

The schoolboy exploits of Steve Morris

The Church Wood Deception
Part I

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CHAPTER ONE

ANNUAL SACRIFICE

“Now!” yelled the referee.

At his command, the ball was hurled into the scrummage. Legs and feet began thrashing about wildly in a frantic attempt to trap the ball as it ricocheted off boots and shins. Twice I thought I had it under control before it was knocked away again by an outstretched foot. The ball continued its highly unpredictable pattern of bouncing and rebounding as though it had a mind of its own. A third time I thrust my left leg out into its path when suddenly I felt a searing pain in my right ear. A yelp quickly became a roar as the pain increased. Someone had chewed on my earlobe. By the time I fought through the acute burning sensation that had temporarily paralysed my movement - the ball was gone.

As it dribbled through the opposing pack, they began to push us backwards, and even though we each tried to stamp our right foot hard into the ground as one synchronised body, the pitch’s muddy conditions caused by heavy overnight rain, caused us to slip and slide as we struggled to stay on our feet. They continued to push us backward at an ever-increasing pace until the last vestige of resistance drained away and we began to break up.

“Someone has bitten my damn ear,” I shouted, as I stumbled over the prostrate body of Jester Green, our tighthead prop, while still clutching the side of my head.

This was the first of two matches against Twmpath Secondary Modern School and it was following the normal pattern of rugby games against our most fierce rival.

Games! What a joke. We were lambs to the slaughter.

We had beaten them just the once, and that was at our ground a few seasons ago before they doubled in size as puberty set in. We regularly lost by fifty points or more and such had been their superiority and dominance over us at that time that even a draw was cause for wild celebration. This was the away match, never easy, and today they were taking great pleasure in pummelling us. I staggered to my feet still protecting my bleeding ear as the ref, their PE teacher, ran up.

“Are you okay son?” he panted.

“Someone bit my ear,” I replied angrily, followed by a yelp as he yanked my hand away from my wet head.

“It looks fine to me,” he declared after a cursory examination. “It was probably just a clash of heads.” With that, he turned and ran off down the pitch blowing his whistle to signal another try for Twmpath, their eighth of the match. Throughout the match the rain had been persistent, but in the last ten minutes it had intensified making it hard to even see the ball, much less handle it.

“Come on St Alban’s,” shouted the lone voice of Mr Jeffries our assistant PE teacher with a distinct lack of enthusiasm. He was stood on the touchline huddled under his umbrella held at a forty-five-degree angle to protect himself from the sweeping rain. However, his words of encouragement were drowned out by the sea of Twmpath pupils who despite the dreary conditions chanted enthusiastically. “Twmpath” clap...clap...clap, “Twmpath” clap...clap...clap.

“Come on, regroup and try again,” Mr Jeffries shouted a little louder, but few heard him.

“He should be on the pitch getting his arse kicked,” snarled our left-winger John Harris wiping his face with the inside of his wet jersey. His face was plastered with mud courtesy of a thumping tackle a few moments earlier.

“*One-Cap* wouldn’t want to get that jersey dirty,” Dai Williams replied sarcastically as he walked despondently toward the centre of the pitch in readiness for the restart.

One-cap Jeffries boasted at every opportunity that he had played for Wales, implying that he had been a regular senior player. If anyone challenged his instructions during rugby practice his arrogant retort was, “Have you played for your country, boy? Well, come back when you have.” Strangely, no one could recall any fixture in which he had played. It was stretching the imagination considerably to even think about him in the same breath as Barry John, Gareth Edwards, JPR, John Dawes and Gerald Davies. Welsh legends one and all.

And then one day the word spread that he had indeed played for his country ... Wales B against some minor nation. He had played just once, the first seventy-two minutes on the bench and the final eight minutes on the pitch. The Welsh jersey was well worn, it had faded badly, and was darned in at least five places.

With little enthusiasm, I trudged slowly toward the halfway line. It was a bitterly cold wet autumn day, and due partially to the driving rain, their pitch had cut up badly. Throughout the match, we had found the ball difficult to hold. It behaved like a large bar of soap slipping through wet numb hands, bouncing off bodies and popping out from under arms. Warily I trotted the final few feet to the halfway line ready for the restart; we were down by forty-five points. The only crumb of comfort was that we wouldn’t be white-washed as we had been in the corresponding fixture last season. Today we had amassed a paltry three points courtesy of a penalty. Thankfully only ten minutes remained. I was cold, drenched to the skin and completely knackered.

Twmpath’s pitch sits on a plateau and is at the mercy of the elements with no trees to act as a windbreak or buildings to protect from the fierce winds that sweep through the Eastern valley. The lethal combination of wind, rain and a rampaging Twmpath front row had quickly sapped the strength and spirit of our team.

Edwards, their scrum-half and captain kicked off. The ball soared skyward and hung in the air as our forwards jostled to position themselves underneath it. With the Twmpath players charging toward us like rampaging bulls the ball was caught and thrown hurriedly to Dai Williams to kick upfield. Dai has a good turn of pace and a mighty kick making him a natural selection as full-back.

Despite the dreadful conditions Dai elected not to kick, instead he tucked his head down and ran forward full of purpose. He had barely covered six yards when he bounced off a solid wall of flesh ... Smith.

Standing at over six feet and weighing in excess of one hundred eighty pounds Smith was a frightening prospect. In full flight with nostrils flaring he is terrifying. His neck is thicker than my thigh, which is further emphasised by his small head and a misshapen nose, the result of his other passion - boxing. During this summer’s County Schools Seven’s tournament I witnessed many a player reduced to a quivering wreck when Smith fixed his icy cold stare upon them, face devoid of emotion. He would follow the player with his eyes like a heat-seeking missile locked onto its target for perhaps thirty seconds, long enough, however, for the message to be received loud and clear - touch the ball again and you will suffer the consequences.

Each of Twmpath’s front and second-row players looked to be over one hundred seventy pounds and none of them had yet reached seventeen. In comparison we were lightweights; I am probably the heaviest player in our front row at around one hundred fifty pounds.

As the seconds ticked away the ref had again awarded a scrum with their put-in. Jester placed his hands around his mouth to act as a megaphone and shouted and bellowed in all directions.

“Come on, let’s win at least one scrum.”

His desperate attempt to fire us up became contagious as Dan Platt, our loosehead prop and team captain, also yelled words of encouragement. “Yeah, we can do it, one big push.”

I too became caught up in the moment and swelled the chorus demanding action.

“Come on lads, I am sure they are tiring...” My words of bravado tapered off as I looked up. Before me stood man-mountain Smith, arms over the shoulders of the two Twmpath props. He grinned at me and gnashed his teeth, a painful reminder of my throbbing lughole.

Once more we formed up, freezing in the stooped position, ready for the brutal encounter with Smith and his pack.

“Now!” shouted the ref for the umpteenth time. Jester, Dan and I thrust forward, heads ramming painfully into the shoulders of the opposing front line. Smith deliberately moved his head backwards and forward to further inflame my pulsating lobe.

Both packs started to push, each side trying to gain superiority over the other. A strong pungent smell of sweat permeated the air around us trapped within the body of players that formed a small tunnel. Feet slipped in the mud as each pack strained trying to gain an extra couple of inches. A tremendous pressure was being exerted, breathing became difficult and laboured. I felt like a zit that was about to pop. As both packs pressed forward the squeezing effect lifted my feet off the floor, and then out of the corner of my eye I saw it, a fist was rapidly approaching with my nose as its target. I let out a scream, but it never came.

Slowly I became aware of distant voices and someone shaking me. As I started to focus on the shape of Mr Jeffries bending over me became recognisable.

“Are you okay Morris?” he asked, clearly concerned.

“First he bites my ear and then punches me in the nose,” I answered groggily.

“How many fingers am I holding up, two or three?”

“Fourteen,” I replied sarcastically.

“He’s okay,” he reported to the ref, who nodded and then ran off to restart play. Slowly I limped off the pitch, my head tilted backwards while holding my nose to arrest the bleeding. My head was swimming and there was no feeling in the front part of my face.

“How the hell did he have an arm free?” I muttered to myself. I was sure that he had both arms draped over the shoulders of his props.

Eventually, the match ended with Twmpath emphatic winners racking up sixty-four points. Our solitary three points gained with a fortuitous penalty was scant consolation in this crushing defeat by our fiercest adversaries.

“I suppose I will have to ferry you back to school in my car, Morris, in case you’ve suffered a brain injury,” said Mr Jeffries sarcastically as he passed by. “But don’t get blood on my seat, you turd,” he snarled in my direction as I quickly fell in alongside him.

“Thank you, God,” I prayed silently, at least I would be spared the humiliating run of shame.

Like a pack of wild dogs seeing an intruder off their territory, a large horde of Twmpath pupils ritually provided a farewell committee.

The post-match routine is always the same. As we emerge from the dressing room huddled together for protection, a large baying crowd part reluctantly at the order of their PE teacher. As we run the gauntlet of fear, the mob shoves, pushes, and trips each player sprinting towards freedom. The physical intimidation is exacerbated by the customary jeers, taunts and threats uttered with vividly descriptive expletives. Oaths issued promising disembowelment and hearts torn from our warm writhing bodies are not

uncommon. At this point, all thought of a dignified withdrawal is hastily abandoned as the annual pack chase begins. School uniforms and bags are clutched under sweaty armpits, each person concentrating on remaining upright as metal boot studs slide on the smooth pavement slabs.

My mother once told me that it's almost impossible for a woman to run in high heels. Hah! A piece of cake compared to running down a smooth wet gradient on metal studs fighting to maintain control.

The chaos intensifies near the top of Crane Street where the shopping premises begin. The Globe Public House, Lloyd's the Chemist, the entrance to Pontypool's famous indoor market, a cake shop and Fowlers haberdashery on the one side. Sidolli's café, Sandbrook & Dawe hardware store, a craft shop and Timpsons shoe sales on the other.

On more than one occasion one of us has collided with an unsuspecting shopper as we stampede through scattering their groceries in all directions. Conversation is restricted to cursing at the pursuing hordes until the high street is in sight, which is where customarily the hordes break off their engagement and start the long climb up Crane Street, hollering and issuing further blood-curdling oaths as they retrace their steps.

I had nearly finished showering when my bedraggled teammates staggered into the changing room in ones and twos dropping their clothes and collapsing onto the benches in exhaustion. No one spoke as they peeled off their wet muddy kit. They showered in total silence, humiliated and embarrassed; each person left to their thoughts. Only the sound of the water hitting the shower area floor could be heard, there was no banter. I dressed quickly and made my way through the empty school corridors, games bag over my shoulder, only the echoing sound of my footsteps breaking the eerie silence.

I walked wearily to the bus stop situated in front of the Town Hall where I waited for the bus that would take me home to Trevethin, a large post-war housing estate situated high above the valley town of Pontypool. Everyone was huddled under the bus shelter roof trying to evade the cold wind-driven rain. Unfortunately, only the first ten or eleven people enjoyed the protection of the corrugated roof, the last two or three at the rear of the queue were totally exposed to the fierce elements. Reluctantly I joined them.

I tightened the cords of the hood of my parker and thrust my hands deep into my pockets as I turned my back to the near-vertical rain. Within minutes my trousers too were saturated as the torrential rain ran down the back of my coat. I tried to transport myself mentally to a tropical island scene where a clear blue ocean gently laps up a golden sandy beach. In my imaginary paradise, I am sheltering under a large beach umbrella to escape the hot sun, sipping from a large tumbler of Coke with ice chunks clinking against the cold glass. "Oh, to live in the Bahamas," I sighed longingly as I shivered in spasms. It didn't seem possible to be wetter than I was at that moment - short of standing under a waterfall.

It was a couple of minutes past five and the bus was overdue. This was not an uncommon occurrence for Browns' buses, a family-owned transport service with a fleet of seven dilapidated coaches, some more than twenty years old. Two of the oldest busses have a semi-coach body with wooden window surrounds rather than the more modern aluminium. Most belched large amounts of black smoke and frequently break down, often failing to deliver passengers to their destinations.

At long last, the bus arrived, and we filed on. I was the last passenger to board and sat in an empty seat at the rear of the bus. As it pulled away I undid the cord to remove the hood of my parker and began running my fingers through my damp hair. It felt good to be in a warm dry environment even if was on a bus that should be a museum piece. Slowly the bus threaded through the high street towards Pen-y-garn hill, the main transport route to Penygarn, St Cadoc, and Trevethin.

A village-size collection of Victorian dwellings, Penygarn - complete with a small sub-post office - looks down on the town below. Penygarn hill rises quickly limiting most vehicles to second gear, especially so around the fifty-yard mark as they negotiate a very tight right-hand bend. As the bus started the steep climb towards the sharp bend it began to struggle slowing to a crawl followed by a series of jerks, and then inevitably ... it stopped.

"Please, not now," I implored the god of old buses. "Don't break down today."

This all too frequent occurrence is usually followed by a request for all male passengers to disembark and to make their way to the top of the hill on foot, a good fifteen-minute lung-bursting strength-sapping climb. The near-empty bus eventually struggles to the top of Pen-y-garn hill where occasionally it waits for the foot weary passengers, but mostly it ploughs on in an attempt to adhere to some imaginary time table, tough luck if you have already paid.

"Don't panic, we'll get to the top," said the driver shouting for the benefit of those of us at the back of the bus, and then with a crunching sound first gear was engaged and the bus crept forward in short erratic leaps. The jerking gradually diminished as the speed increased and the bus crawled up the hill in first gear causing the engine to scream loudly as it finally levelled out at the top of the hill. The driver struggled to change up to second and then crunched into third as the bus continued its journey towards Trevethin.

Though geographically an average size parish in medieval times, Trevethin is now synonymous with a large housing estate of around three thousand houses, most of which have been pebble-dashed and painted a depressing grey. They are heated by coal fires and have an effective ventilation system – ill-fitting, single pane wooden framed windows. Much of the housing stock was built in the late '50s, and early '60s, and are neatly arranged along roads a mile or so in length.

Elm Close is situated at the farthest end of Newman Road; the main road that runs the length of the housing estate, and number three is the home of the Morris family.

My name is Steve Morris and I am the eldest of two. At sixteen I consider myself to be the man of the house – my parents having divorced when I was younger. I am in the sixth form studying hard for my O level exams... most of the time ... well, some of the time ... studying might be an exaggeration. I intend to study immediately prior to the exams because Morris's Law says '*why study now what you can study later as you will probably forget most of what you have read anyhow,*' and I am the living embodiment of that law. '*A little knowledge is a dangerous thing*' wrote Alexander Pope, a profound statement and one which I do not wish to contradict.

I am approaching six feet tall with blonde hair which now reaches down to my collar; until recently I was forced to endure a crew cut, my mother's preferred choice. Thankfully, my mother has adapted to the times and relented, possibly influenced by my stubborn refusal to ever visit the barbers again until my hair reaches my backside.

I am a little overweight and support Manchester United. There's no obvious connection between the two, other than United's sluggish performances in the last few seasons, finishing eighth last year in the 1970 / 1971 campaign, and eighth the previous season. Remarkably, the present manager, Frank O'Farrell, has enjoyed a bright start to the new season. He has even squeezed a few good performances out of bad boy Georgie, the Irish wizard. Unfortunately, he has a mammoth task ahead as the ageing team is slowing down. Anxious times indeed for 'United supporters.

Arriving home, walking nonchalantly into the kitchen proudly displaying my war wounds, Mum who had heard the front door close shouted to me, "Wash your hands tea won't be long." Turning to face me she caught sight of my bulbous nose complete with traces of congealed blood and gasped in horror. "Oh, my lord, however did that happen?"

It looks really painful, come and sit down while I tend to it.” She started to fuss around me reaching for the medical box. After rummaging around for a few seconds, she emerged with the TCP bottle.

Just like the outrageous claims of the travelling medicine shows in the Wild West, mum considers TCP to be the cure-all wonder potion. Fall over and graze a knee, she wheels out the TCP which is liberally applied to the injured limb regardless of additionally inflicted pain. Complain of a sore throat and mum prescribes TCP to be gargled and then spat out. This leaves a ghastly taste, numb lips and tongue, and TCP breath.

However, the most torturous use of TCP is lavishly administered during her weekly zit check. Upon catching sight of an emerging spot, she fiendishly squeezes it with the curved end of a hair clip, gauging out pieces of flesh - the pain is indescribable. Her pièce de résistance is to slap a cloth doused in TCP onto the offending area.

“Stop being such a baby,” she chides as I grit my teeth wincing in agony.

She performed a similar ritual last week after squeezing three festering zits on my forehead. “If you think that hurts, try giving birth,” she said in a scornful tone as I wriggled in pain.

Now I am sure that her observation is biologically correct; giving birth sounds painful and undoubtedly brought tears to her eyes as she spat me out. But don’t place the blame at my door; I was extremely small and vulnerable at the time.

True to form, the TCP bottle appeared, and she applied copious amounts of the liquid to my ear which stung like hell, so badly in fact that tears ran down my cheeks. Thankfully, she couldn’t think of a way of applying TCP to my nose, although she did refer to snorting, but she was joking – I think.

Olwen, my mother, is about five feet and a tab end in height with blue eyes and blonde hair which she normally keeps short. It can’t have been easy raising a family alone during the last five years and luxuries have been in short supply. We have only a small black and white television positioned in the corner of our living room; the programmes are piped to it by Rediffusion. The television programs and a few radio channels are accessed by a rotating switch on the wall. In her younger days, mum was a bus conductress which was how she met dad. “He was a dashing handsome bus driver,” she often recounted during her more wistful moments.

I had little appetite for tea after being tortured by the TCP fiend and made my way upstairs to my bedroom which I share with my fourteen year old brother David. We are not on speaking terms due to my heavy snoring which sometimes keeps him awake. A few nights ago, I dreamt that I was being pummelled by a gang of thugs and awoke with a start to find David leaning out of his bed prodding me in the nose with a boxing glove on the end of a pole. “Stop snoring,” he snivelled.

I was furious and threatened to stick the glove and pole somewhere painful in one sharp movement. “Do that again and people will be calling you sooty you little sod,” I said, with a snarl. My nose throbbled for an hour afterwards.

CHAPTER 2

ST ALBAN'S COMPREHENSIVE

The next day I arose for breakfast at eight o'clock, I was extremely fragile and stiff. Surprisingly, my nose, while a little swollen, no longer throbbed; it just ached, though breathing through it was difficult. My ear lobe, complete with sunken teeth marks, merely lacked feeling.

"I told you that TCP would do the trick," mum gloated when I reported that my ear was no longer painful. "The old remedies are the best," she added with a faraway look in her eye, which was the signal to run before the lecture on the glories of the past followed. Mum would recount tales of *the good old days* at the drop of a hat. "We pulled together through the war years, not like today's generation," she would exclaim whenever reports about crime or adversity was reported on the television.

Only two months ago George Harrison and Joan Baez held a concert in aid of the suffering people of Bangladesh which received wide coverage on the television. As the newsreader concluded his report from Madison Square Garden mum looked up from her newspaper.

"They are not the only generation to experience food shortage. I often queued all morning for a loaf of bread and then stood in line all afternoon for sausages after the war ended."

Removing her glasses, she placed the newspaper beside her on the sofa and continued to reminisce. "I didn't taste sugar or fruit until I was in my teens, and we considered ourselves lucky to have meat in our stew." I froze, not daring to look or to respond. "*Kill me now*," I screamed in my head. Mercifully, mum replaced her glasses and returned to her newspaper. The trip down memory lane had been uncommonly brief. Breathing a sigh of relief, I slipped out of the room faster than a speeding bullet.

As I lay in bed, I tried to identify the source of my irritation when mum drifts into the good old days. I appreciate the hardships that mum endured in the '30s and '40s, and I would never belittle the valiant efforts of that generation, but I had found that people of mum's age group often made the sacrifices sound noble, virtuous, implying that people today aren't made of the same stuff. She may be right, but I doubt that the people of Bangladesh would agree.

It was a bright morning which prompted me to walk to school, the walk would be enjoyable, and the bus fare would be better spent in the school tuck shop. The journey to school on foot demands a level of fitness and sure-footedness due to the combination of street walking and cross-country trekking.

Walking briskly the length of Newman Road to a small shopping precinct situated at the junction with Church Avenue takes a leg stretching fifteen minutes. Turn left at the bottom of Church Avenue onto Penygarn Road and you arrive at the Yew Tree pub where the entrance to Church Wood is located.

As the name implies Church Wood is situated near a church, St Cadoc, one of the oldest churches in Wales dating back to before the 13th century. The church and its boundary are referred to in a land deal involving the uncle of King Henry VII in 1490. The path beginning near the church initially runs down through a large field and then snakes its way, quite steeply at times, through a heavily wooded area and exits onto Peygarn Hill. This part of the journey requires nimble feet, particularly where the path is nothing more than a muddy track strewn with boulders and areas of sparsely scattered rocks. This element of the journey also takes fifteen minutes and demands the agile skills of a ballet dancer to leap gracefully across the surface of the stones.

At the bottom of Pen-y-garn hill, the road bears to the right and crosses the Afon Lywyd River where it begins to thread its way through Pontypool town centre.

Just off the bend is Park Lane, a quiet leafy lane that leads to the gates of St Alban's Comprehensive School. The lane then narrows as it runs alongside a high stone wall that protects the rear of the school eventually leading out into Pontypool Park, one of the oldest and largest parks in Wales.

Pontypool Park is an area of unrivalled natural beauty that covers one hundred fifty acres of some of the finest land in the Eastern Valley, much of it an impressive display of flower beds and rolling lawns, bordered by a striking array of trees some many hundreds of years old. All of this was once owned by the Hanbury family, rich landowners that made their fortune from the 17th and 18th century iron industry.

In the last fifty years large tennis courts, playing fields, and a sports centre have all been added. However, the most imposing structure - the jewel in the crown - is the rugby stadium home to the famous Pontypool rugby team. The Poolers, as Pontypool Rugby Club is affectionately known, was formed in 1868. They were a founder member of the Welsh Rugby Union in 1881 and are enjoying their best period for many decades. The clubhouse is also situated at the bottom of Pen-y-garn hill and is always packed on match days. It's not uncommon to hear stories of Barry John, Cliff Morgan and other Welsh legends floating out through the open windows and lounge door carried along on the heavy beer fumes and cigarette smoke.

Pontypool, one of the largest towns in the Eastern Valley, owes its existence to Richard Hanbury who bought land in the area in the late 16th century for the purpose of making iron. It has a population of around thirty-five thousand and was once a vibrant town. In the fifties and sixties, the crowds flocked to the large indoor market and plethora of small traders that characterise a thriving town. However, with the arrival of out of town supermarkets, the butchers, haberdashery and bakers have made way for estate agents, insurance companies and financial institutions – the service industry.

The main complex of St Alban's looks out into Pontypool Park and is the oldest part of the school. Even today, Park House, as it was formerly known, is a large imposing building, a fine example of early Georgian architecture which was constructed in the late 1690s. It has seen many structural changes and bland extensions have been added over the years.

The core subjects, English, Maths and History are generally taught in the classrooms of an extension added to the South end of the main building which looks down over the lower school complex, a single storey addition to the old Park House estate built in the '60s. Complete with a tarred flat roof, this sprawling structure houses the main assembly hall, the gymnasium and four classrooms where the craft subjects are taught. The two buildings are connected by a covered walkway. The most recent addition to the school infrastructure is a three-storey building near the bottom of the school grounds where the science subjects are taught.

Two centuries of Hanbury residence ended when Park House was given to the Roman Catholic Order of the Holy Ghost in 1915. St Alban's is still predominantly a Roman Catholic school, and even today the teaching staff is supplemented by four nuns. Its proud motto is *Miles Christi Sum*, literally translated as *a Soldier of Christ*.

DETENTION REGISTER

Hurrying along Newman road, I jogged the length of Church Wood. Nevertheless, I approached the bottom of Pen-y-garn Hill at nine o'clock, out of breath and ten minutes late. I rushed up Park Lane passing Rose Cottage, a quaint Victorian dwelling covered with ivy; the large front garden colourfully reflects the house name displaying impressive

rose beds of varying colours. A few paces further I passed the old stables that once housed the Hanbury family's many horses and carriages. Until recently the building complex had been a small chest clinic. Centralisation has resulted in this local facility being moved to Newport, six miles to the South, as it is incorporated back into the monolithic NHS machinery sounding the death knell of one more friendly and efficient family service.

As I approached the school gates a prefect, chest thrust out, paced back and forth like a Sergeant Major on the parade ground puffed up with self-importance. He turned and positioned himself between me and the school entrance; a soldier on guard. His weapon was the detention book which he grasped firmly in his right hand. He smirked as I approached. "Fill in the details, slimeball," he ordered contemptuously. Pathetically I pleaded for leniency, but without success. "You should get up earlier, low life," he said disdainfully.

A long-forgotten quotation suddenly sprang to mind. *Absolute power corrupts absolutely*. "How true," I muttered angrily under my breath.

As I entered my details into the detention book, I chuckled at some of the previous entries. In the reason for lateness column, Brian Day had written: *Hit my head on a low-lying bridge and lay unconscious for thirty minutes*. A humorous entry as Brian who measured six feet two inches in his stocking feet when he was in the first year is now approaching seven feet tall. Another amusing entry read: *Developed amnesia over the weekend, I forgot where the school was*. Evidently, there was a competition to see who could think of the most outrageous reason for lateness. I couldn't compete with the school jokers, the reason for my tardiness read: *Slept late, blame my mother*. However comical the explanation, it wouldn't permit me to escape detention at the end of the day.

Maths and Geography were the first two lessons of the day and, as anticipated, Dan, Jester and I faced a torrent of abuse. Undoubtedly the other members of the humiliated, bumbling, sixth-form rugby team scattered about in various lessons this morning were likewise mocked. As the insults flowed, Dan scowled and hid behind his long straggly greasy hair. It might have been parted in the middle in some haphazard fashion, probably with his fingers, certainly not with a comb or brush. Though a quiet person, Dan possesses a dry sense of humour and a surprisingly sharp tongue, the taunts were water off a duck's back to Dan. Realising that Dan wouldn't respond to their jibes the few remaining hard-core aggressors focussed on me and Jester. Like Dan, Jester also has shoulder-length hair, but there the similarity ends. Rich ginger in colour, Jester's hair makes him immediately recognisable even from a distance; however, Jester evidently ate his crusts in his youth as his hair is naturally curly and well managed. His extremely outgoing nature and a string of never-ending jokes and pranks earned Jester his nickname. He is everything Dan is not, loud, boisterous, always the first to volunteer. He loves to be the centre of attention and is usually accompanied by a couple of girls.

O'Hare, class bully and my personal tormentor, maintained the tirade long after everyone else had moved onto more important matters, constantly making tedious remarks about my red nose and cabbage ear. "Only a big girl would get his pig ugly face mashed up," O'Hare sneered from his desk two rows behind me. "Even my eight-year-old sister could kick your backside," he added, causing a few of his cronies to giggle.

Christine McDonald who was sat at an adjoining desk idly twisting strands of hair around her finger unexpectedly came to my rescue. "O'Hare, shut up!" she said in a clear loud voice. "It's only a rugby game, deal with it."

Mr Bovill who was bending over talking to Liz Baxter, the class swot, straightened up and turned to face Christine. "Thank you, Christine, for reprimanding O'Hare," said Mr

Bovill. “However, I will administer the discipline - if that’s all right with you?” he added sarcastically.

Christine often partners me at badminton on a Monday evening, an after-school event. She is a pretty girl, slender in appearance, graceful in her movement and softly spoken. I find Christine’s gentle manner most appealing. Occasionally, there is a brief spark between us, nothing I can put my finger on just the odd glance, a coy smile. I believe that given the right circumstances it could develop into something more tangible.

As the lesson continued, she leaned over and touched my hand gently.

“Just ignore the toad. He’ll slither away eventually,” she whispered into my ear. As I turned and looked deep into her seductively hazel-brown eyes, she blushed and turned away.

It was sound advice but easier said than done, as at the mid-morning break he followed me out of the classroom with his henchmen by his side. In a coordinated movement, O’Hare dragged me to the ground by my bad ear while one of his devotees pushed my books out of my grasp onto the floor scattering them in all directions. They all laughed contemptuously as O’Hare launched himself onto my back forcing me to the floor. With a final slap across the back of my head, O’Hare stood up and joined the others as they walked off in the direction of the main exit laughing scornfully as I rose to my feet. Unfortunately, the corridor was full of pupils pouring out of the adjoining classrooms, some dawdling and others barging their way through the crowd eager to escape into the playground. Many of my books were trampled on by dozens of feet and others were kicked out of my grasp as I crawled around trying to gather them to place them back into my bag. As people pushed past me and over me, I heard a familiar voice.

“Want some help?” I looked up at Tom my best friend who was standing over me; he smiled and knelt beside me. “O’Hare drags his knuckles on the floor you know,” he said attempting to lift my spirit. “He is obviously trying to overcompensate for a tiny, tiny, willy.” The mental image caused us both to giggle as we struggled to our feet and brushed the dust off our trousers. Slowly we made our way to the main exit and out into the playground.

O’Hare had set his sights on me from the first day of our secondary education. At first, the intimidation was confined to verbal comments and taunts, but soon it extended to include physical attacks: pushing, tripping, pinching and punching. At over six feet tall and built like a barn door, O’Hare presents a daunting figure. He is a popular player in the school football team and his dark brown eyes and curly collar-length hair makes him a favourite with the girls. In a discussion during one of his more lucid moments he could offer no explanation for his relentless persecution other than to say: “It relieves the boredom.”

Tom and I patrolled the edges of the large upper playground area where groups of younger boys were playing football, their blazers and school bags piled up to form the posts of a goalmouth. Tom and I have been friends since enrolling at St Alban’s in 1966; he is a thin gangly lad with collar-length black hair, brown eyes, and a very dark swarthy, almost Mediterranean, complexion.

Sometimes it’s difficult to identify the qualities or characteristics of a person that blends so easily with your own and that binds you in friendship. Whatever magical ingredients make up the recipe - our easy-going relationship fits into that category. However, it hasn’t always been without incident. Sometimes Tom would react angrily to a situation or remark and sulk for a few hours. I too would occasionally strain our friendship, but Tom and I had similarly placid natures and soon the fallout would be forgotten.

We ambled slowly around the playground to the girl's play area, hands in our pockets, aimlessly kicking small pebbles out of the way while we discussed football and United in particular. Tom also supports God's team, though in his case he is more a closet fan in a futile attempt to avoid the tedious taunts.

The normal playtime scene was taking place around us. Girls stood in small groups talking a few had skipping ropes, and others were being chased by boys shrieking and giggling but running slow enough to be caught. On the grass verge, a couple of girls sat reading lesson books hurriedly completing their homework assignment. These were playtime pursuits that were probably taking place in thousands of schools around the country.

Eventually, we reached the lower playground where we made our way slowly to the pump house situated on the outer edge near the high perimeter fence. The Afon Llywyd River runs parallel with the perimeter fence and even though the fence is eight feet high, at least three or four times each week a football would soar over the fence landing in the fast-flowing river. What follows then is reminiscent of a scene from the Keystone Cops. Up to twenty boys race frantically through the bottom school gate and out into the park. Cautiously they skirt along the riverbank hoping the ball will drift into some of the shallower areas of the riverbed. Sometimes a brave soul takes off his shoes and socks and pulling up his trousers wades out towards the middle of the river hoping to retrieve the ball and bask in the praise of his school mates. Often though they stumble and are completely immersed in the fast-flowing currents and emerge coughing and spluttering only to spend the rest of the afternoon drying out.

I too had bravely ventured out into the middle of the Afon Llywyd one sunny afternoon last year to retrieve the ball, and I also stumbled over a hidden rock only to fall backwards into one of the deeper parts of the river. I surfaced a few yards away gasping for air and began to clutch at imaginary railings for support as I tried desperately to regain my balance. Twice more I fell to my knees tripping over rocks and debris as I dragged myself to the riverbank. Thankfully, I had my games bag with me and had to sit in my rugby kit for the remainder of the afternoon enduring taunts from O'Hare, naturally.

Huddled behind the pump house are three boys and two girls dragging on a shared cigarette. Joining them, Tom produced a cigarette from his pocket and cadged a light from one of the others. As we laugh and joked, periodically each of us in turn peers around the corner of the building acting as lookout. The hot topic of the day is the rumour circulating about Mrs Green, the junior year Maths teacher, and Mr Edwards, a new addition to the Geography Department. They had apparently been caught in a compromising position by a cleaner.

"Do you reckon he was giving her one?" asked Tom crudely, as he sucked deeply on the cigarette.

"You're a filthy pig," cried Susan Daniels in disgust, making the rest of us laugh as Tom awkwardly tried to backtrack.

"That wasn't what I meant," squealed Tom, stammering as his face reddened.

"Oh yes, it was," we all shouted back at him.

As the laughter died away, Allison, a classmate, appeared from around the other side of the building accompanied by Jayne, the girl of my dreams. Jayne, a year ahead of me, is in the first year of her A level studies. With her piercing Nordic blue eyes and sporting a wave of long blonde hair, Jayne could easily be mistaken for a film star. Her hourglass figure and delicate poise add to her model-like appearance; she exudes sensuality and mystery, further emphasised by her aloof manner. Jayne has an almost regal-like posture, straight back, seldom moving her head as though it has been stuck onto her neck with

glue. She gives the impression that every-day mundane matters are beneath her as she glides past. Nevertheless, she has a long queue of admirers which I head.

Unfortunately, even a look from Jayne reduces me to jelly, doubles my heart rate and takes my breath away. Sometimes my brain freezes, and I do my codfish impersonation, staring, moving my lips, but unable to speak. When pressed, I start to talk gibberish, stumbling through sentences, nervously spitting with each syllable that leaps from my mouth. My co-ordination also suffers as I do an uncontrollable impersonation of Jerry Lewis. My feet suddenly balloon to clown-like proportions as I stumble without cause. Even my hands let me down; they seem inexplicably bound within an invisible pair of boxing gloves as I drop the simplest of objects while trying to look cool. Sadly, Jayne looks right through me. She ignores me, not recognising my existence. I am a nonperson, a flea, perhaps an invisible flea in Jayne's world.

The remainder of the morning was spent in Sidolli's, an Italian café on Crane Street, an establishment that Tom and I frequent regularly during our free lessons. Sidolli's is also a popular fish and chip bar which occasionally means fighting through the queue waiting to be served at the. Once past the counter, rows of tables, neatly arranged down both sides of the room, provide a hangout for truants, a meeting place for school kids and the unemployed.

Alan, a likeable twenty-four-year-old Pontypool lad, often joins us as we laze around drinking coffee and humming along to the jukebox. On a good day, particularly dole cheque day, he is a useful source of cigarettes. A teddy boy at heart, Alan claims that he was born fifteen years too late. He is always decked from head to toe in black, and sports an authentic fifties-style leather jacket. He must keep Brylcreem in full production as he uses a large palm-full at a time to support a quiff that juts out four inches from his head. He carries a tin of it with him wherever he goes and on many occasions has mesmerised Tom and I as he applies a large dollop to the gravity-defying hairpiece, rubbing it into his scalp vigorously before combing and twisting it continuously until he achieves *the look*. Alan is devoid of ambition, regularly boasting that he hasn't had a job since leaving school and doesn't intend to. "I'm not getting out of bed for the pitiful wages offered around here," he says while grinning at us waiting for a nod of agreement. One day last week he tried to tap us up. "Buy me a coffee, lads. My dole isn't due until Wednesday and I know you schoolboys are loaded." You can't help but smile at his cheek.

At the end of the room, a one-arm bandit sits against the wall alongside a large jukebox into which Tom and I often feed over half our dinner money. Tom loves Pink Floyd and Yes, whereas I am a Beatles and Zeppelin fan.

Bidding farewell to Alan, Tom and I spend the remainder of our money in a small room at the rear of the building where two pinball machines live. We spend many hours there honing our *pinball wizard* skills and discussing pressing topics, such as United's next game, homework assignments, and of course.....girls.

FOUL PLAY

Double music in the afternoon was exhausting. The Welsh Joint Education Board has set this year's budding O level musicians the task of analysing Bedrich Smetana's *Moldau*. Strangely it is termed a symphonic poem.

Music was compulsory for the first four years when the class size exceeded thirty, now only ten diehards remain - including me and Tommo. We have scrutinised the twelve-minute LP at least five or six times, and each time I am transfixed by the sheer beauty of the intertwining flutes and clarinets representing two streams beginning their journey as mountain brooks. The violins take up the main melody as the constant motion increases and the brooks merge into a fast-moving stream which eventually becomes the river

Moldau. As it courses its way through the countryside it passes a wedding party, moonlight nymphs, and encounters the foaming St John rapids before passing Vysehrad, an ancient royal castle. Gradually subsiding, the river flows gently past Prague before disappearing into the Elbe.

Mr Sinclair was determined to make considerable headway this lesson and maintained a fast delivery. "We have to cover at least six pages today so keep your notes brief and try to keep up," he warned as we opened our scores and the music began.

Scrutinising a score written for more than one hundred twenty instruments requires a high level of skill, so many instruments and so many little black notes on the score. The piano is easy, just the one instrument represented by two staves on the score. The string section is more complicated: tracking first, second and third violins, violas, cellos and double bass demands concentration. If the orchestra only consisted of piano and strings life would be easy. Now add the woodwind section: clarinets, flutes, piccolo, oboes and bassoons. An added complication is that the B flat clarinet is the most common clarinet used. This is a transposing instrument, meaning that the note it sounds is a tone lower than that written. Throw in the brass section: trumpets, French horns, cornets, trombones and tubas, now the life of the orchestral conductor becomes manic. Completing the ensemble are the percussion instruments: timpani, commonly known as kettle drums, cymbals, triangle, xylophone, harp and glockenspiel.

The bell sounding the break brought merciful relief, I had a bad case of writer's cramp and my brain had seized due to the exertion of fixating on the score. As we made our way to the play area incomprehensible phrases bounced around inside my brain. Modulatory bridge passage, multiple measure rest, cadence, pizzicato. I could feel a migraine brewing.

After the break, I approached the PE changing room with a feeling of dread. Many of my O level choices differ from O'Hare's which for the most part keeps us apart; however double games are a combined lesson which leaves no escape.

After the ignominious defeat at Twmpath Mr Cropper, Deputy Headmaster and PE teacher would undoubtedly form us into two rugby teams to work on tactics, ball handling, scrums and line-outs. O'Hare, aided by his flunkies, used similar occasions to rough me up, particularly in the ruck where the piles of bodies hide illegal and dangerous play. I still have stud marks raked down my back during a previous encounter with O'Hare. Tom, a secondary target for O'Hare, suffers from mild asthma and is only considered fit enough to run the line. Perhaps I should develop asthma, at least until the stud marks disappear.

An essential part of the intimidation is the routine threats and pushes on the way to the rugby field and O'Hare lost no time as we left the changing room and crossed the play area towards the bottom gate that leads out into the park.

"You're dead meat, Morris. I'm going to stamp you into the ground," he snarled, as he came up behind Tom and me. He followed up his menacing warning with a jab to my right side followed by a shoulder barge as he ran ahead towards the rugby field.

"You'd better stay away from the mauls," Tom remarked, his face wore a concerned look.

"Definitely, and the scrums and the tackles," I replied, with a hint of sarcasm. "That's sure to keep me in the rugby team." Tom did have a point though; O'Hare would take advantage of any situation to stamp on me.

Upon his arrival, Mr Cropper, assisted by *One Cap*, duly separated us in to two teams. Surprisingly, and to my intense relief, he placed O'Hare as hooker and me beside him as loosehead prop. O'Hare would be hard-pressed now to inflict pain on a teammate. However, our pairing did little for team unity as throughout the match O'Hare cursed and

threatened me. Twice on the blindside of the scrum he managed to run his studs down my leg, but as the whistle blew signalling the end of games, I felt that I had escaped lightly and trotted alongside Tom as we headed for the showers.

Like a whippet out of the trap, I was in and out of the showers before O'Hare had even stripped. And I had dried, dressed and combed my hair before he emerged wrapped in a large towel. Tom who hadn't run fast enough to work up a sweat saw no need to shower and had departed for an early bus home.

The bell signalling the end of the school day sounded and I walked out of the lower school building and started up the steps toward the English room where I would serve the next thirty minutes in detention. The going was slow due to the large crowd of pupils hurrying toward me under the covered walkway that stretches between the two buildings. I felt like a salmon swimming against a fierce current as I was buffeted by the escaping throng. I finally reached classroom 2a where three fellow miscreants sat pens at the ready as Mr Sinclair handed out sheets of A4 paper. "You're late, Morris!" said Mr Sinclair. "A couple of minutes more and you would have incurred detention tomorrow lunchtime also," he added, in a menacing tone as he passed me a couple of blank sheets.

"Well sit-down lad and complete a double-sided essay on the virtues of punctuality. I expect a minimum of four reasons why punctuality is essential." His voice carried a note of irritation; he didn't relish an extra thirty minutes added to his working day either.

Mr Sinclair has eight years seniority at St Alban's serving as head of the music department. He sports a large bushy beard which gives his face an extremely round appearance. Many aspects of Mr Sinclair's appearance give clues as to his age and marital status. The random grey patches in his beard and the long unkempt hair that frequently falls over his face indicate that he is probably in his late forties and not particularly bothered about his appearance. The thick-rimmed national health style glasses with the left arm held on with sticking plaster is further evidence of this. The dowdy tweed jacket complete with leather elbow patches, and the uncoordinated brown check shirt and blue tie indicate that he is almost certainly a bachelor. Finally, there is the hint of sadness reflected in his softly spoken voice and gentle unassuming nature that provides the surest sign that Mr Sinclair was a very lonely man.

For half an hour I strained for inspiration, forcing my thinking processes to extol the virtues of punctuality which I attempted to pad out with enough waffle to fill two sides of an A4 page. You could almost smell the smoke pouring from my head caused by the friction of the little numb skulls racing through the archives of my grey matter.

"Pens down. Please hand in your effort as you leave," Mr Sinclair said wearily. The clock hanging above the classroom door read 4:04 P.M.

The four of us rose quickly and each placed our masterpiece on Mr Sinclair's desk as we passed him heading for the door and freedom. Politely I turned to bid Mr Sinclair good evening, however, he was busily tearing up our literary works and depositing them in the bin. "Do you know, Brian," I said indignantly to Brian Evans, a classmate, as we headed for the main exit, "there's no likelihood of St Alban's unearthing a Shelley or a Keats with an attitude like that."

Slowly I made my way back up through Church Wood. My thoughts dwelled on Saturday's epic football match at Anfield where we dug out a two-two draw thanks to the ever-reliable Dennis Law, and the elder Charlton brother, Bobby. The season had started well, exceeding my expectations. I was convinced we would finish in mid-table due to the ageing squad. But at this early point in the season, we topped the table. Life is good.

I reached the end of the wooded path that leads into a large open field overlooked by the Yew Tree pub. Possibly due to its location, sandwiched between the wood on the west side and Penygarn Road that borders its east side - combined with the poor grass quality,

the field is only considered fit for grazing cattle. The well-trodden path leads to a swing gate, also known as a 'Kissing gate,' that allows people – mainly contortionists - to exit the field. Like the turnstile mechanisms employed in football stadiums around the country the gate, strangely swings only through some forty-five degrees. With my bookbag on my shoulder, I squeezed through the gate and carried on past the Yew Tree, the overpowering smell of hops and cigarette smoke wafted out through the open windows causing me to wince.

On our way to the youth club earlier in the month, Dan Platt and I had paid a discreet visit to the Yew Tree's off-licence as we hurried towards Church Wood. Youth club evening is a rushed affair. There's barely enough time to get home and eat before returning to play five-a-side football, basketball, or under the glorious summer evening sun – cricket. Eddie, the landlord, apparently doesn't believe in age discrimination as he willingly sold us a flagon of Pale Ale which we drank on our way to the youth club and finished on the return journey home.

I strolled up Church Avenue and turned left onto Newman Road striding out purposefully towards the farthest reaches of Trevethin. Like most estates built on a mountain slope, houses drop below road level on one side of the road and rise high above road level on the opposite side of the road; this is well illustrated when travelling along Newman Road.

Glancing occasionally to my left I had a clear line of sight directly in to various bedroom windows. Some had patterned wallpaper while some looked more contemporary with bold colours of paint. One bedroom was a dark mauve with yellow stripes, obviously a throwback to the sixties psychedelic influence. Wardrobes and dressers were the most common pieces of furniture that I could see. About every fifth house I peered down over the sloping garden to view the house number, counting down as I walked almost hypnotically; I had long since found that this helped to relieve the monotonous nature of the trudge home. The steps leading down to the front of some houses were impossibly steep, forcing the council to place handrails to assist the less nimble negotiate these daunting gradients that would present a serious hazard in wet or icy conditions.

I had just passed number ninety-seven when one of Browns' buses chugged passed me belching noxious black smoke from its exhaust, causing me to hold my breath until it had passed and the fumes had dissipated. The bus slowed as it approached the bus stop fifty yards ahead and then stopped for two people to alight. The second passenger was an extremely large old dear who took an eternity to struggle down the steps aided by the bus conductress which delayed its departure long enough for me to reach its rear section. Looking up, I stared straight into the emerald green eyes of Diane, the gorgeous nineteen-year-old daughter of our next-door neighbour. Catching her attention, I smiled and gave a casual wave trying to appear cool, she smiled back at me and waved as the bus began to pull away on its journey to the top of Trevethin. I have spent many a night fantasising about Diane declaring her undying love for me, and she did kiss me last New Years Eve. To my extreme disappointment, she is currently dating a muscle-bound oaf. I suppose there is no accounting for tastes.

I continued the brisk pace, romantic notions filling my head when disaster struck. I had stepped in something that an animal had deposited. It must have been a Great Dane or an elephant such was the volume of excrement. I spent the rest of the journey scraping my shoe on anything that could help remove the parcel of joy that had been strategically placed in my path like a land mine. I scraped my shoe vigorously on grass, weeds, gravel and tarmac with limited success.

Reaching home, I walked wearily down the steps where I removed my smelly shoe and left it by the front door, praying it wouldn't rain that night.

IS IT THAT TIME ALREADY?

“Steven, get up,” my mother shouted from the bottom of the stairs. “This is your fifth and final wake-up call. I have better things to do than act as your alarm clock.”

Barely awake, I stumbled out of my bed and into the bathroom; even cold water did little to rouse me from my semi-conscious state. By the time I sat down to eat a bowl of cornflakes it was eight-thirty and my brother David had long since departed for the bus. I had twenty minutes to reach school or face detention again.

Grabbing my school bag, I raced up the hill and onto Newman Road extremely annoyed with myself. I loathe having to rush because you can never make up the lost time, which is probably why they call it *lost*. I alternated between walking at a brisk pace and trotting until I reached the shops where I stopped for a few moments to catch my breath. It was a beautiful warm September’s day; the sky was a clear blue and the birds offered their appreciation as they chirped merrily. What a contrast to the day of the rugby match when we left the field with hyperthermia, thoroughly wet and covered in mud.

As I sat on a brick wall in front of the newsagents, my thoughts drifted back to the summer holidays and a hot sultry July during when I picked blackberries. Several farms near Hereford had arranged for two buses to transport pickers from Trevethin to work on acres of blackberry bushes. For the best part of four weeks, I stooped, squatted, sat and knelt, dragging my bucket behind me while picking blackberries; my fingers were constantly sore and acquired a deep red tinge. During the first few days, I ate heartily of the produce, after that the heavy sweet smell that blackberry bushes give off made me feel queasy. For a short time after I lived like a king on the money that I earned that summer I still had a few pounds hidden in an old *David-proof* tin buried deep in my wardrobe, but it was not enough to sustain me for more than a few weeks. Recuperated, I set off purposefully in the direction of Church Wood.

CHAPTER 3

INVISIBLE TEMPORAL TRAVELLER

The suddenness of the blast pierced the quiet still morning and startled me sufficiently to cause me to stumble as I was hurrying through the field at the top of Church Wood intent on finding that lost time. The explosion ahead was completely unexpected, it was a loud blast producing the sort of sound I imagine hand grenades make when exploding. Birds likewise startled had scattered swiftly in all directions. For a few moments, I remained motionless pondering the most likely cause of such a discharge. There are no houses between the start and end of Church Wood, so a gas explosion seemed unlikely.

Still shaken, I walked cautiously towards the edge of the woods peering apprehensively at the area ahead from which the blast had emanated. I fully expected to find a large crater and perhaps the remains of a World War II bomb. Slowly and carefully I began my journey through the wooded area eyes darting from left to right alert to any sudden movement, instantly focussing on any sound; but the isolated path appeared to be deserted and the area was once again quiet and tranquil. Growing a little bolder I began to increase the pace of my steps until I rounded a group of trees protected by a couple of large bushes where I was astonished to see a shattered tree stump, charred with smoke still rising from the cremated remains. The base indicated that it had been a large tree but there was little of it remaining now. Lying in the grass on the opposite side of the small path that snakes its way down towards the town was a black helmet, also smouldering; this was a truly bizarre sight. My first thought was that a rally-cross motorbike rider had hit the tree and been killed in the explosion, but there were no visible signs to confirm my theory; no twisted metal frame or the remains of a wheel - not even a body. More than a little unsettled by these disturbing events I was about to hurry on by when a voice calling from beyond the undergrowth caught my attention.

The voice weak and strained cried out: "Boy, come here."

I was startled and filled with a sense foreboding, the hairs on the back of my neck stood up and a shiver ran down my spine. I was suddenly keenly aware of the extreme isolation as I stood completely alone, on a little-used path, running through a remote wooded area; and I was being hailed by an unseen person which greatly alarmed me. My imagination began to run riot. Could it be the motorbike rider, or maybe a psychopath? Perhaps it was a pervert playing out some obscene sick fantasy.

I had all but decided to scurry off when the voice called out again. "Please ... I haven't much time left." There was a hint of desperation in the voice and a strange vulnerability. I paused to consider my options: I could listen to my head and flee, or I could trust my gut feeling and investigate. Cursing my instincts, I took a deep breath and cautiously entered the undergrowth.

As I pushed through the overhanging branches and copious overgrowth, I entered a clearing where a truly gruesome sight greeted me, a man lay on the ground with severe wounds to his chest and left shoulder. Flesh that was torn and charred was exposed but with very little bleeding. Whatever had caused this damage had also cauterised his injuries and stemmed the blood loss, but still, his face showed he was in severe pain. The rest of his body was encased in black body armour, the sort of body protection equipment the American riot police wear. On his left wrist was an armband with buttons - this too looked damaged.

"Who are you?" I whispered. "And what happened?"

"That's not important. Listen..... I am an officer of the Temporal Directorate; we are guardians of the timeline. I have travelled from the 25th century chasing what the

directorate believed to be unimportant time thieves. That's people.... Sorry give me a minute.... who gain access to temporal technology and then travel to an earlier time where they steal and hide valuable objects. They return to the 25th century to reclaim the object and become wealthy."

Despite his laboured breathing he continued to speak in whispers. "In my time there is almost no crime, war or hunger, but on the rare occasion a citizen breaks the law it is my job to apprehend them. I never fail."

"Mmm," I muttered, irritated at an obvious lie. "So you're a time traveller?" I scoffed. "Why are you wasting my time ...?"

"In this case it was Plutonium," he grunted, interrupting my outburst, "bought from the Russian black market and hidden in the Beacons. I tracked them to a series of caves, the location of which and the details of their illegal endeavours are recorded on this disk which you must protect until someone contacts you." His shaking finger pointed slowly to a small silver disk tucked into the side of his arm device.

This conversation was too ridiculous for words; I had no intention of listening to any more nonsense. I wasn't sure whether this was a mad man, a sick hoax or a bad dream, perhaps I would wake up if I pinched myself. "Why don't you just teleport yourself back home?" I said flippantly.

"You can see my injuries," he gasped quietly, "and that particular function on my armband has been disabled possibly as a result of the time I spent watching them in the caves." He took a couple of slow breathes, and continued.

"I think the high level of radiation confined within the walls is responsible. Even my cloaking device is proving periodically unreliable."

"What!" I exclaimed in utter disbelief. "Do you honestly expect me to believe that you can make yourself invisible as well as being able to travel through time?" I found myself almost shouting in indignation that somebody thought me so stupid and naïve that I could be duped, and then I paused. Suddenly a feeling of stupidity washed over me as memories of Candid Camera victims flashed through my mind. I had been set up. I spun around a couple of times looking for signs of hidden cameras expecting at any moment someone to spring out from behind a bush shouting: *'Surprise! You're on Candid Camera!'*

A few moments passed, and then a few more – nothing. The badly wounded time traveller stared up at me, mouth open in surprise, evidently confused by my wild dance. I grinned sheepishly as it became clear there was no camera crew hidden in the undergrowth. Nevertheless, a few embarrassing moments later I erupted into a fit of laughter at the absurdity of his claims.

"Look, mate," I said shaking my head, "I will go and call an ambulance, but I don't think they will believe your story either.

"Press this button," he groaned quietly pointing to a small button at the top of his armband. He took a series of short breaths and screwed up his eyes in pain, his face was an awful shade of grey and his lips had a blue tinge. Staring at his face fresh doubts began to surface, either he was a superb actor or at least parts of his story were real, his injuries certainly appeared genuine. My concern for the physical condition of this strange man was growing and a sense of guilt swept over me for doubting him; I had been overwhelmed by the weird events and his unbelievable tale ... time traveller ... invisible man ... time thieves. My mind was reeling.

I leant over him to press the button he had pointed to and for the first time took a close look at his face; he was around thirty-five years old with short black hair and brown piggy-like eyes. A small gold number – Sixteen - was embedded into his shoulder pads. Even in the future people are just a number I figured humorously. Looking down I pressed the button and quickly stood back expecting him to disappear or perhaps explode

as he self-destructed. When nothing appeared to happen, I stared at him with a quizzical look. "Over there!" He gestured with a grimace. Five yards to my right, lying face down was a body dressed in similar body armour. His lack of movement and the grotesque position of his arms and legs indicated that he was dead. My jaw dropped and I gasped in surprise.

"Where did he come from? He wasn't there a moment ago," I yelled, the pitch of my voice rising sharply. "And what the hell is happening here?"

I was now hopelessly confused, I felt punch drunk. I was being pounded by circumstances and revelations that were unimaginable only a few minutes ago. Mohammed Ali couldn't possibly have felt more detached from reality when he was pummeled by Joe Frazier at Madison Square Garden earlier in the year.

"He is one of the time thieves I spoke of, the others got away," replied the Directorate Officer, as he continued with the explanation that had led to this awful moment.

"Normally they are armed with light weapons but this one surprised me, he had a laser-guided particle gun. These are normally only used by Special Forces and are considered top secret. I saw him out of the corner of my eye, and I tried to evade the blast, as I turned it glanced off my chest and shoulder and hit a tree. But even my body armour protected by an energy field provided little resistance against such a weapon. In his haste and determination to kill me, he attempted a second burst, but it jammed, and the charge quickly built up resulting in a deadly explosion, which you no doubt heard. He was an amateur with little knowledge of lethal weapons and he died because of it."

"I saw the result. There's nothing left," I whispered quietly, realising that this was no dream and that the weapon he spoke of had a terrible destructive capability that the military of my time would kill to possess.

"You must remove a tracer from a small pouch on the left arm of his body protection; it is spherical and about four centimetres in circumference. When you locate the tracer activate it by pressing a small button in the centre of the sphere, it will send him back to the time in which he belongs."

Nervously I walked over to the body of the deceased thief and cautiously bent over to touch his left arm. Twice I snatched my hand away when I thought I detected movement. I had never seen a real dead body before, and this situation had completely unnerved me. Before launching my third attempt I paused to prepare myself and control my breathing. Slowly I ran my fingers over his body armour starting at the left shoulder; I was struck by the smooth feel of the material nothing like the leather it resembled - it had the feel of silk. As I dug my fingers into the surface of the arm protector, I was surprised by the reaction of the material that forced my fingers to withdraw as it strained to resume its original smooth shape. Running lightly down the material towards the elbow my fingers felt the tracer's slight bulge long before my eyes detected the pouch. With a little fiddling, I forced a finger into the pouch and felt the outline of the object. Running my finger over the raised button in the middle of the tracer I took a deep breath and pressed it hard before sharply removing my finger lest it also sent me hurtling through time with the dead time traveller.

As I stepped back, to my astonishment the body vanished before my eyes. "I can think of a few people I would like that to happen to," I said quietly, O'Hare being uppermost in my mind.

"What about you?" I asked, turning my attention back to the severely injured man lying prostrate on the grass before me. "Will you also use a tracer to return home and get medical attention?"

Officer Sixteen let out a short laugh which much to my concern caused him to cough in a series of convulsions, any one of which seemed likely to be his last. After the third

bout of coughing subsided, he regained control of his breathing and smiled weakly in apology.

“As you can see, my tracer was disintegrated along with a large part of my body protector and flesh; I have no means of leaving this place. Regrettably, I fear I will not return to my time, my injuries are too severe.”

I no longer doubted that the wounds Officer Number Sixteen of the Temporal Directorate had received were anything but genuine and having watched a man appear from nowhere and then disappear – I was convinced that this man was indeed from another time.

Wincing with pain, he pressed two buttons in sequence on his arm device and spoke in short spurts, “Command Code release,” after which he recited a series of numbers. “I have released my armband with my command code, come here and place it on your left forearm.”

In hindsight, I should have questioned his instructions but caught up in this emotional rollercoaster I undid my shirt sleeve button. I walked over to him hesitantly offering my left arm; he struggled to raise himself before slumping back gasping from the effort. Seeing that he was unable to rise I knelt beside him, took the armband, and placed the device on my forearm where it snapped into place and tightened causing my arm to tingle momentarily.

“The armband is identifying your biological code. Recite a series of eight numbers that you will remember: they will form your command code.”

“What do I want with your armband?” I asked in confusion. “I don’t want to be one of your timeline cops.”

He gasped, closing his eyes and wincing in pain. For a few moments he lay panting and I wondered if Officer Number Sixteen would muster the strength to deliver his warning, he was not a well man. Gradually his breathing slowed as the pain passed and he opened his eyes slowly. “I haven’t much time, please listen carefully. As of this moment you hold the fate of millions of your descendants in the palm of your hands. Why do you think these men wanted the Plutonium?”

“I don’t know, and to be honest I don’t think I care if it puts me in the firing line of some monster weapon.”

“The danger is minimal. All you are required to do is to protect the disk and remain inconspicuous until you are contacted. In my time we have had world peace for many generations, but an extremely sinister and powerful organisation has emerged whose agenda, we believe, is to place time travel technology under civilian control. The latest intelligence brief has revealed their intention to build a super explosive device with a nuclear core that would destroy a whole sector, killing millions, and contaminating a whole continent. The additional evidence I have gathered indicates that they intend to blame the Directorate for the devastation, claiming that wormhole travel is unstable and has ripped a hole in space and time.”

Once again, a series of violent coughs caused him to clutch his chest. After a couple of deep breaths he continued. “They will assert that fatal flaws in technology design, combined with unacceptable levels of incompetence and mismanagement when harnessing the immense power of wormholes, amounts to culpable negligence. The thought of time travel controlled by a faceless corporation terrifies me. Now, do you see why the information on the disk is so important?” His face was again contorted with pain as he spoke with intense passion. “The armband will give you added protection as well as acting as a beacon for my colleagues to trace.”

“I suppose,” I replied with little enthusiasm. “Alright,” I said decisively, realising that I had little choice, “I need a command code.” My date of birth sprang to mind. “15041955,” I said loudly.

The fatally-wounded officer looked up at me and smiled bravely. “The armband will not work on anyone else now that it has combined with you biologically and accepted your command code. It also releases a marker and nanotechnology into your bloodstream which will reside in an area of your cortex.” With a limp hand, he pointed toward the array of buttons on the armband. “The top three buttons operate the cloaking device, energy shield and time travel. The counters beneath display the time co-ordinates of the period you are in, however, that function is now unreliable.”

He was now continually gasping for breath and had little time left.

“Listen carefully. When I die, bury me deep in the woods and dispose of my body armour and any other devices you find in this area. Watch the proximity indicator near the top of the armband as it indicates that someone with similar technology is very close, they could be cloaked, and they may not be friendly. May the ancestors be with you,” he gasped quietly. With that, he lapsed into unconsciousness and shortly after took his last breath.

I sat by his body for a long time stunned at what had transpired in the last thirty minutes. Everything I thought I knew seemed insignificant. Lying before me was a man whose name I didn’t know and who had died far from home, but staggeringly was from another time.

Suddenly a sense of dread and a need for urgency swept over me; time travellers good or bad could be watching me right now or would be shortly if I remained here.

I searched the immediate area quickly, looking for anything that looked futuristic or technological with little success. I extended the search area to a thirty square yard perimeter and gathered a few pieces of damaged body armour hidden under a large bush as well as a small device that bore a resemblance to an information readout screen, but it didn’t appear to work. As I walked back toward the dead officer my attention was drawn to sunlight bouncing off metal near the base of a tree, it was the remains of a gun – probably the weapon that had ultimately killed him. Picking up the disfigured object, I thrust that also into my games bag.

With a sense of profound sadness, I stripped off the protective armour from the body of Officer Number Sixteen of the Temporal Directorate and dragged him deep into the dense forest area where I covered him with stones, branches and leaves. I squashed the equipment into my bloated games bag and quickly left the area, frequently looking behind me as I hurried to the bottom of Church Wood desperate to be amongst people, lots of people.

The consequences of skipping school seemed absurdly trivial in the light of what I had seen and learnt this Wednesday morning. The armband, although slightly bulky, fitted under my white shirt and light blue jumper comfortably. I made my way to Sidoli’s where I sat drinking coffee for twenty minutes trying to make sense of the intriguing events I had witnessed.

Suddenly I felt giddy with the knowledge of the power contained in the gadget on my forearm. Dare I attempt to use it? Becoming invisible had boundless possibilities: listening in on conversations, practical jokes, sneaking into the cinema free. The list was endless.

What of the energy shield? No more facial damage for me, and how might it enhance my ball kicking or energetic rugby tackles? I had a good feeling about the technology I had unwillingly inherited.

Time travel, even leaping back just twenty-four hours held unlimited possibilities. Memorising the Saturday horse racing results and travelling back to the previous day could be very profitable. Of course, I would need some way of obtaining the initial stake money, not an easy task for a schoolboy. But saving my dinner money for a week would amount to a couple of pounds which, placed on a 'Lucky Seven', could potentially net thousands. The football pools was also an extremely lucrative possibility. Seven or eight score draws could produce tens of thousands of pounds.

And then the euphoria of the situation evaporated as quickly as it had appeared, as once again my mind recalled the dying face of Officer Number Sixteen of the Temporal Directorate. My stomach churned and a deep depression flooded over me. What sort of person could even entertain the use of future technology for pleasure when two men had died and perhaps millions more could suffer the same fate? "Remain inconspicuous," he had instructed me. Easy enough for a school kid, just do the normal things I have been doing for years.

I jumped as a voice from behind interrupted my train of thought. "Steve, where have you been?" It was Tom.

Relaxing back in my seat I looked up. "Hi Tom, I didn't feel too good, so I came here for a coffee. What's happening?"

"Not a lot. You've missed registration but this is our free session. Fancy a game of pinball? I'll set it up, you put some money in the jukebox," Tom instructed, as he walked into the back room.

I put a few coins into the jukebox and selected four tracks, although in all honesty, I paid little attention to the songs I had chosen. We played a few games, drank coffee and shared a couple of Peter Stuyvesant's before returning to school for double PE. However, I had great difficulty in suppressing the recent horror from my mind.

GLYN'S APPENDAGE

As we strolled along the corridor to the changing room I called into the male toilets. As usual, there was toilet paper strewn across the floor and a heavy smell of cigarette smoke. Visible evidence of this forbidden school time activity was floating in one of the toilet pans where the nicotine junkies had discarded three cigarette butts. I locked the cubicle door and undid my shirt sleeve. I pressed the two buttons that Officer Number Sixteen had used to release the armband and quietly recited: "Command Code 15041955." The armband released its hold on my forearm and I quickly removed it placing it at the bottom of my games bag among the body armour.

With a heavy heart, I made my way to the changing room and undressed lethargically, the horrific events continually replaying in my mind. I was also very apprehensive about leaving the armband unguarded while we spent the next hour and twenty minutes doing circuit work in the gym. I was comforted with the knowledge that the security code rendered it useless to anyone else, while at the same time I felt burdened with the heavy responsibility of caring for it until others contacted me.

I quite enjoy the repetitive circuit of climbing frames, crawling along beams and then swinging on ropes to the next piece of apparatus. I was grateful that the physical exertion temporarily pushed the shock of watching a person die before me to the back of my mind.

As usual, I humiliated myself as I tried, unsuccessfully, to scale the thick ropes hanging from the Gymnasium ceiling. Though I tried to grip the rope between my feet I began to slow at the fifteen feet mark. I have never managed to reach the top and strike the ceiling in celebration as many others regularly have, and today was no exception. At the twenty foot mark I had ground to a halt, the build-up of lactic acid in my muscles

caused them to scream in pain as my feet slipped against the rope trying unsuccessfully to gain purchase. I clung to the rope swinging like a worm on a hook.

“Morris,” yelled Mr Cropper. “Get down! You’re holding everyone else up, you fat lump of lard.” Extremely embarrassed I slid down the rope in an ungainly fashion and moved onto the next piece of equipment - the trampoline. Surprisingly I am at least competent on this piece of equipment.

Keeping my legs and body straight I bounced a few times gaining height on each occasion and with growing confidence, I attempted a summersault. As I soared towards the ceiling, I thrust my elbows backwards and started to rotate in the air, the room spun briefly and then stopped abruptly as I landed on my backside. Clambering to my feet I began the process again. Increasing in height and velocity on each bounce, I steadied myself and attempted a summersault for the second time, this time I landed on my feet but still bent in the pike position. My nose hit my knee and I fell forward burying my face in the canvas. On the third attempt, still trying to clear my woozy head, I stumbled and bounced onto the padded edge. Now totally unbalanced, I flew through the air landing unceremoniously on my back with a loud thud as I hit the surrounding mats. I staggered to my feet rubbing the small of my back and massaging my aching neck while the growing queue of classmates waiting impatiently for me to move on to the next piece of equipment heckled and jeered. Unfortunately, the pace of circuit work is unrelenting and even as I tried to focus, I was pulled onto the next piece of apparatus by Tom. My trampoline work was also entirely unspectacular on the second circuit and when I approached it on the third circuit I was determined to end with a better performance - if only my body had known this. The first summersault saw me bounce off the padding and the second attempt also ended in a heap on the mats. As I climbed to my feet I was once again booed by those behind me in the queue waiting impatiently for their turn. Thankfully the whistle sounded signalling the end of PE and I shuffled towards the changing room hiding at the rear of the queue.

“Nice moves, Steve,” Tom chuckled, as he appeared beside me. “I was particularly impressed by the sound effects as you hit the floor.”

It appeared that critical assessment of my performance wasn’t confined to Tom as O’Hare barged past me. “Morris you are a pathetic loser,” he hissed, jabbing me in the back.

“You know, Tom,” I mused, “flying through the air is best left to the birds - it’s too damn painful.”

Shower time presented the opportunity for Glyn O’Keefe to strut around the changing room. Glyn had developed faster than most of us and had an impressive appendage which he delighted in swinging about as he walked to and from the shower. It had a hypnotic effect; you couldn’t help but look at it.

“That’s never normal,” John James commented, with a look of admiration.

“How do you get that into your trousers Glyn?” Dan Platt joked. However, I detected a slight hint of envy.

Glyn just smiled, sucked in his stomach and pushed his chest out as he strutted around the room, the Alpha male unchallenged in his domain. As normal Phil Edwards then became the focus of attention. A late developer, he had the smallest member and hardly got wet as he hurried into the shower and out again, quickly wrapping a towel around himself. But it didn’t matter, everyone knew he was under-developed, and the teasing followed.

“Have you grown one yet Phil?” shouted Donovan.

“I think you are in the wrong changing room, this is the boys,” piped a voice from the shower area.

However, the banter ended abruptly when Mr Cropper emerged from his office. “Okay that’s enough, any more comments about the size of someone’s dangling parts will result in a slapped arse,” he bellowed.

You ignored Mr Cropper’s warning at your peril. His party trick was to grab an offender’s sideburn or any facial hair in front of the ear which he would then tug upwards with sufficient force to ensure that they were standing on the tips of their toes, eyes watering. Many of us had painful memories of this and so a hush fell over the changing room and we finished dressing with some haste.

INNOCENT BYSTANDERS

Morning PE often results in tired bodies, and in many of the classrooms as the lack of ventilation allows the build-up of carbon dioxide - tired minds. This proved to be the case during Geography in the afternoon when Jim Carrol fell asleep at the back of the warm and stuffy classroom. Mr *Psycho* Bovill, Head Geography teacher, was alerted to Jim’s condition when he observed him doing the head bob. Unfortunately, when his head eventually slumped on his chest he also began snoring softly.

Mr Bovill put a finger to his lips as he gestured to the rest of the class to remain quiet. He moved forward a few paces while still describing the beauty of the Serengeti; he was like a cat stalking its prey. Jim Carrol, however, was blissfully unaware of the impending danger as *psycho* moved through the first rank of desks stealthily, lowering his tone so as not to wake Jim and alert him to the approaching threat.

Those seated near Jim started to lift their desktops slowly while sinking in their seats to hide behind their raised wooden shields. This is standard behaviour when Mr Bovill becomes irritated, he has been known to throw chalk and even board rubbers at anyone who upsets him. Everyone, including his intended target, knows the precise moment to raise their desktops to protect themselves as his missiles often ricochet. On more than one occasion the object thrown would miss the victim and bounce off a raised desktop hitting the head or body of someone seated nearby. In a strong Swansea accent, he loudly exclaims: ‘*Collateral damage is to be expected in the war against dullards.*’

This time, however, his missile - a piece of chalk - hit Jim smack in the centre of his head waking him with a start. In his confused state, he toppled backwards onto the desk behind him.

“What’s the matter boy, didn’t you get any sleep last night?” bellowed Mr Bovill as Jim hastily scrambled to his feet shaking his desk as he did so.

“Sorry Sir, my baby brother woke us all up in the middle of the night and cried for hours,” he muttered quietly, embarrassed by the attention.

“Well don’t let it happen again or I will stand you at the front of the class and use you for target practice,” threatened Mr Bovill ominously, much to everyone’s amusement.

Eventually, the bell went, and we swarmed out of school, most of us heading for the Town Hall bus stops. I wanted to be surrounded by people after the morning’s events; it would be a while before I would walk through Church Wood alone.

The three bus shelters opposite the Town Hall were quickly submerged in a sea of school children waiting for buses travelling North of Pontypool to Abergavenny, and South to Cwmbran and Newport. As I waited at the bus stop by the Town Hall for a bus to Trevethin I noticed O’Hare and a couple of his goons making their way to join the queue opposite. I stooped slightly and tried to blend in with those around me, the last thing I needed today was a confrontation with that mob. It worked.

CHAPTER 4

MUM, THE GUINEA PIG

I arrived home and went straight to my room, David was out with his friends and mum was busy preparing tea. I flopped onto my bed and began to dig to the bottom of my games bag to retrieve the armband. Holding it up to the light I examined it carefully, the armband appeared to be composed of flexible black leather-like material; its texture was smooth and the buttons were barely visible when looking directly across the surface of the armband at eye level.

As I placed it onto my forearm it tightened gripping my lower arm comfortably. I recited the command code as I stared down at the layout of the buttons on the armband. Nearest to my wrist was an unlit indicator; beneath this were three more indicators directly above their corresponding buttons. The indicator above the first button was flashing red intermittently. This was the button I had been told by Officer Number Sixteen that controlled movement through time. The middle indicator was also flashing, however, unlike its neighbour, this indicator was flashing orange intermittently. Only the third indicator was a steady green.

Officer Number Sixteen had spoken of an energy shield. He had also revealed the presence of a cloaking device that was proving unreliable; perhaps the button beneath the flashing orange indicator was the cloaking device and the button beneath the steady green indicator was the energy shield. However, this assumption was little more than guesswork, the armband had been subjected to long periods of radiation, it's a miracle that anything worked. The only sure-fire method of determining which functions were active and their purpose was by trial and error, and the most logical starting point was the function that appeared to be in working order.

My forefinger hovered above the button apprehensively, I gulped and closed my eyes as my finger made contact and gave it a short prod. A few seconds passed, nothing had happened that I was aware of, no sensation or sound. Tentatively I opened my eyes and looked down, everything seemed normal. My body and the room looked just like it did a second ago. "This button must activate the energy shield," I said quietly to myself and gave my bed a hefty slap to test my theory. "Ow!" I yelled, as my brain was quickly informed that the ends of the fingers in my right hand had incurred sudden pain. Not sharp pain, nor even a prolonged period of pain, just the pain associated with slapping a hard mattress with a degree of force.

"Right ... not the energy shield then," I hissed, as I rubbed my hand vigorously. I padded over to my wardrobe door to look at my reflection in the full-length mirror and to my utter astonishment, I saw nothing. I wasn't there. I could see the furniture behind me, my bed, side table and lamp, objects that should have been partially obscured by my body, except there was no body to obscure them. I touched my head, felt my chest and rubbed my legs together, I definitely existed I still had mass, but it appeared to be an invisible mass. I was at a loss as to an explanation. Was it a light-bending trick, or had my molecular cohesion been disrupted in some unfathomable way? I doubt that even the keenest scientific minds of the 20th century could explain it.

I looked at the light on the armband, the indicator beneath what was now undisputedly the cloaking device button had changed to an intermittently flashing yellow. I pressed the button again and the light returned to a steady green. Anxiously I looked again at the mirror to view the results ... and heavens be praised, I was back. Rarely had I been so delighted to view my reflection. "Whoa," I whispered quietly. "This is awesome. I am the invisible man." I repeated the sequence at least twice, waving my hand vigorously in front

of the mirror, pulling faces and chuckling at the absence of a reflection. Stage one: investigation of the cloaking device was complete. Stage two: confirmation by a third party was still a work in progress. Could I walk past someone without them detecting my presence? I needed a test subject and one came quickly to mind as I heard the kettle whistling downstairs. For some strange reason, mum, a traditionalist at heart, is reluctant to embrace change. She has doggedly refused to change to an electric kettle preferring the old-fashioned whistling variety heated on the gas cooker. She would be my guinea pig. Again, I pressed the first button and watched the steady green light turn to an intermittent flashing yellow. I took a final look in the mirror to confirm my invisibility once more and walked silently down the stairs.

Two stairs creaked as I trod on them, not loudly, but more than enough to arouse attention given the wrong circumstances. This could present a problem; I imagine that in the invisible realm stealth is imperative, how embarrassing to be detected through a couple of creaking stairs. This led me to wonder about footprints, undoubtedly wet floors, flower beds and snow could also prove tricky.

As I approached the kitchen, I saw mum making a pot of tea. Now she would sit down and pour herself a cup, take a few sips, and then dunk a couple of biscuits. She was fairly predictable. I waited for her to sit down and then walked as quietly as possible towards her. I stopped a few feet from where she was sitting and stood there for a few moments breathing quietly. I thought I had been rumbled as she looked directly at me, and seven or eight tense seconds passed before I realised that the cloaking device was still working properly, and that mum was merely looking through me as she pondered. Suddenly she rose from the table and walked over to the cupboard, as she did so I stepped forward and picked up the last remaining biscuit that was sat on a plate beside her cup. I hid the biscuit behind my back and quickly stepped back before she turned around to return to her seat. After a few seconds, she closed the cupboard door and walked back to the table where she sat down and continued to drink her tea. After two or three sips she began to look around the table, moving the plate and lifting her cup, she even looked over the side of the table at the floor; she was looking for the biscuit that I had hidden behind my back. She shook her head and continued to drink her tea. Again, she stood up and walked over to the cupboard where the biscuits were kept. This was my cue to leave. I turned quietly and hurried back up the stairs, careful not to step on the creaking boards. I was shaking with excitement as I entered my bedroom, letting out a gasp of air as I began to relax.

“That went well,” I whispered elatedly to myself.

But I had taken a careless risk in the kitchen. I had reasoned intuitively that if I hid an object behind my back it too would be invisible; I had to prove that premise before I used the cloaking device in anger.

I placed the biscuit on the edge of the bed near the wardrobe mirror. It sat there in plain sight - it was a biscuit on the edge of a bed. However, I was still invisible, walking in front of the mirror confirmed that. I stooped and picked up the biscuit, and it too became invisible. When I placed it back on the bed and withdrew my hand it again became visible – a biscuit sat on the end of a bed. So, the cloak projected beyond my body, but how far?

This seemed as good a time as any to test the limits of size and distance, so I began to pick up objects of varying dimensions starting with *The Lord of the Rings*, a peculiar book I had started to read some time ago and that I had left on my bedside table. I picked the book up and looked in the mirror, it had vanished and, like I, it was now invisible. I dropped the book onto the bed and picked up my pillow, a cursory glance at the mirror confirmed that this too had become invisible. Stooping over I grasped the end of my bed with both hands and looked over at the mirror. I wasn't too surprised to see the bed still

reflected in the mirror. It seemed logical that there would be a limit beyond which the cloaking device would be unable to project the field of invisibility that cocooned my frame.

I was eager to explore other armband functions and apprehensively pressed the first of two buttons that was positioned below the group of three that I had already examined. This was the same button I had pressed to reveal the dead thief, however, this time there was no response. I waited a few seconds and pressed it again ... nothing. Pursing my lips, I rubbed my chin gently puzzled at the lack of response. Slowly I replayed the events of this morning over in my mind; it was only after I had pressed this button that the dead time thief was revealed. In a blinding flash of inspiration, I realised that this function probably destabilised other cloaked devices nearby, which would account for the dead thief suddenly becoming visible. If true, this function could prove to be my first line of defence against cloaked time travellers. Only time would tell.

The function of the second button was unknown. Nervously I pressed it and was dismayed to see the armband disappear; it had vanished in front of my eyes. My immediately thought was that it had been reclaimed, transported forward five hundred years to the 25th century, but it was still there I could feel it gripping my forearm. I ran my hand over the armband and located the second button by touch. Again, I pressed the button, this time more forcibly and to my overwhelming delight the armband materialized again. This was brilliant; the armband could cloak itself. I could wear it in invisible mode and no one would be any the wiser. I could even leave it in my bedroom safe in the knowledge that my brother and mother wouldn't stumble upon it.

I wondered what promise the first button on the third row held as I pressed it tentatively. "Which function do you require?" a voice asked. I gasped in surprise, frozen to the spot. My mind was in turmoil. Had they found me so soon? My heart was racing wildly, and my breathing had become ragged, even the hairs on the back of my neck stood up. Screwing up my courage I spun around expecting to find someone stood behind me but bewilderingly the room was empty. I did a pirouette, quickly followed by a second, but I appeared to be alone.

"Please restate the function you require," repeated the voice.

In a state of panic, I grabbed my eighteen-inch Tech Drawing ruler from under the bedside table to prod the air around me. If a cloaked time traveller was indeed stood in my bedroom, he or she must have thought me a madman as I lunged like a demented swordsman cutting the air, thrusting and parrying indiscriminately until I collapsed onto my bed exhausted. I lay panting and wheezing for a few moments before wearily sitting up.

"Please restate the function you require," said the voice a third time.

It sounded so near, almost in my head ... and then it dawned on me I *was* hearing the voice in my head. I recalled Officer Number Sixteen's technical explanation about the transfer of command codes ... "It releases a marker into your bloodstream that will reside in an area of your cortex." Biology wasn't my best subject, but even I knew that the cortex facilitated higher brain functions and the voice was now talking to me in my head.

"State the functions available," I said quietly.

"Communications, Data Retrieval, Inquiries, and Command Codes ... which of these functions do you require?"

I thought I would try to talk to someone, maybe the Temporal Directorate, perhaps the 25th-century police or even a government official. I would settle for anyone that might be able to make sense of this incredible situation.

"Communications," I replied, hopefully.

“I am sorry, a temporal connection is unavailable at this time. Please try again later,” replied the voice.

Typical, the bleeding telephone’s broken, I thought, in frustration.

I assumed that data retrieval was used to check criminal records and other boring things, and so I moved onto the next function.

“Inquiries,” I said purposefully. I had a hundred questions that needed answering: How and when will someone contact me? What do I do if a 25th-century villain tries to kill me? And isn’t that illegal even in the 25th century? And how can I contaminate the timeline even though I was born and live in this time? The list was endless.

“Please state the nature of your inquiry,” said the voice ... a soft feminine voice. *Probably about twenty-five, single with long dark hair and brown eyes*, I thought to myself as I started to drool.

“Stop daydreaming you fathead,” I cried loudly, trying to expel the hormone-driven fantasy from my mind.

For the first fifteen years of my life girls had proved an inconvenience. They were annoying, spiteful and bossy. And then suddenly, and without warning, they mesmerised me. I was drawn to their curves, their looks and their smell, but this wasn’t an appropriate time to fantasise.

I continued the inquiry. “What is a particle weapon?”

After three minutes of boring technical details I resolved to think before asking further technical questions as the 25th-century babe went on and on about particle accelerators, charged particles, energy output, and laser guidance.

“Stop,” I yelled.

“Too much detail.”

She was hurting my head with her 25th-century techno babble. “Let’s get down to what is really important. Which team last won the World Cup and how many times did England win it?” I awaited the answer eagerly.

“The game of Football ceased in the year 2190. Luxembourg was the last country to win the World Cup. England won the competition only once, in 1966.”

That sounds about right, I thought dejectedly. Like many millions of English football fans, I was filled with great expectation during the 1970 World Cup in Mexico, after all we were the cup holders. How could we lose with Banksy in goal, Bobby Moore marshalling the defence and the Charlton brothers at the height of their prowess? Sadly, the heat, a couple of dubious substitutions, and aided by a very suspicious stomach bug that laid Gordon Banks low saw Germany through to the semi-finals by three goals to two. Infuriatingly, the winning goal glanced off a bald-headed German, and Peter Bonnetti - supposedly the *Chelsea cat* - was left flapping like a demented moggy. I cried at the end of the match and kicked everything in sight.

A talking encyclopaedia had definite possibilities. Imagine; no more memory lapses in class. The next time Mrs Bovill, the Biology teacher, and wife of *psycho* grills me, I will make her choke over her questions.

Mrs Bovill, known as *the witch*, has a high pitch gravelly voice and frequently yells like a shrew. Just over five feet tall she has short black curly hair, small beady eyes, and a nose that resembles a pig’s snout. A few weeks ago, she was droning on and on, the classroom was stuffy, and I started to fall asleep.

“Well!” she barked.

Startled, I awoke to see an angry Mrs Bovill standing right in front of me, her face contorted with rage. I also had the undivided attention of the rest of the class.

A few classmates began to snigger, and O’Hare began to offer advice, “Send him to the Headmaster, Mrs Bovill.”

Mitchell, one of his troggs also shouted out, "Give him double detention, Miss."

Ignoring their comments Mrs Bovill leant forward menacingly and bellowed in my face. "What's the answer?"

I gulped and tried to play for time. "I didn't hear the question Mrs Bovill," I replied nervously, as I broke out into a cold sweat.

"What's the difference between a broad bean and a runner bean?" she snarled. I breathed a sigh of relief. *Easy question*, I thought. I smiled and visibly relaxed.

"Broad beans are white, and round and runner beans are green and long," I answered, beaming in triumph, crisis averted.

"Are you being cheeky you stupid boy?" Mrs Bovill screamed, spitting the words out as she yelled in my face.

Aggh, wrong answer, I thought, panic again sweeping over me.

"Go and stand in the corner for not listening and for falling asleep in my lesson," she yelled, and then she hit me around the back of my head as I shuffled towards the corner of the classroom.

It's quite humiliating to stand in the corner of a room staring at the paintwork while everyone sniggers and makes comments at your expense.

Maybe she wanted a sort of biological answer, I thought, upon reflection.

However, as useful as a talking encyclopaedia might prove, this function would have to be used discreetly. People might misinterpret a man talking aloud in public, seemingly engaged in conversation with thin air. Undoubtedly some have been locked up for less.

Having explored most of the armband's functions and discovered that a few offered some, if limited, protection against futuristic technology, I felt a little happier about the covert world of time travel into which I had unwittingly stumbled.

My attention was drawn to Mum's voice; she was outside shouting. "Steven, David, dinner is ready." She first shouted down the road and turned to shout up the road repeating the exercise and increasing in volume each time she rotated.

Because I had spent the last hour or so quietly exploring the armband in my bedroom, she must have assumed that I was playing football in the road, my normal evening pastime. I opened the window and leaned out, by now she had reached the gate and was yelling at the top of her voice. "I'm up here, mum," I shouted hesitantly. I knew she would be irate when she learned I was in the house and that she had yelled up and down the road unnecessarily. Turning, she looked up at me and scowled. "You could have told me you were upstairs, I have been shouting like a fool," she added angrily, as she stomped back down the steps towards the front door.

I left the armband cloaked on the top of my wardrobe and made my way downstairs to a gourmet's delight: eggs, beans, and chips - my favourite meal - simple but enjoyable. Mum was fussing with the salt cellar when David dashed in panting and covered in sweat, he proceeded to give some pathetic excuse for being late.

"How was your day at school?" mum asked, glancing in my direction.

"Mmm..... it was okay," I mumbled, my mouth full of food.

After tea, I decided to tackle Tech Drawing homework. I quite enjoy the symmetry and precision of the subject; it's just a shame that I usually make a pig's backside of it. By the time I have finished grinding graphite particles into the paper in an attempt to erase careless mistakes it frequently ends up looking a grubby grey mess. "Had your dinner on this again have you, Morris?" Mr Morgan, the Tech Drawing teacher often jibes, much to the amusement of my classmates. Well, tonight was going to be different. My pencils were duly sharpened, two hbs, two lhs, and two 2hs, one clean eraser, one straight rule, drawing board and drawing clips at the ready.

Two hours later I had finished my homework assignment, and it looked impressive. An accurate side view and front view of a building complete with nice clean one-point perspective lines. I rolled it up and inserted it into my Tech Drawing tube. Well, it's a girdle tube kindly donated by Fowlers; a large expensive lingerie shop situated next to the entrance to Pontypool's well-known indoor market.

The indoor market, dating from 1891, was one of the few buildings in Pontypool to have escaped being demolished by German bombers during WW2. Mum told me the Hanbury family donated the Town Hall and the popular indoor market to the good people of Pontypool in the early part of the twentieth century.

At the start of each new school year, a few of us would shuffle nervously into the female underwear department of Fowlers staring straight ahead, neither looking to the left or the right while dying of embarrassment. Walking through aisles of women's foundation garments is something adolescent boys would normally avoid like the plague. Teenage boys may fantasise about buxom blondes in lingerie, but it's quite a different matter to be caught looking at said garments without a female at your side, almost a perverted fetish. The reason that we venture into Fowlers and shuffle past the bras, knickers, stockings and petticoats, is to collect empty girdle tubes which they kindly put aside for us each autumn and give without charge.

"Girdles must be extremely fragile garments to be protected by such sturdy cardboard tubes with metal ends," Tom remarked philosophically, as we made our way out of Fowlers one day last week.

I thought on it for a second and then shook my head in disagreement. "No, I think it's more like a luxurious treat in honour of the awful fate awaiting them, imagine how far a girdle has to stretch to squeeze Mrs Bovill's hideously fat rump into it."

We laughed all the way down Crane Street as we dreamt-up other ways in which the innocuous girdle tube could be utilised, each suggestion increasingly ruder and more bizarre than the last.

Later that evening, I pondered on the fate of a girdle attempting to cram an excess of flesh into it, as I sat watching the television. I felt some sympathy for the contortion expected of the stretchy material as I called to mind my visit to the dentist a few months ago. Two fingers, a drill, and a mirror had been crammed into my mouth, followed by the sucky thing that tries to rip the tongue out of your mouth. The final straw was when the dentist said, "Open wider." Did he want to get his foot in as well?

Even though I had engaged the cloaking device just before drifting off to sleep, I felt uneasy about leaving the armband in my bedroom with the possibility that my mother or my imbecilic brother could stumble upon it, even though it was an invisible object. After some deliberation, I chose to hide it at the bottom of the wash basket wrapped inside a towel reasoning that it would be safe there as washing is a twice-weekly occurrence, Monday and Friday. I would retrieve it tomorrow evening after I had finished school.

SQUASH ANYONE?

I once heard a saying: *'Sometimes you're the pigeon, and sometimes you're the statue.'* Lately, I have been cast as the statue more frequently than I care to remember by O'Hare and his followers who were particularly frisky this Thursday morning.

They had been pestering both Tom and me during the lunch break, bouncing into the back of us as we strolled along the upper play area. On the second circuit of the play area, we were suddenly confronted by O'Hare as he blocked our route. "What are you doing on the weekend Steve?" he asked cheerfully. I am always suspicious when confronted by Greeks bearing gifts and quickly spun around to find Mitchell kneeling behind us as a prelude to O'Hare pushing us over, a childish trick favoured by those with a juvenile mind.

Unfortunately, the speed of my turn unbalanced me as I attempted to avoid falling over Mitchell, and I found myself sprawled on the tarmac, quickly followed by Tom as O'Hare executed his childish plan. A moment later, O'Hare, Mitchell, and two other plop heads dived on top of us.

Mass autosuggestion is a strange phenomenon. Upon seeing a group of bodies laid on top of each other, dozens of boys almost as one shouted: "Pile on, pile on." As they ran towards us from all areas of the playground, I struggled frantically to break free, desperate to escape before the stampede hit, but to no avail as perhaps twenty-five bodies piled on top of us.

There is something quite terrifying about being pinned by a great weight, unable to move, breath or scream, just total darkness and awareness that the life is being squeezed out of your body. I didn't feel the pressure lifting as bodies were thrown off by two teachers, only the sensation of light and oxygen suddenly becoming available again. The teachers appreciating the possible consequences of suffocation were furiously throwing boys in all directions as they dug to the bottom of the pile, yelling at each miscreant as they yanked them to their feet.

A few of us, O'Hare included, lay on the ground for a couple of minutes sucking in air. The side of my face had gravel burns and my head throbbed due to the compressive effect of the exerted pressure. Everyone protested their innocence, including Tom and I, however, our plea fell on deaf ears and we were all given thirty minutes detention at the end of school that day.

Our punishment ... four hundred lines: *I must not jump on others as it could hurt them and is a childish practice.* That's institutional justice for you.

Grateful that the school day had ended, I made my way to the Town Hall to catch the four-thirty bus which as expected arrived late; I was one of the last people to board the bus sitting in an empty seat by the door. As we stopped at the Town Bridge, the final bus stop before Pen-y-garn Hill, many more people squeezed on so that about fifteen were made to stand in the aisle.

The last passenger was a frail old lady of about seventy; she had thinning grey hair and wore a fragile-looking pair of turtle shell framed glasses. She was weighed down with two heavy carrier bags which she placed at her feet so that she could hold onto a pole near the door.

In my head I could hear mums voice: "A gentleman always offers a woman their seat, particularly if she is elderly or pregnant."

Pricked by my conscience I stood up and offered the old dear my seat. My chivalrous gesture was gratefully received with a half-smile and the nod of her head. By now the bus had started the long climb up the hill to Pen-y-garn, the engine groaning as it got slower and slower, and inevitably ... it stopped.

"Everyone standing will have to get off and walk," the driver shouted up the bus. "And because we are running late, I can't wait for you at the top!"

I was pretty fed up as I climbed down the steps; I was in no mood to walk home; my body was stiff, and my face was sore from the squishing suffered earlier in the day. However, to my utter astonishment, I heard the old woman to whom I had kindly offered my seat talking to those around her: "Good enough too! Young men need the exercise." I made an angry pledge right there and then that never again would I offer my seat to a woman, particularly a wrinkly prune.

Reluctantly I started the slow climb up the hill, cursing quietly under my breath. At length the bus approached noisily behind me, engine screaming. I glared at the driver as he drew alongside me and began gesturing and uttering expletives. This was quickly curtailed as a large cloud of black smoke enveloped me and the other ejected male

passengers as it passed. Each of us coughed as we struggled to extract oxygen from among the cocktail of carbon monoxide fortified with oil vapour.

I finally reached the top fifteen lung-bursting minutes later, my leg muscles ached, and my throat was dry. I stopped outside the small post office shop perched at the top of the hill to regain my strength. By then I had walked off my anger and decided not to punish womanhood with one exception ... the old prune. Next time she can stand.

CHAPTER 5

SHE'S WASHED THE ARMBAND

"I'm home," I shouted as I closed the front door. Making a bee-line to my bedroom I threw my books on the bed and turned to retrieve the armband from the washing basket.

"Aggh," I shrieked in horror as I stared into an empty basket.

"She's done it a day early." I bolted down the stairs two at a time and sprinted into the kitchen, it was empty.

"Where is she?" I cried frantically to myself, confused at her absence. Mum is always in the house when I arrive home from school, usually preparing the food that would constitute that night's burnt offering. It flashed through my mind that she might be at number five drinking tea with Edna, mother of the gorgeous Diane, but it was not her normal afternoon routine and mum is entirely predictable.

As I was about to rush into the street to continue my frenzied search, I noticed the back door was open; walking quickly out into the garden I was mightily relieved to see mum pegging garments onto the washing line.

"Hi mum," I said trying to appear casual.

"Did you find ... umm ... anything unusual in the wash basket?"

Turning in my direction mum smiled. "Just your dirty clothes, love," she said wittily. "The last wash is on now, have you lost something?"

"Err ... no" I replied guardedly, "I thought I may have left a pen in my shirt pocket that's all." With that, I rushed back into the kitchen.

"Damn," I yelled out in frustration.

"I can't be relied on to do anything right; a future generation is relying on me and I've Daz-ed them to death."

Never mind biological warfare ending the planet – biological washing powder was proving just as powerful.

Lifting the lid on the twin tub to halt the wash cycle I stared down into the murky black water as rising steam blasted my face. "Nothing can survive this," I whispered solemnly as panic swept over me. I picked up the giant wooden tongs my mother uses to transfer hot steaming clothes from the washer into the spin dryer and started fishing to locate the armband amongst whatever lurked beneath the surface of the water in the boiling cauldron. However, the steam hampered my progress as I had to withdraw my hand every few seconds to avoid scalding it. At length, I located a jumper, a trouser leg, and three towels, everything except the armband.

It was during my third probing expedition that I finally located it; at least I think it was the armband as I was grasping nothing ... a bulky nothing. I wrapped it in a tea towel because it was too hot to hold in my hands and closed the lid to continue the cycle. Anxiously I ran upstairs with the armband and placed it on the windowsill to cool.

After a few worried minutes, I picked it up and felt for the button to deactivate the cloak. "Please work," I pleaded. "Don't punish my great, great, grandchildren ten times removed just because you've been thrashed about in mum's twin tub."

Suddenly the armband materialised.

"Yes!" I shouted, as an immense feeling of relief washed over me. Sitting in the palm of my hand was one intact and extremely squeaky-clean armband. A cursory examination failed to reveal any obvious damage, however, the energy shield indicator no longer flashed an intermittent orange, like the cloaking indicator it was a steady green. I guessed it had been revitalised by being immersed in murky boiling water.

As a result of these two events, being squished like a grape and nearly Daz-ing 25th-century folk to death, I decided from that moment onward to constantly wear the armband to school. It proved to be waterproof so I could even wear it in the shower if I enabled the armband's stealth mode.

WHEN IS A BUS STOP NOT A BUS STOP?

When is a bus stop not a bus stop? The answer was annoyingly illustrated this morning when the bus refused to stop as I dashed up the hill towards the bus pole on Newman Road.

The place at which the bus picks up passengers can only be referred to as a bus stop because the bus stops there. Only a small circular disk attached to a short pole embedded in the top of a house garden retaining wall indicates that it is a designated bus stop.

I had left the house with two or three minutes to spare, normally more than adequate for Browns buses whose mission statement should read: *'We promise to always run late, and occasionally not to turn up at all.'* However, as I rounded the intersection of Elm Close and Bell View Road, I saw the bus pulling up to the bus stop, and with only three school kids waiting to board my chances of catching it looked slim. Fortuitously I had set off for school with the armband strapped to my forearm, discreetly hidden under my shirt and jumper. Now I needed to call upon its power. I activated the energy shield as I started to sprint up the hill towards the bus stop fifty yards away. The moment I activated the function I felt an exhilarating surge of energy kick in as I lengthened my stride and powered my way towards the bus waving my arms like a lunatic and shouting for all I was worth. I could see my brother walking up the aisle of the bus and I began shouting, "David, stop the bus," but to no avail, he couldn't hear me.

As I reached the top of the hill, I finally caught the driver's attention. He looked at me and smiled, and then to my utter astonishment he started to pull away. That was frustrating enough as I now faced the long walk to school, but what further incensed me was the sight of my brother seated at the back of the bus poking his tongue out at me. Infuriatingly his friends were waving me farewell as the bus disappeared into the distance. However, after a few steps, I quickly forgot the incident as I began the tedious journey along Newman Road. After a few dozen paces I activated the armband and began to run. I wanted to see the look of surprise on my brother's face when I waited for him at the school gates.

Friday is one of my favourite days of the school week. Just two lessons in the morning - English and Music, and a double in the afternoon - History. Need I reveal where Tom and I spend the free periods ... drinking coffee, listening to the jukebox, and playing the pinball machines. Can life get any better than that?

However, when I reached the swing gate opposite the church my mood changed. As I squeezed through the gate into the field overlooking the wood, I nervously recalled the events of only two days ago. As then, today everything was quiet not a soul to be seen except for a small herd of cows chewing grass at the north edge of the field. Approaching the wood, I quickly activated the cloaking device and the energy shield which I had deactivated when the bus pulled away. Both green lights changed to an intermittent yellow as one had done in my bedroom which I found strangely reassuring. A couple of yards into the wood I started to jog, I wanted to pass through the area where the bizarre incident had occurred only forty-eight hours previously as quickly as possible. Nearing the shattered tree stump I glanced repeatedly to my right as though the entire episode was about to happen again and given my recent awareness of time travel anything was possible.

In my mind I could still hear Officer Number Sixteen uttering his final words ...
“Watch the proximity indicator near the top of the armband; it indicates that someone with similar technology is nearby.”

I pulled up the sleeve of my jumper and shirt and glanced down at the indicator with bated breath. Thankfully it remained dormant. Swerving to avoid a pothole I became aware that I was running flat out, almost sprinting, and yet it was effortless I wasn't even breathing hard. Normally I would be stooped over coughing and gasping for breath after a dozen paces at this speed.

By the time I approached the end of the wood I had formed a tentative hypothesis. Perhaps the energy shield had reduced the gravitational effect on my body in some manner. I ascertained that it also improved strength and stamina as I continued to sprint at full power until I reached Pen-y-garn Hill. Nearing the bottom of the hill I glanced at my watch, now worn on my right wrist, and was astonished to find it was only eight forty-five. It had taken me less than five minutes from the top of Church Wood to the bottom of Pen-y-garn Hill, around one and a half miles. That was surely a world record pace.

I was about to deactivate the cloak as I approached the school gates when I caught sight of a prefect at the side door detention book in his hand. It was the same snotty sod who had called me a *slime ball* and *low life*. Retribution would be sweet. Silently I approached the side entrance door where he was pacing back and forth oblivious to my presence.

Autumn is always windy as lengthy squalls sweep up through the valley and today was no exception. A stiff breeze was blowing large piles of leaves and other litter around the courtyard in a swirling effect, the noise would cover any possible sound of my footsteps as I slid past. Moving up behind him I waited patiently for the right moment which presented itself as he turned to march across the courtyard for the umpteenth time, swinging his arms in military fashion.

Walking alongside him I prepared to grab the book on the upbeat. On the third swing of his right hand, I snatched the book and hurled it in the direction of Park Lane with all the force I could muster. Ordinarily, this would have been thirty feet or so, but with the energy shield enabled it was nearer two hundred feet, landing at the farthest end of the chest clinic entrance. The last I saw of the prefect as I opened the door to enter the building was his petrified figure running towards the bottom play area arms flailing, screaming “Poltergeist, Poltergeist.”

ASK ME ANY QUESTION

Even though it was concealed under my shirt sleeve and jumper, the armband remained in invisible mode all morning and proved its worth during Music, the final lesson before lunch.

“As I promised on Tuesday, this morning we are going to have a quiz,” said Mr Sinclair enthusiastically, who although being a slightly odd-bod character had a clear love of music. In the time I had been at St Alban's he had formed a small orchestra, a choir and had arranged and produced a Gilbert and Sullivan operetta. He selected his victims carefully firing questions at them; if they answered incorrectly, he threw the question to the class. Finally, he turned to me. “Steven, what is the name of this symphony, what key is it in and who composed it?”

Knowing my turn was imminent I had already pressed the appropriate button and could hear the voice in my head asking: “Which function would you like?”

“Inquiry,” I said quietly, and then I repeated Mr Sinclair's question out loud.

“Which symphony is this, in what key is it written, and how many symphonies did he write?” I paused and rubbed my chin slowly while looking up at no particular part of the ceiling as if searching the recesses of my mind.

“Answer,” said the voice in my head: “This is the fifth of nine symphonies written by Ludwig von Beethoven and is in the key of C minor.”

I smiled confidently at Mr Sinclair and merely paraphrased the information imparted to me by the voice in my head.

“This is Beethoven’s fifth symphony, it’s in the key of C minor. He wrote nine altogether.”

Mr Sinclair nodded approvingly. “Well done Steven, especially for remembering the key in which it was written.”

He turned to Tom sat beside me. “Mr Maxwell, what nationality was Ludwig Van Beethoven?”

Tom thought for a moment and then replied. “French...I think.”

Mr Sinclair looked aghast. “Stupid boy, his name almost gives it away, Ludwig Vann Beethoven,” he said emphasising the consonant.

“Dutch,” shouted Tom in desperation, as everyone burst into laughter. Realising he was groping in the dark for the answer, Tom, who was turning bright red with embarrassment, leaned over toward me. “Was he Italian, Russian, Swedish ... what was he?” His face bore the look of extreme panic and his forehead was covered with sweat.

“German,” I whispered with a chuckle.

“German, he was German,” Tom blurted out with the fevered reply normally associated with a game show contestant who has only one second remaining of a ten-second count down.

“Yes, Maxwell he was German,” confirmed an exasperated Mr Sinclair. “I almost forgot the original question as you recited the major countries of Europe. Thank you, Steven, for enlightening your dim-witted colleague,” added Mr Sinclair.

Relieved that it was now someone else’s turn to be interrogated Tom settled in his seat but didn’t lift his head until the class began taunting the perpetrator of a similarly ludicrous response sometime later.

As the quiz continued Mr Sinclair increasingly turned to me for the correct answer. He maintained this pattern until he was asking obscure questions that only someone with a retentive memory and lots of research or a cheat could answer, and I wasn’t ashamed to be included in the latter category. Mesmerised, my nine classmates watched in astonishment as I answered the final question ... “Prokofiev, Khachaturian, Tchaikovsky and Shostakovich - the Russian composers,” I exclaimed jubilantly.

“I don’t know what you have been drinking but please share it with the rest of the class next time,” Mr Sinclair said in amazement, clearly impressed.

As the bell sounded for the lunch break, we rose and left the classroom. Tom pushed his way through my musical classmates behind me and drew up alongside.

“What the hell was that all about? How were you able to answer those questions? You’re normally as thick as I am.”

I shrugged off the slur on my integrity with a nonchalant flick of my hair. “Jealousy is a nasty quality Tommo. I eat a lot of fish - good for the brain - you should try it. Come on let’s have lunch in Sidolli’s.”

BROTHERLY REVENGE

On Saturday morning I walked to town, and on the orders of mum was forced to take David. We argued most of the way which wasn't unusual. At one point near the end of Newman Road, he stomped off angrily until he was about thirty yards ahead of me.

The argument had erupted because of mum nominating me as keeper of the purse and handing me three pounds, which included one pound for David. But he wanted his money there and then and nothing would dissuade him otherwise. At fourteen, he thinks he should be allowed to handle his own financial affairs.

I have mixed feelings about my younger sibling. On the one hand, there is a kind of affection. Well, you grow used to them, don't you? Also, there is an expectation.

"He is your brother;" mum would remind me accusingly. "Remember, blood is thicker than water."

An obvious statement - if a little tenuous - to which you could add many liquids.

"So too is oil," I would reply, "but I don't feel any particular affection toward car engines."

I clearly remember one incident a few years earlier when I was chasing him on my full-size bike. He was riding a junior-size bike and his legs were a blur, smoke pouring from his daps, or *plimsoles*, if you are not from the valleys...well nearly. No matter how fast I peddled, he peddled faster, which was probably just as well as I would have squeezed him to death, my preferred method of punishment at the time.

As the little germ marched ahead of me through Church Wood an overwhelming desire for payback swept over me. "Hit me in the nose with a boxing glove would you," I muttered under my breath. I engaged the cloaking device and ran toward him on the grass to muffle my steps. I continued to run some way past him and then stopped and waited.

As he approached mumbling to himself, he turned around to make some comment. Puzzled at my sudden disappearance he turned a full three hundred sixty degrees a few times trying to find me. As he spun around for the third time, I disengaged the cloak and at the top of my voice yelled "Oi!" in his face.

He jumped at least three feet in the air, screamed hysterically like a big girl, and shrieked some comment that implied our parents were never married as he ran off down the track. I didn't see him again for the remainder of the day. Revenge served cold was undeniably sweet.

Later that afternoon I walked into the larder to search for a bottle of Tizer as I had worked up quite a thirst on the walk home and my dry throat was desperate for a cool refreshing drink.

"Where's your brother?" Mum asked as I emerged bottle in hand.

"I don't know mum; he wouldn't stay with me?" I answered casually, filling the glass to the top. Before consuming the amber nectar.

I added, "He's like a bad penny he'll turn up when it's time for tea."

The strawberry flavoured carbonated bubbles soothed my parched throat as I gulped down the contents of the glass in one long continuous swallow. The pop lorry delivers once a week on a Friday carrying, for the most part, Tizer in three flavours, strawberry, orange and lime. Mum usually buys two bottles which last until Monday, or Tuesday if we ration it out. I belched loudly as I returned the almost empty bottle to the larder.

"Steven!" cried my mother in surprise.

"Better out than in," I replied, walking quickly into the living room before the long arm of my mother found the back of my head.

IS IT SUNDAY ALREADY?

Sunday, according to my mother is a day of worship. Unfortunately, the time she allots for worship doesn't coincide with the priest and congregation.

Pontypool's Roman Catholic Church is situated at the top of Zion Hill, a road that branches off the High Street and climbs steeply, as do many roads in Pontypool. Due to the bus services starting only at midday on the Sabbath we are forced to trek some four miles down the mountainside to a deserted town centre. Most Sundays the only thing moving through the high street is debris being blown about by the wind, evidence of the previous night's activities.

Mum knows that mass starts at ten sharp, but somehow, we rarely leave the house before nine-thirty. Four miles in thirty minutes would be child's play with the aid of my recently acquired technology, but not for mum with her short legs. Each week we set off at an extremely brisk pace. This slows to a weary stroll at about the two-mile mark and becomes a crawl as we tackle the final three hundred yards - climbing the steep gradient that leads to the church. Needless to say, we arrive well after the service has begun. Now depending on your spiritual point of view, this could be a bad thing. However not mine, especially if we miss Father Brown's sermon.

An extremely likeable middle-aged priest, Father Brown has recently moved to this diocese. He is a quiet humble man who has made quite an impression on mum.

"That man puts on a great service," she tells anyone that will listen. "And he's from the same neck of the wood as my grandmother, I'm sure it's a sign."

The emphasis placed on his *r's* is a tell-tale sign that he hails from south-west of England, Wiltshire I would guess if pushed. Unfortunately, he bores the pants off me. His sermon is constantly punctuated by long pauses during which he sways from side to side like a metronome. On many occasions, I have been mesmerised expecting him to topple with the next lurch, but he recovers and gradually starts to lean in the opposite direction.

He talks in low tones for much of the discourse, and then without warning, gets louder and animated hitting the lectern with his fist as he reaches a crescendo. And then just as suddenly, the passion is gone, and he begins to mumble incomprehensively again.

Mum tells me that he is taken along by the Holy Spirit. My theory is that he has been at the communion wine. I am not alone in my views as many breathe a visible sigh of relief when he eventually concludes the sermon. I would be hard-pressed to recite the theme of his interminable orations as I tend to pass the time squirming about on the hard pew looking down at my shoes while wiggling my toes in an attempt to burst the leather.

On the Sunday in question, we left the house at nine fifty, late even for us. Mum's constant prodding forced us to maintain a brisk pace to make up for lost time. Of course, I wasn't bothered as there was no question that we would miss Father Brown's sermon and most of the boring bits as well.

Somehow, we got lost in a time warp, for as we wearily climbed the church steps people suddenly emerged through the large oak doors like a cork out of a bottle. Okay, a little embarrassing, particularly as many smiled condescendingly as they squeezed past us on their rush down the steps. Still, all things considered, it was a good result as we turned around and proceeded to walk back home after mum had lit a candle and said a quick prayer.

Unfortunately, blessings are often accompanied by maledictions, and that was certainly true on the long painful trek home. Mum blamed David and me for taking too long to dress and even accused us of walking slowly to delay our arrival.

I would have blamed the lack of breakfast in mitigation had I the courage; however, it's a brave man that contradicts Mum when she goes off on one. And that's another

reason that I dislike Sunday worship, according to *Il Papa* you cannot eat on a Sunday morning until after Mass. No wonder there are strange stomach noises and falling attendances.

Anyhow, mums nagging continued long after I had switched off, but I had to continue to offer the occasional nod in humble supplication or risk being prodded every ten yards until we arrived back at number three.

CHAPTER 6

I LOVE MATHS

The lights blazed in every room in the house and standing in the middle of the living room I was alarmed to see that the windows had been left open and were inexplicably curtain-less. I rushed to close them, frightened that an intruder could already have gained entrance. I peered out into the darkness but could see nothing in the black void outside, and yet I knew that someone - or something - was peering in. I hurried into the kitchen to find the back door wide open and the windows unsecured; the room was icy cold as wisps of the night air had drifted in. Terrified, I knew that there was a frantic race to lock the door before some terrifying presence burst in. I relived this scenario in every room in the house, securing window after window, and locking door after door, certain that we were about to be overrun.

I awoke with a start disoriented and drenched in sweat. I had experienced this nightmare many times in the last few weeks, possibly a sign of insecurity, but more likely a sub-conscious fear of cloaked intruders. Nevertheless, I felt groggy on this Monday morning as I dressed and left for school. It was raining and the bus was extremely full, which meant I had to stand all the way to the Town Bridge where I disembarked and walked up the lane behind a few stragglers through the school gates.

Every red-blooded male in the country eagerly looks forward to the Miss World competition held at the end of each year. The winner last year, Miss Grenada, provoked a great deal of controversy as Miss Sweden had more first-place votes but was awarded only third place.

There was also uproar on a separate issue. South Africa had been allowed two entrants, one was black, and the other white. Julia Morley, the Organising Director, resigned and her husband Eric, the Chairman of Mecca who ran the Miss World contest was criticised for the complex voting system. Those are the boring details surrounding the competition; however, they paled into insignificance when the stunning beauties filled the screen.

Following the pageant last year some of the girls in my class rolled out the same old tired objections: "It's sexist, it's degrading," and, "It's like being in a meat market."

I have no firm stand on the issue other than to point to the worldwide audiences and the tasteful settings in which the sixty most beautiful women on the planet are placed. The one thing that almost everyone agreed on was how colourful the native outfits were - not that I was able to discern the subtle shades and patterns on our black and white set.

The reason that I am reminiscing is that I get to enjoy again the glamorous poses adopted by the contestant to accentuate their hourglass figures.

Well, *praise The Lord*; St Alban's too has a ravishing beauty - Sarah Stephens. Miss Stephens also emphasises certain facets of her outstanding figure, worthy of any pageant, during the second lesson on a Monday morning.

Preferring to be called Sarah in the absence of other members of staff, Miss Stephens is a 22-year-old Maths graduate fresh from University. She has long hazel coloured hair and a sweet face which is greatly enhanced by her large brown eyes. Unlike many of the teachers that rule by fear and who constantly remind us that they have been teaching longer than we have been in existence, Miss Stephens, who is much closer to our age, prefers consensus and encouragement. Her kind manner and occasional glimpse of vulnerability have a calming influence on our normally boisterous class. Even given her teaching style most of the boys, Tom and I included, would probably have paid little attention and messed around as normal at the back of the class. But in addition to her

good looks, Miss Stephens has gorgeous legs. A fact of which she is evidently aware as she wears extremely short skirts.

As a bonus, Miss Stephens has the habit of leaning against the front of her desk as she talks and after a few minutes lifts and bends her leg, resting the sole of her high heel on the desk behind her. At that moment every male in the classroom cranes their necks forward to catch a glimpse of her thigh which she generously reveals, causing eighteen love-sick boys occupying the first four rows of desks to sigh in unison. Astonishingly, even this mind-blowing fantasy is eclipsed when she raises herself to sit on the desk. After a few minutes, she lifts a leg and grasps it with both hands just below the knee to support its weight as she speaks. In this position, we often catch a glimpse of her underwear, a hormone popping moment for adolescent lads.

Consequently, Maths with Miss Stephens is the subject with the best attendance, the lowest noise level and eighteen boys hot with passion. Occasionally we even learn mathy things.

PUMMELLED BY O'HARE & GANG

O'Hare and his gang had been a little subdued since the great squishing incident, but I knew that it wouldn't last forever, and my intuition proved correct during the morning break. Tom and I had meandered down to the pump house for his morning cigarette which he had barely lit when O'Hare and three other numskulls rounded the corner. Without warning, O'Hare snatched it from Tom's fingers and then pushed him in the face so that he stumbled backwards and landed on his backside in the mud.

A fit of fierce anger suddenly swept over me as I squared up to O'Hare and snarled in his face. "Why don't you do something useful like drown yourself O'Hare?" It was a foolish mistake to challenge him and his numskulls with no teacher in sight, but I could tolerate his bullying no longer.

Unfortunately, I hadn't anticipated a confrontation with the gang of four and the speed of the encounter prevented me enabling the energy shield as they each started to push me around like a pinball bouncing off power grids. When they tired of this routine, they started to punch me, and when I fell to the floor, they continued their assault by kicking. Thankfully Dan Platt, Jonesy, and Dave Ryder who were playing football nearby saw the commotion and broke it up. I was sore and tender for the rest of the day, sporting a few bumps and bruises, but I was most concerned about the mud all over my trousers. I can endure bullying but not my mother's wrath.

To add to my troubles, this week there was no scheduled rugby match to extricate me from the last subject of the day, double Biology with *the witch*. The caked mud on my trousers was now dry and powdery and could only be removed with vigorous rubbing. Accordingly, Tom and I sat in the rear row of desks as it would provide me with ample opportunity to pick off the lumps of mud while *Brunhilda* was busy at the front of the class.

I had been rubbing a particularly stubborn patch for some minutes and was so deeply engrossed that I failed to respond to the dig in my ribs from Tom who was acting as sentry. Suddenly I was hauled back into the present by the withering tones of a shrill voice.

"Well!" ... Talk about Deja-vu.

Once again Mrs Bovill was stood in front of me; the entire class had turned around to gawp, and for the second time in a couple of weeks I didn't even know what the question was.

As I looked up, I slowly dropped my arms below desk height enabling me to trace the outline of the buttons on the armband. I pressed what I prayed was the right button, and

then held my breath waiting for the commotion that would surely follow had I inadvertently activated the cloaking device instead of the talking encyclopaedia. A vanishing classmate might be a cool trick but would be devilish hard to explain. Thankfully the voice in my head confirmed that I had located the correct button as it asked me to identify the required function.

Finally, I spoke, "Sorry Mrs Bovill what was the question?" As she took a large breath with which to propel the words like darts from a blowpipe, I quietly whispered "Inquiry."

"Name the different parts of the heart?" she shrieked, like a venomous old crone. "Unless you want to stand in the corner again?" Her face was screwed up, and the veins of her neck were prominent.

I repeated her words slowly. "Name the different parts of the heart," and then I merely repeated everything the voice in my head said: "Superior Vena Cava, Inferior Vena Cava, Aorta, and Pulmonary Artery."

I gave an astonished Mrs Bovill a large smile of satisfaction as I finished reeling off the list of valves, auricles and ventricles, adding nonchalantly, "Did I leave anything out Mrs Bovill?" Her jaw had dropped as her mouth hung open in surprise. She just stared at me in astonishment. "Well?" I pressed triumphantly.

After a few moments, she snapped out of the trance. "No, that was fine," she stammered. And she wasn't the only one who was shocked; most of my astonished classmates were silent too. Turning, she made her way back to the front of the class and didn't bother me again, leaving me to concentrate on cleaning my trousers before arriving home where my mother would demand an explanation.

KEEP YOUR HEAD DOWN

Wearily I headed out of school through the bottom entrance. Crossing over the footbridge that straddles the Afon Lywyd I walked up through the Italian flower gardens leading to the bus stops opposite the Town Hall. It was a sunny afternoon, and, on an impulse, I continued walking. I walked past the bus stops and onwards toward the Clarence located at the south end of Pontypool.

The Clarence is the main staging area for the bus companies; the local service provided by Browns and the regional service of Red & White, a much larger transport organisation that covers the longer routes to Newport, Abergavenny and Brynmawr. Still trying to shake off the effects of the pummelling earlier in the day I walked at a leisurely measured pace to avoid agitating the painful areas of my body.

Deep in thought, I was pondering over the many questions my encounter with Officer Number Sixteen had thrown up when I heard someone shouting my name. Turning around I saw with horror O'Hare and three of his trolls who had tracked me out of school, a mere twenty yards behind.

Instinctively I did what anyone that is outnumbered would do, I ran. After a dozen yards my face broke into a broad smile, I had momentarily forgotten about the overwhelming advantage I now possessed...the armband. Fumbling under my shirt sleeve I located and pressed the button that enabled the energy shield and as I had discovered the previous week running with the shield enabled significantly increased my physical abilities. I gradually increased the tempo as I sped past the few small shops and buildings on the outskirts of Pontypool: The Swan Inn, Antonio's Italian Café and a sweet shop with rows of large sweet jars that never fails to entice the young and old. I raced past The Pearl Assurance building, Fine-Cut, the barbers, and The Clarence Hotel. Once considered the height of luxury, in these more austere times the hotel now offers dinner time deals to school pupils.

Effortlessly I easily maintained the distance between me and the chasing hounds. Unbelievably, I felt no detrimental effects, even my respiration seemed normal; I could have sustained this pace all day long.

The Clarence bus terminus has a covered waiting area divided up by perhaps twenty barriers, the sort of barriers found in the stand areas of football and rugby stadiums all around the country. As I approached the terminus, I noticed dozens of people standing in queues waiting for buses that would take them to their various destinations. To avoid dodging in and around, or squeezing through groups of people bunched together, I slowed to a brisk walking pace which allowed O'Hare and his goons to close the distance. When they were almost upon me, I stooped and ran underneath the metal barriers knowing that O'Hare and his trolls would follow.

This was a tricky manoeuvre involving co-ordination, stamina and timing which at least one of the trolls, Mitchell, lacked.

A slimy, devious individual with greasy uncombed hair and a bad odour problem, Mitchell managed two barriers but the third was waiting for him, and as he raised his head a fraction too early, he hit the horizontal bar an inch above his eyebrows. There was a sickening thud as his head was propelled backwards followed by a loud high pitch scream. Mitchell who had been in the lead was closely followed by the others trailing behind him like a Hokey Cokey line. Hot on his heels was O'Hare. He tried to avoid the pole-axed figure of Mitchell but only succeeded in kicking his already painful head, narrowly missing one of the barriers as he too fell. The slower trolls bringing up the rear also tripped over Mitchell and ended up sprawled all over the floor.

I was laughing so hard I could no longer run, I was bent double holding my stomach, bellowing, with tears running down my face. A few concerned people started to help the trolls to their feet while others stooped over Mitchell frowning, shaking their heads and sucking air through pursed lips.

"That looks painful son," said one old man.

A younger woman piped up "You could have brain damage after a blow like that."

In fact, that was extremely unlikely as I have it on good account that Mitchell shares a brain cell with the other trolls, and it wasn't his turn until the weekend. However, he sported the indented imprint of the horizontal bar above his eyebrows as a souvenir for the best part of a week.

SITTING IN THE FERNS

'Why did the chicken cross the road?' The stock answer is usually: *'To get to the other side.'* What then, is the answer to this question: *'Why was the schoolboy forced to run up the hill?'* Answers on a postcard because I have no idea why Games teachers resort to this form of physical punishment as their considered recipe for *toughening up*.

Unfortunately, a gruelling cross-country run, including a lung-bursting climb up a tortuously long steep slope, followed by a death-defying, stumbling descent, awaited us this Tuesday afternoon.

There had, however, been much amusement during the morning lessons - Maths and Geography, in the form of Mitchell baiting. *'A man walked into a bar ... oh no, that was Mitchell. Why can't Mitchell go to youth club ... he's been barred.'* The jokes probably continued for the remainder of the morning, but I didn't witness them as Tom and I had two free sessions, and you can guess where we spent them.

My free sessions are the result of the O level choices I had to make last year. Unfortunately, there was a clash between many of my favourite subjects. For instance, I was forced to choose between Music and French. Reluctantly I chose Music.

I was confronted with a similar choice between Chemistry, and bizarrely, Geography. Conscientious pupils would probably visit the school library and study during their free periods. Tom and I prefer to study in Sidolli's; that is calculating how to drink coffee, play pinball and listen to the jukebox all at the same time, thereby improving our co-ordination skills.

Unhappily, the final lessons of the day approached and as we all gathered in the changing room Mr Cropper revealed the demanding route he had selected with a fiendish grin.

"Stamina appeared to be in short supply last week," he yelled. "Therefore, I have prepared a cross country run designed to increase staying power during the return match with Twmpath."

Mr Cropper then bellowed instructions above the din as forty teenage lads changed into the mandatory white t-shirt, dark blue shorts and white daps. This devilish endurance session would begin as we passed through the school gate and entered the park. We were instructed to maintain a swift pace until we reached the highly decorative wrought iron gates at the south entrance to the park.

These gates are almost two hundred fifty years old and were a gift to Major John Hanbury. They were presented to him by the Duchess of Marlborough. Today he would most likely receive a piece of unfathomable modern art – how times have changed.

After reaching the gates we were to perform a left turn and follow the demandingly tough route up the hill to the Grotto.

The *Shell Grotto*, to give it its full title, is a small circular structure perched on the top of the hill some three hundred feet above sea level. The interior of the building was decorated with shells more than one hundred and fifty years ago, and until recently was open to the public. It's most historic claim to fame occurred in 1882 when The Prince of Wales, later Edward VII, attended a Royal picnic held near the building.

The climb to the Grotto demands a great deal of effort scrambling up a small winding track through bracken, grass and ferns, and heather worn down over many years. The steep incline tortures leg muscles, lungs, and heart, and quickly drains stamina. The return journey completes the assault on the body's resources as inevitably each participant slips, slides, and stumbles on the descent back through the overgrowth, heather and ferns. Even in the dry season, this is tricky, but in autumn treading on fallen leaves following a few days of rain - it is suicide.

Tom and I are always at the head of the first group despatched; this is because we are amongst the slowest, the no-hopers. A few minutes later the moderately fit are released, and a few minutes after that the super fit, including a couple of semi-professional club runners who power through the park determined to run us down.

Tom and I adhere to our well-worn tactical plan as we jog slowly towards the gates at the bottom of the park and are caught and overtaken by everyone else, taunting and abusing us as they race by. When we approach the bottom of the hill we are always in last place. This is our signal to stop and watch our classmates as they struggle up the tortuous gradient intent on reaching the top, arms pumping, legs straining, some reduced to walking and a few doubled over struggling for breath.

Today we slowed to a walking pace and ambled over to a patch of dense ferns. Sitting down, Tom lit up a fag he had hidden in his sock along with one match. Basking in the glorious sunshine we talked about the match against Huddersfield scheduled for Saturday. We picked the team, discussed tactics and strategy, and then we moved onto the vivacious Miss Stephens and her fantastic legs. Tom had just finished the cigarette and was laughing about *bar-head* Mitchell when Woodhead, the first of the super fit, reached the bottom of the hill.

“Lazy tossers,” he shouted, as he ran past us.

“Stupid fit pratt,” we yelled back, as he disappeared around a group of trees.

“You’ve got to be stupid to run up a hill and back down again,” Tom said, philosophically. I nodded in agreement, I felt weak just at the thought of the effort involved.

Eventually, the main body of front runners came rushing down unable to slow their descent, sweating and panting from their exertions, motivated by their desire to be amongst the first back. These were followed over the next ten minutes or so by the remainder of the group, some running, some walking.

After the last of our classmates had descended and disappeared around the tree line on their return journey, Tom sprang to his feet. “Right, that’s it,” he said commandingly. “Thirty-eight up, thirty-eight down. Time to shower and change.”

We walked back through the park but began to sprint the final two hundred yards so that we were perspiring and gasping for breath as we entered the changing rooms. We had run the good run, completed the course, physically fitter than when we had set off.

“Hid in the ferns again did you Morris and Maxwell?” said Mr Cropper, as we collapsed onto a bench.

That man must have eyes in the back of his head.

CHAPTER 7

THE KING OF CONKERS

Few things can compare to a walk through Pontypool Park on a warm, lazy afternoon, even for a teenager. The scenery is magnificent. It's almost impossible not to be impressed by the sprawling acres of manicured lawns and areas of woodland displaying impressively mature trees. From certain spots you can hear the Afon Lywyd River babbling as it passes over rocks and crashes down on itself; it is considered a difficult white-water course to traverse by canoe when the river is at its highest.

The Afon Lywydd begins its journey in Blaenavon, a mountain town on the fringe of the Brecon Beacon National Park and meanders down through the small hillside villages of Cwmavon and Abersychan, gaining in strength and increasing in pace as it flows past Pontypool and Cwmbran, finally coursing into the Severn estuary at Newport. One of the closest areas to the river is near the bottom of the park where large concentrations of trees are situated; from here you can hear the river roar. The trees are predominantly oaks; some are over one hundred feet tall and exceed twenty feet in circumference bearing broad rounded canopies of perhaps one hundred forty feet. Chestnut trees, native to Greece and the Balkans, were introduced to the park in the 16th Century by the Hanbury family. Around this time of year, the grounds around the Horse Chestnut trees are littered with conkers gathered by many generations of schoolboys and used in hand-to-hand combat in schools across the land.

Having showered and changed after the games lesson, Tom and I walked through the park toward the horse chestnut trees in search of this season's crop of conkers. Intermittent shafts of sunlight, broken up by tree branches and the large brown leaves that readily identify the conker tree, continued to shine on the surrounding area, now covered with a copious amount of fallen leaves. We had to crouch and run our hands through the leaves parting them in search of the finest conkers and that elusive specimen - the king conker. Several times we stopped to stretch our aching legs and backs after long periods of stooping and squatting searching for the one that would sweep all before it.

An hour passed and we had found only a handful of conkers that could be considered a decent size when Tom glancing at his watch let out a yell of panic.

"Aggh, my bus leaves in five minutes."

Frantically we gathered our belongings and raced through the park passing the rugby stadium and tennis courts, sweeping over the footbridge and then up through the Italian flower gardens. Tom ran through the large gates at the top of the gardens and turned left with me in close pursuit. Upon seeing a large queue of people gathered in the furthest bus shelter - the Abergavenny staging area - Tom let out a cry of relief.

"Phew! That was far too close; I thought for a minute I would have to wait for the early evening bus."

Slowing to a brisk walking pace and still breathing heavily we made arrangements to meet the next day before I prepared to cross the road to catch my bus home. Dodging between oncoming traffic I joined the relatively small queue of people waiting for transport to Trevethin. Some were impatiently looking at their watches while others were moaning to the person next to them about the frequent lateness of Brown's buses. Lacking interest in their grousing session I watched as Tom's bus eventually rolled up and people began to board. Gradually the bus filled, and I caught sight of Tom as he made his way to the back of the bus and slump into a seat by the window. As the bus pulled off Tom turned and waved. I returned the gesture and gazed as the bus turned the corner on its way to the Clarence, and ultimately onward to Abergavenny.

Eagerly I opened my bag to look at the conkers I had gathered, seven in all. Three of them were medium-sized; the remaining four slightly larger. I took each one in turn and gave them a good rub with the shorts I had worn during games now stuffed in the bottom of my bag. They appeared healthy and felt firm lying in the palm of my hand. Eventually, the bus appeared curtailing the conversations about tardiness as we each boarded the bus and found a seat.

Each autumn, I have sought out the finest specimens determined to produce a winning conker. I have tried the traditional recipes and myths, soaking them in vinegar overnight, baking them in the oven, and storing them in the freezer - but without success. My conkers rarely lasted more than one or two engagements before exploding under the onslaught of a killer conker, which often to my chagrin was considerably smaller.

Upon arriving home, I laid the conkers on the table in a straight line. *Battle drill*, I thought, as I looked at them from various angles. Rolling them slowly around the table I squeezed each of them in turn to gauge flexibility. I examined them for defects, anything that indicated they would crack open during the first probing engagement. Next, I drilled through the centre of each conker, threaded a piece of string and tied a large knot at the bottom. Finally, I dangled each conker in turn and swung it through the air assessing it for balance. At last, I was ready; tomorrow there would be a new champion.

BALL HANDLING PRACTICE

'Another day, another dollar,' goes the American expression, and my financial situation improved considerably this fine Wednesday lunchtime.

Following registration, we filed quietly into the changing room for double PE. Mr Cropper was determined that we would offer greater resistance in the return rugby match with Twmpath, just one week away, for which he had a special training session planned. Initially, he formed us into two teams, and then he reduced the first team pack to just the front and second-row players to be pitted against a full pack made up of the largest players he could muster from the second team.

Both teams made their way to the playing fields sandwiched between the river and the rugby stadium. The pitch was in good condition for the time of year, quite firm but not too hard. After some last-minute instructions, the second team kicked off and the game got underway.

Though outnumbered we soon found our rhythm which, allied to our clean crisp passing, caused uncertainty and confusion in the second fifteen allowing us to score within a couple of minutes. Shortly after the game restarted a scrum was awarded and our pack of six prepared to engage the second team's pack of eight, which included O'Hare playing as tighthead prop. We had been warned of this unconventional practice match just after the run to the Grotto the previous day. In preparation, I had worn the cloaked armband under my rugby shirt.

Enabling the energy shield just before kick-off, as both packs engaged, I was prepared for anything O'Hare had in mind and my instincts were proved right. O'Hare hadn't the guile of man-mountain Smith. He couldn't free an arm or turn his head to bite my ear and was limited only to threats of violence, "I'm going to kick you in the nuts you maggot," being the most colourful.

As the ball was thrown into the scrum, we held the second eight momentarily and then pushed. We gained some ten yards before Dan Platt broke away and sprinted twenty yards before he was bundled into touch. At the throw-in we took control of the ball and I found myself in possession fifteen yards from touch. Turning sharply, I sprinted towards the line, however, out of the corner of my eye I saw O'Hare pounding towards me, nostrils flaring.

O'Hare is considerably slower than I am on a rugby field which is one of a dozen reasons he hasn't made the first fifteen, but on a normal day, he was close enough to have caught me, inflicting considerable damage in the process. Today, however, I had the extra speed and power provided by 25th-century technology and easily evaded his clumsy tackle causing him to clutch air as he hit the ground with some force. Sidestepping two advancing defenders I crossed the line for a touchdown in a spectacular dive, sliding three yards on my stomach.

"Yes, very nice Morris," yelled Mr Cropper. "Cut out the theatrics; this is rugby practice not a dance class. O'Hare you fairy, make sure you have hold of your man the next time you hit the dirt."

Furious at his humiliation, all reason had departed from the squashy pudding O'Hare calls a brain and in a blind rage he spat out several expletives accompanied with an extremely graphic description of the destination of his boot at the earliest opportunity. His chance came a few minutes later when our reduced pack won the scrum and the ball was passed to me. O'Hare let out a war cry and sprinted towards me; fists clenched.

Between us stood another useless lump of lard, Les Peterson, who upon hearing O'Hare's primaeval grunt also decided to join the chase with a manly roar as he too charged forward. Amusingly Peterson's voice has not yet broken, and his high pitch falsetto scream caused some of his teammates to stop and stare in astonishment as he ran in leaps, arms flailing like a windmill.

Laughing at the mental image of a mauling by the almost feminine aggression of Peterson I sidestepped his lame challenge by spinning three hundred and sixty degrees. Unfortunately, Peterson collapsed in a heap just in front of O'Hare who had to leap in the air to avoid trampling him. As O'Hare landed, I crouched low and sprang forward catching him in the abdomen with my shoulder. O'Hare let out an almighty *umpphh* as the air was forced from his body by the impact and my momentum carried me over the line for my second try. This time I picked my knees up high as I rejoiced in the style of an American football player, and then I threw the ball down in celebration.

O'Hare, however, was still on the ground clutching his stomach gasping for breath and had to be helped off the pitch where he sat for the rest of the game. "Nice manoeuvre Morris. I hope you have saved some of that aggression for the return match," said Mr Cropper. Praise indeed.

CONKERS AT THE READY

D-Day began at lunchtime. Armed with my haul of conkers I made my way to the lower play area where an unofficial tournament had been in progress for two days.

A rumoured prize of eight pounds had been amassed; the resulting prize money was due to an exorbitant entry fee of ten pence per game. Annoyingly as one of several late entrants I had to pay an outrageous fee of twenty pence per game. A geeky fourth-former named Trotter was acting treasurer and bookie; he kept an immaculate set of books and would enthusiastically explain his unique betting system to anyone foolish enough to ask.

The competition was thinning out, and the remains of many battles lay scattered around the bottom left corner of the play area where the tournament was situated. Lewis, a third form pupil, had found a beast of a conker. It was large and seemingly with a core of concrete, in fact, some suggested that he had found a way of siphoning out the innards, replacing it with concrete. Others suggested that due to his stature, being just over five feet in height, he had an unfair advantage over his opponent's conkers that hung almost at nose height. I couldn't see the reasoning of that argument, but he had seen off all comers and was Trotter's hot tip for the 1971 conker champion of St Alban's Comprehensive School.

In the preliminary rounds, my smaller conkers were blown apart and I was on my fourth by the time I was paired with Lewis, his piggy little eyes staring up at me over the top of his thick-rimmed NHS glasses. As they slid down his nose, he aimed a bony finger at the bridge of his glasses and pushed them back into place.

“Take a swing loser,” he challenged.

With my left hand, I pulled the conker back towards my left eye, taking careful aim, and with string taught I launched my conker at his. Unfortunately, his conker was dangling much lower than most and I only succeeded in tangling the strings of our conkers which resulted in a chorus of laughter from among the spectators.

“My turn,” said Lewis impassively, as he adopted the same technique.

While he was taking aim, I too began to wonder whether his height posed an unfair advantage because his head was at conker level, and that did appear to influence the technique of his swing. Slowly he leant back, and then snapped forward, providing his conker with extra speed and a greater momentum than I had achieved.

“Hurrah,” shouted the spectators as his conker hit mine dealing a fatal blow. Bits of my conker flew in different directions, another casualty to Lewis’ monster conker.

With ten minutes of the lunchtime break remaining, I had spent my entire dinner money as I worked my way through the preliminary rounds yet again and was matched against Lewis in the final match of the competition. However, conker number six was looking decidedly dodgy, it would be cannon fodder for the monster conker. There was only one course of action left ... the energy shield.

Lewis shuffled over with a look of boredom. Sighing, he stared at me with those piggy little eyes and said: “Take your best shot dickweed.” I was desperate to beat this snotty little upstart, to wipe the smile off his smug face, and to salvage a semblance of pride and reputation.

I had reasoned that if the energy shield followed the contours of my body, it might shield an object that I was holding, probably within limits as I had found with the cloaking device. I took the opportunity to surreptitiously enable the energy shield as all attention was focussed on Lewis who was issuing threats of total annihilation and loudly proclaiming himself as champion simultaneously. If his actions were designed to humiliate and unsettle me, he was unsuccessful.

“Come on then take your last swing,” he challenged, holding his conker up.

I moved into position, took careful aim with my left eye, and taking a deep breath I swung my remaining conker at the beast with as much force as I could muster.

When a champion conker hits another conker, bits break off and fly in different directions; this is usually accompanied by a loud cracking sound. However, when my conker hit Lewis’ it exploded into hundreds of tiny fragments with a loud *phhmmmp*. The small energy blast propelled Lewis backwards some five yards into the thinning crowd of spectators who were stunned; the monster had been annihilated in the most spectacular fashion.

“W...w...what was that?” a crestfallen Lewis spluttered, as he clambered to his feet.

“A superior conker dickweed. Come back next year,” I replied triumphantly, honour restored. I walked over to Trotter who was furiously scribbling in one of his so-called ledgers, a look of astonishment on his face.

“How much have I won Trot head?” I asked humorously.

“Five pounds and seventy pence,” was his eager reply. I nodded my head in appreciation; I had spent just over a pound and had accumulated nearly six pounds in prize money. A fair return in anyone’s book.

“I heard that the pot stood at eight pounds you money-grabbing shyster,” I said accusingly. “Where’s the rest of it going?”

Trotter stopped writing and started to rifle through his money bag as he counted out my winnings.

“Listen, turnip brain, a bookie has many overheads,” he replied condescendingly. “I have to pay out to six pupils who bet on your conker killer, and then there’s the question of my management fee. That leaves five pounds and seventy pence, okay?”

I would have cracked his head with my conker for his impertinence, but he was the banker. Odds are this geek will become a wealthy man.

CHAPTER 8

ANOTHER MORNING ASSEMBLY SHAMBLES

As you would expect of a Roman Catholic school, morning worship takes place in the Assembly Hall once a week. You might be forgiven for thinking it is scheduled for a Monday, the first day of the school week. Perhaps a Friday might seem the more logical choice, just before the weekend. At St Alban's it occurs each Thursday. I cannot think of a logical reason why the penultimate day of the school week was selected, but *c'est la vie*.

Most find the perfunctory Thursday morning assembly boring. It begins with the singing of a hymn; this is then followed by words of guidance. It's often a lecture from Mr Pickering, our Headmaster. And then it's all change as a senior member of staff works through a list of announcements. Mercifully, morning assembly is brought to a close with a prayer followed by a concluding hymn.

I had decided to add a bit of spice this Thursday morning. Having enabled the cloaking device in the seclusion of the toilet cubicle I entered the assembly hall and moved silently to the side of the grand piano alongside Mr Sinclair who was sat at the keyboard, his right hand poised above middle C. His eyes were firmly fixed on the stage awaiting the command to play the introduction to Jerusalem the Golden, the hymn chosen to begin assembly this morning. Mr Bovill was stood at the rostrum performing a test of the microphone; he tapped it four times and then began settling everyone down ready for the commencement.

Silently I moved forward and struck a loud F base note. Mr Bovill's head jerked to the left as he glared at Mr Sinclair in annoyance. Mr Sinclair who had leapt up off the piano stool as though stung by a bee wore a shocked look and hunched his shoulders as if to say: *'That wasn't me.'* Many of the first-year and second-year pupils sat in the first six rows giggled in amusement as the piano stool wobbled and almost toppled onto its side, until Mr Sinclair regained his composure and quickly steadied it.

"Alright, that's enough, settle down," said Mr Bovill loudly, scowling at the first few rows of pupils. "Williams, stop that and see me later," he said sternly, to a first former who was grappling with a boy in front of him. As the fidgeting stopped a hush quickly descended over the assembly hall. Mr Bovill instructed everyone to stand, and then after a few seconds nodded at Mr Sinclair to start the piano accompaniment.

It's difficult to describe adequately the sound produced by first-year and second-year boys singing soprano in unison with the girls, and the older boys whose voices are breaking, singing lethargically an octave lower. Many were moving their mouths but producing no sound, others were singing loudly paying no attention to the sound level of those around them. Eventually, the discordant cacophony ended, Mr Pickering took a step forward and waited for everyone to sit before launching into words of wisdom for the day.

After he had droned on for several minutes, I took a step forward and hit the F base note again. Mr Pickering stopped abruptly and glared at Mr Sinclair who again shrugged his shoulders: "It wasn't me," he whispered apologetically.

Visibly irritated, and with a face like thunder, Mr Sinclair looked to his left and right and then spun around determined to apprehend the culprit. Suddenly realising that he was the focus of attention and that the nearest person was at least eight feet behind him, he quickly returned to the playing position. Mr Pickering tapped his fingers on the rostrum impatiently while he watched Mr Sinclair's piano stool gymnastics. Having returned to the keyboard, Mr Sinclair froze like a one hundred yards sprinter waiting for the sound of the starting pistol, poised to explode out of the starting blocks. Satisfied that his authority

had been restored Mr Pickering turned his attention back to the bored and increasingly restless audience to resume his instructions.

I moved silently to the front of the stage, and stopping at the foot of the microphone stand, I proceeded to rotate it slightly to my left. The microphone which was a few inches from Mr Pickering's mouth began to rotate slowly to his right. At first, he started to follow it with his head and then he grabbed it and moved it back into position just in front of his face. Again, I started to rotate the microphone stand, this time to the right, and once more he started to follow it with his head before snorting in annoyance and snapping it back into position once more.

After a minute or so I grasped the microphone stand with both hands and started to tilt the stand - complete with microphone - to the left. With disbelief, and a not a little irritation, Mr Pickering grabbed the stand and removed the microphone. Taking a step backwards he snapped, "I don't know why this morning's assembly is being constantly interrupted," whereupon he quickly ended his diatribe for the day. As an irritated Mr Pickering sat down, Mr Bovill moved back to the rostrum. Wisely he too picked up the microphone to make his way through the morning's announcements.

I walked quietly up the steps leading to the stage and into the wings where the sound equipment is located. A prefect was sat at the controls staring out at the audience from behind the curtains. He was paying little attention to the assembly programme as he poked his tongue out at several of his classmates seated near the rear of the hall. Silently I moved to the amplifier and quickly turned the volume to full. Blissfully unaware, Mr Bovill was giving instructions about the lunch period when the speakers screeched as a sound loop was created and everyone hurriedly covered their ears in pain. The prefect, who had jumped up as though evading a charging bull when the screeching burst forth, lurched towards the amplifier in a frantic effort to adjust the volume. Mr Bovill, who had also covered his ears, dropped his hands as the feedback ceased and attempted to restore calm before quickly wrapping up assembly. There was no prayer or closing hymn, and as the pupils began to file out row by row, he stormed across the stage. In his fury, he tore into the prefect and began poking him in the chest as I made an invisible exit. I might have felt some sympathy, but it was the same bonehead that had given me detention last week.

Leaving the assembly hall, I disabled the cloaking device in a quiet shadowy corner of the cloakroom. Quite appropriate I thought, de-cloaking in a cloakroom. As I did so, my attention was drawn to the light beneath the time travel button; to my utter delight, it was flashing intermittent green. It surely indicated that the time travel function would be available in the near future. After a few moments, it changed to a steady green, a surge of excitement swept over me, another function – the crème de la crème - ready for testing. Quickly I made my way to the top block for Maths with Miss Stephens.

"Strange assembly," I said to Tom, as we sat down in the front two desks.

"Yes, it was," he sighed deeply. "But who cares we have the best seats in the house. Doesn't she look gorgeous today?"

Indeed, she did look good, wearing a tight pink jumper and a short black skirt that set the pulse racing. Within minutes she adopted her normal pose at the front of her desk regularly raising each silky leg in turn and resting her exquisitely sculptured foot on the desk panel behind her.

If a slow-motion camera had filmed the lesson it would have captured the heads of all the boys swaying gently one way, like a field of wheat in the wind, as she raised her right leg, and then swaying the opposite way, as she raised her left leg. As expected, the girls began to hiss, calling us perverts. Miss Stephens aware of their comments just smiled and raised her slender frame upon the desk. The head of every boy in the room craned forward

in anticipation and Miss Stephens didn't disappoint as she raised first her right leg, holding it in position with both hands for what seemed like an eternity.

Again, every male head moved forward as she lowered her right leg and then raised her left leg. It was like watching the changing of the guard at Buckingham Palace, it only happens a few times a day and you wouldn't want to miss it.

She held our undivided attention except during question time. No male in that lesson heard the question or knew the answer; we left the mathy part to the girls as they needed the practice. Each male in the classroom had memorised the only formula they needed to know; Miss Stephens, plus two legs, equalled perfection.

FLETCHER - THE PERVERT

At the bell, Tom and I reluctantly left Miss Stephens and made our way down the staircase to join the stream of pupils swarming through the corridors. It took us the best part of two minutes engaged in the *slow shuffle* to reach our intended destination – classroom 1a and English with *pervy* Fletch.

In his late forties, Mr Fletcher, head of the English department, is a small dumpy man who sports a waistline that well exceeds his age. *Pervy* Fletch has earned his nickname by consistently lavishing unwanted attention on the prettier girls. Stealthily he ghosts up behind the more mature girls where he stands for minutes peering over their shoulder, staring down their blouses. When they become aware of his lecherous presence, he squeezes his bulky frame against them so that he can view their work. His favourite is Jane Lewis, possibly due to her long blonde hair and extremely well-developed bust. More than once during a lesson *Pervy* Fletch has been observed by many to bend over her shoulder while peering down at her chest, panting quietly and sweating profusely.

"He breathes heavily into my ear," Jane later relates, with a look of disgust. "He sneakily paws my shoulder and his breath stinks," she adds with a shiver.

However, Jane is not entirely beyond reproach. Realising the power she possesses, she occasionally teases him by undoing a button or two before calling him over. Raising her hand to gain his attention she sighs, "Sir, I really don't understand where to use an adverb in this sentence. Could you explain it to me, please?" fluttering her eyelids. Mr Fletcher is at her side faster than a fox into a henhouse and assumes the position, staring down her generous cleavage, eyes bulging, armpits drenched with perspiration.

Today Jane used the object of his attention to excuse her uncompleted homework. In preparation, she had undone three buttons on her blouse and as *Pervy* Fletch asked for her assigned homework she thrust her chest out indecently while trotting out her well-practiced excuse. Mr Fletcher just stood hypnotised.

"I think he's about to have a heart attack," whispered Tom excitedly.

"I think his eyes are about to pop out," I replied agog.

He became aware that the class had gone quiet and that every eye was on him as we watched him gaze at Jane's ample bosom. Glancing to the right and then the left, *Pervy* Fletch sprang up like a shotgun being snapped closed and quickly walked to his desk. For the remainder of the lesson he remained glued to his seat dictating from a course manual, but occasionally we caught him staring in the directions of Jane's boobs. The man was hooked.

Following Tech Drawing, Tom and I elected to visit a local chip shop in Pontymoel for our dinner. Situated at the southern end of Pontypool, Pontymoel is an area that shared close ties in iron production during the industrial revolution. In the early 19th century a tin works had been built at Pontymoel to compliment the ironworks in Pontypool with pig iron being produced in Bleadare a mile away. Sadly, nothing remains of the sites to indicate the impact these foundries had on the population of the day.

Tom and I walked leisurely towards the Victorian gates at the bottom of the park deep in conversation about the look of embarrassment on the face of *pervy* Fletch when he was caught ogling at extremely close quarters the bust of Jane Lewis. Suddenly, I was pushed violently from behind. It didn't take a genius to guess who the aggressor was, and as I stumbled and fell to my knees, I pushed my fingers up the left sleeve of my jumper quickly enabling the energy shield.

"You got lucky with that rugby tackle yesterday you fat ball of slime," O'Hare snarled. Unsteadily I climbed to my feet and turned to face him. "Want to try it today without any teacher to rescue you?" he sneered; face twisted with rage. His entourage of empty-headed goons stood behind him heckling and goading.

O'Hare has bullied me mercilessly for the last five years, and yet in all that time I had never been afraid of him – just physically unable to subdue him. This was in part due to his superior size and weight, but also my passive and gentle nature, which he views as a sign of weakness. He has taken advantage of my quiet disposition using every opportunity to belittle, insult and occasionally physically assault me. Once he snatched my jumper and bag out of my hand and threw them onto the flat roof of the gymnasium where they remained until the Janitor rescued them at the end of the day. On another occasion, he and his gang chased me and having trapped me on the riverbank, with a contemptuous laugh O'Hare pushed me into the Afon Llywyd. I squelched all the way home.

Bullies, of course, disguise their intolerable behaviour with innocent and plausible explanations: *'It was a joke; I was only playing with him - just larking about.'* And because bullies rarely operate independently, the victim is often confronted by a pack of aggressive thug's intent on causing pain, purely because they want to. My mother, as you can imagine, was unaware of my torment. For in common with others who have been bullied I felt a sense of shame, that being victimised was a sign of weakness, a lack of back bone.

That had all changed with the immense power of the armband at my disposal; O'Hare could no longer use his size and aggression to intimidate me. However, I was a little disturbed by the power it unleashed when I pulverised Lewis' monster conker, it had repelled him five yards, lifting him off his feet. I suspected that I had proportionately increased the power the shield generated because of my fierce determination to obliterate his pride and joy. Although I would like to do something similar with O'Hare's head, I grudgingly accepted that I had to act with restraint or have some serious explaining to do.

O'Hare squared up to me. Behind him 'bar-head' Mitchell was playing the staring game, his crazy eyes boring into my skull like Mohammed Ali during the weigh-in. I might have found it intimidating if Mitchell was heavily built and aggressive. On the contrary, he was of slight build, scared of his own shadow and hid behind O'Hare when the going got tough.

"How's the head, gormless?" I asked with a grin.

Seeking to take advantage of my distraction, and without warning, O'Hare launched himself at me with both arms outstretched as he lunged for my head. Amazingly the energy shield appeared to sharpen my reflexes as the speed of his movement slowed dramatically enabling me to evade his attack by sidestepping and rotating my body simultaneously. O'Hare stumbled as he belatedly tried to change direction, crashing to the floor like a sack of spuds, smacking his head on the asphalt surface in the process. His numbskulls, who were stunned into silence, remained motionless for a few seconds before rushing forward to tend to his obvious injuries.

I was intrigued by the sudden increase in speed. My immediate feeling was the rush of adrenalin I experienced in the first seconds of our engagement interacted with 25th-century technology exponentially increasing the speed of my reactions. But a second

plausible explanation ran through my mind. Could it be that the time function intuitively slows the passage of time within a small bubble causing the aggressors reactions to appear sluggish when the wearer of an armband is in danger?

O'Hare was dazed and his head bleeding. He appeared to be quite woozy as he was helped to his feet.

"See you around then John," I said, as I gestured to Tom to resume our journey to the park gates. "What a clod! He tripped over his own feet," I said, by way of an explanation.

Tom nodded in agreement. "Excellent sidestep though." And without further ado, we continued our stroll in the sunshine.

Upon reaching the Victorian gates we turned right and headed toward Pontymoel. En route, we passed the crumbling shell of a workhouse, home to the destitute and orphans of Pontypool and Pontymoel one hundred years ago.

"You know Tom; it's a crying shame that a building of such historical importance has been neglected and allowed to deteriorate like this," I said in disgust.

Tom nodded in agreement. "My mum told me that it has been used as a warehouse since WW1."

We passed the forlorn, dilapidated shell, again on our return towards the Victorian gates busily eating our chips.

"We have a lot to be grateful for," I said solemnly. "We have food, clothes and a warm house, more than many had back then." Tom mumbled a garbled reply, but with his mouth full of chips it could have been anything.

ASK ME A QUESTION

Several remarkable things occurred during an afternoon lesson in Physics. Somehow, we had strayed into the territory of the Periodic table and found ourselves deep in discussion concerning the properties of Plutonium when Mr Jordon asked Jim Carroll how many electrons it possessed. Jim remained silent struggling to find the answer, the seconds ticked past and it became obvious that he didn't have a clue. Knowing that the question would be thrown open to the class, silently I turned the question over in my mind. *How many electrons does Plutonium contain?* To my great surprise, a voice in my head replied, *Plutonium contains ninety-four electrons, and has been allocated the same number in the periodic table.* I was elated by this turn of events; my cortex companion could also assume stealth mode.

"Does anyone know?" asked an exasperated Mr Jordon. "Come on, this is an easy one, even a first form pupil could provide the answer. How many electrons does Plutonium possess?"

I raised my hand and answered confidently, "Ninety-four Sir, the same number it has been allocated in the periodic table."

"Thank you, Morris, I am glad that someone is paying attention. Would you also happen to know how many neutrons it possesses?"

I quickly consulted the silent dictionary. "One hundred and fifty, Sir."

Mr Jordon gave me an approving nod.

"Well done. Right, let's move on," he said, as he launched in to a discussion about Plutonium's half-life decay period which confused the hell out of me. What about the other half? It seemed pretty obvious that if it's got a half-life of five thousand years, it must have a whole life of ten thousand years – *wrong!* Little wonder I discarded Chemistry.

I had a free period next, which in the normal course of events would be followed by Tech Drawing, the last lesson of the day. However, due to an overnight storm and a leaky

roof, three classrooms had suffered flood damage that led to the cancellation of all lessons scheduled for those rooms. Hurrah! An early finish.

As I headed for the exit, and with the dinner time skirmish fresh in my mind, I decided to enable the energy shield until I was clear of school. Merrily I walked out into the park heading for the Town Hall bus stop. The weekend was almost upon me and I had the most exciting function on the armband to explore.

CHAPTER 9

EXAMINING THE DATA RECORDER

For the last few days, I had been troubled by a nagging question lurking at the back of my mind. What was Officer Number Sixteen of the Temporal Directorate doing in Church Wood, fifty miles from the Brecon Beacons where allegedly stolen Plutonium was hidden? It seemed unlikely that the time thieves he was tracking had been sightseeing in Pontypool, and even if they had used public transport to move around South Wales why would they have planned an ambush deep in Church Wood, a shortcut known only to those living in the area? The Pen-y-garn Hill exit from Church Wood is very well concealed and there is little at the entrance to the church of St Cadoc to indicate that it leads anywhere of interest; a stranger would only stumble upon this route by chance, too many coincidences for my liking.

That evening I decided to re-examine the available evidence I had collected after the death of Officer Number Sixteen. I had hidden the body armour retrieved from the dead time officer, and the few pieces scattered around the area, in the bottom of my wardrobe. Laying them out on my bed I examined each piece in turn, feeling for hidden pockets or anything else that might be relevant, anything that could provide a clue. Eventually, after a lengthy search that proved entirely fruitless, I placed the body armour back into the bottom of my wardrobe covering the pieces with my well-thumbed issues of Marvel comics. I had split them into five piles, one for each category: The X Men, Iron Man, Thor and The Fantastic Four, gems collected over many years. The fifth category was an *others* pile: Spider-man, Captain America, Superman, Dare Devil and other superheroes and villains that I bought on a less frequent basis due to financial constraints.

That left the device (that resembled an information readout screen) which I had hidden in an old games bag on top of my wardrobe. Standing on a chair I reached up and placed my hand inside the bag where I fumbled around for a few moments until I grasped the device, which I then extracted. Stepping down off the chair I carefully examined the small device, rotating it slowly looking for anything unusual which caused me to laugh out loud. How much more unusual could a situation be as I examined a piece of technology that shouldn't exist for another five hundred years?

Sitting down onto the edge of my bed I continued the thorough inspection. The device was black and about the size of a small cigar box with a screen that filled ninety per cent of the face of the appliance, however, four small buttons were grouped discreetly below the screen. As my fingers moved over what looked like a small sensor on the top of the recorder a couple of green lights blinked and then remained constant. *Okay, there's still life left in the batteries*, I thought, pleased that I may have unearthed the first clue to the covert activities of our temporal visitors.

A shiver ran down my spine as a disquieting thought hit me, I had no idea what powered this device, for all I knew this little sucker could have a small nuclear generator pumping out the wattage. "That might be closer to fact than fiction," I reasoned audibly, as I ran my fingers over the outer edges of the case.

My fingers stopped as they felt a small release catch located on the back of the device which opened after some gentle prising with a screwdriver. Stored inside were eight small black disks identical to the disk I had been given by the dead timeline protector. *Where there's a disk there's a slot*, I thought, *but where is it?*

Carefully examining the side of the device, I found what appeared to be a slot, but it was protected by a cover that refused to open, even after the most intense prodding with my trusty screwdriver. With a growing sense of frustration, I turned my attention to the

buttons on the front. “Surely, one must be an on/off button,” I hissed through clenched teeth. If manufacturing in the 25th century followed the pattern of 20th-century technology, I would expect one of the three remaining buttons to enable a display function. The screen burst into life momentarily startling me as I pressed the first button, and then powered down when I pressed the second button. I pressed the first button again and the screen once more burst into life. A logo and meaningless text were displayed, followed a few seconds later by a list of names:

Morgyn Williams 16.07.1843 to 12.12.1882 Inn keeper - born Pontypool, died Abersychan, father of....
John Williams 01.02.1870 to 12.04.1905 Miner - born Abersychan, died Abersychan, father of....
Edwin Williams 12.08.1894 to 22.09.1917 Sailor - born Abersychan, died Flanders, father of....
Edward Williams 01.01.1915 to 01.06.1940 Soldier - born Pontypool, died Dunkirk, father of....

The list contained dozens of male names stretching back to the mid-1800s. I was dumbstruck; the last thing I expected to find were family trees, details mapping individual lives covering centuries. What interest could Plutonium smugglers have with - from their perspective - ancient genealogy? I was totally confused. This was perhaps some kind of data storage device, and as such, I would have expected to see a list of materials, part codes, quantities, locations and blueprints, not hereditary lines of descent.

I quickly discovered how to scroll down the list of names by repeatedly running my finger down the right-hand side of the device. After a few minutes I had reached the very first entry:

James Thatcher 02.08.1533 to 14.10.1604 Sailor, born Bristol, died at sea, father of...

Images of Elizabeth I, the British naval battles with France, Portugal, and Spain, flashed through my mind - what a period in which to have lived.

Still baffled by the contents of the disc, I began to browse forward through the names and associated data. I scrolled laboriously through the recorded details of 17th and 18th-century menfolk without recognising anyone of note. I fared no better as I trawled through records from the last century and had begun to lose interest as data on 20th century personnel scrolled past. However, a name suddenly leapt out from the hypnotic flow of data:

John Maxwell 25.02.1922 to 12.12.1958 Butcher, born Ebbw, died Abergavenny, father of....

Thomas John Maxwell 13.07.1955 Born Abergavenny

I was staggered! Chilled! The hairs on the back of my neck bristled. Surely these were details of my best friend? The likelihood of another Thomas John Maxwell born in Abergavenny seemed remote in the extreme. Was there any significance in the fact that the date of his departure from this mortal coil was missing?

I was utterly stunned by the contents of this sinister list of the departed, and greatly alarmed that Tom’s details were included on a database compiled by shadowy figures

from the future. How many others would I recognise? Anxiously I continued searching through the long list of data and soon stumbled over another familiar name

Paul James 28.05.1939 to 02.09.1970 Musician, born Pontypool, died Blaina, father of....

Sian James 12.06.1954 Born Cwmbran

Sian is a year above me, but we have a shared passion for music and have spent many hours practising in the music room, during breaks and after school. Sian is an accomplished violinist and I have often accompanied him on the piano. Occasionally he has returned the favour when I have required a pianist to accompany me on my clarinet.

I was sorely troubled by this discovery; the name of a second school friend listed in a directory spanning centuries, the odds of coincidence must have been astronomically great. And though relieved that the date of their demise was blank, I found their inclusion most disturbing.

I continued to browse through the data but after a while I grew bored and pressed the third button. A voice spoke:

“Recording. Please speak slowly and precisely.” I pressed the third button again: “Recording terminated,” reported the voice.

I pressed the fourth button, and to my surprise, the disk cover opened and ejected a small black disk. Instantly the reason that I couldn't open it earlier became apparent, there was a disk inside. “You bone head!” I cried out in exasperation, annoyed at having spent several unnecessary minutes prodding and prising the cover. Placing the ejected disk on the bed beside me I retrieved the disk that I had sworn to protect from the slot in the armband. “Let's see what secrets you hold,” I said, excitement mounting. At the very least it should reveal the location of the Plutonium which I could then pass on to the police, anonymously of course. As I inserted the disk the disk cover closed and again the screen burst into life when I pressed the first button. For a few moments I stared blankly at the list of contents displayed on the screen before me. If I had been puzzled at the contents of the first disk; I was totally bewildered by the contents of the second disk - the one placed trustingly in my care.

As with the previous disk I had expected to see directions, locations, maps, item descriptions and units of measure; but bizarrely it too displayed a list of names and dates. As I scrolled down the list it also moved back through time, covering a period of three hundred fifty years, back to early 1600. I shook my head and silently berated myself. I must have inadvertently inserted the original disk as I swapped them. Suppressing anger at my seeming incompetence I swapped them a second time, but bizarrely with the same outcome, two disks - two lists containing names of those dead. I was at a total loss as to an explanation; my mind was reeling. Officer Number Sixteen, if indeed he was an officer of any sort, had lied. I had felt a surge of excitement a few moments earlier as the recorder burst into life, I had expected to find answers. Instead, to my alarm, I was faced with a growing list of unanswered questions.

It was now evident that I had been deceived, the question was why? Was he trying to protect me? Had he given me the wrong disk to hide? Had another time traveller collected it leaving me with a useless list of names with which to confuse the authorities of either time period? Though thoroughly confused, filled with a sense of unease, and more than a little intrigued, I stopped searching. I would find no answers tonight. As it was, mum decided the issue when she called me down to tea. I quickly turned the recorder off and replaced it in its hiding place. Solving a puzzle spanning five centuries could not be accomplished on an empty stomach, and not I suspect, without a smidgeon of luck.

“Are you on this planet?” my mother asked, as we ate tea. “David and I have been talking to you for the last minute, whatever are you thinking about?”

“Sorry, I have some Maths homework and I was trying to remember how to multiply matrices,” I lied.

“Go back to your daydreams,” replied my nonplussed mother. “I don’t even understand the question let alone the answer.”

I sat in front of the TV most of the evening, but I couldn’t tell you what programmes were aired; my mind was in turmoil. Was this just a bad dream or perhaps a fantasy? Was the 25th century any safer now that it seemed Plutonium was no longer a threat? Or had the danger increased? And why had nobody contacted me in the last two weeks?

THE ANSWER HITS ME IN HISTORY

The next morning, I awoke late. I had tossed and turned until well after midnight, drifting in and out of sleep, and seemingly had just fallen into a deep slumber when the alarm sounded. I would have incurred detention had I not used the cloaking device to slip past the prefect who stood at the side entrance to the main building. The detention book was placed on the windowsill and no longer in his hand.

I tried to concentrate on the morning’s events with little success. Even Tom commented on my lack of conversation during our free lesson spent studying in our café hideaway. “My head is thumping this morning,” I lied, as questions still churned inside my brain. However, the conundrum was partly explained in a blinding flash of inspiration as the strands of abstract thoughts converged during History, the first lesson of the afternoon. Mr George was discussing the possible effect on history if events during WW1 had taken a different course.

“Herr Hitler was badly injured in WW1,” he said in an extremely bad imitation of a German accent. “Imagine how many lives might have been saved if he had died of his injuries. It is possible that WW2 might never have happened.”

I was sat at the back of the classroom still trying to make sense of the troubling revelation of the previous evening when Carol who was sat opposite me piped up.

“Shame we couldn’t go back to 1918 and bump him off.”

“Yeah, but you would have to kill his brothers, sisters, and parents to wipe out the evil gene,” joked Dave Ryder. “Also his grandparents and great grandparents just to be safe,” he added with a laugh.

“You would have to trace his lineage back to the first Hitler, maybe in the 1700’s, or even earlier, to be fully satisfied that you have eradicated the evil gene,” said Jonesy, extending the hypothetical scenario. “In fact you could erase the entire Hitler clan if you trace Hitler’s lineage to that person,” he continued, nodding his head at the thought.

“How would you even do that?” asked Carol who had a puzzled look on her face. “You would have to trawl through a heap of records in the Registry offices.”

“Don’t forget the records of births, deaths, and marriages stored in the local church,” offered Mr George. “Pontypool’s civil registrations began in the late 1830’s, before that the church maintained the Parish registers. You would have to thumb your way through each of the registration books to list the date of birth and death of each Hitler down through the ages.”

I jerked my head to stare at him as his words suddenly shone a brilliant dazzling light into the area of my mind where the conflicting thoughts and questions had, until that moment, been groping in the dark.

“What did you say about churches, Sir?” I blurted out excitedly.

Mr George fixed his gaze upon me and remained silent for a moment as if I had asked a trivial question.

“Don’t forget the part the church has played in recording the big events in the lives of its parishioners,” he replied firmly. “Births, christenings, marriages, and of course deaths. These records tell the stories of so many lives across so many generations.”

I was stunned. I felt a great surge of blood as the realisation hit me.

Could it be that simple?

I had been greatly puzzled as to why someone would travel back in time 500 years to catalogue precise details of the deceased. People that had led unremarkable lives: miners, cooks, mariners, and inn keepers.

Had a plain observation made by Carol provided the answer to this conundrum?

Was it possible to apply the far-fetched process of tracking down Hitler’s ancestors to the purpose of the list in my possession?

Was this the reason time travellers were fighting near St Cadoc’s church? Had they copied names and dates from the church records locked up in St Cadoc’s archives, and had they repeated this process in other churches around the area?

I couldn’t imagine a historian would risk the dangers inherent in time travel and move between periods to map a remarkably accurate genealogy merely to satisfy some bureaucrat or a person of wealth in the 25th century.

I couldn’t be certain, but the class may have just stumbled upon the answer. We had selected one of the century’s most vile creatures, a man that permitted - if not ordered - the mass extermination of millions of people. More than 60 million souls perished during World War II, and Hitler was at the head of the list of those most culpable. You could never scrub the innocent blood shed from the hands of this monster. But assuming you had the means, would that justify erasing the lives of hundreds of his forefathers to remove the head of the snake? Hitler was not the intended target of this or any other foray into the past, that much was obvious as memory of him was still present, and the awful events and results had not been removed or reversed. So who was the target of the list contained on the disk? Though it listed many dozens of people over a period of a few hundred years, alarmingly, it had also included two living individuals, Tom and Sian. Could either of them be the in the cross-hairs of a 25th century analyst and some machine that would crunch the data and display the most expedient method of wiping them from history? There was also the possibility that the middle 20th century was just the tenth or eleventh layer of accumulated data, perhaps the real target was living in one of the centuries between us. If that was so, a further eight or nine layers of data would be required to gather a complete picture.

One thing was crystal clear; the disk placed in my protection would not see the light of day. Indeed, at the first opportunity, I would destroy both disks, particularly the disk containing details of my best friend. A bit of creative thinking would prove necessary though because the disk would have to be replaced. Evidently, Officer Number Sixteen was not who he claimed to be, and logically whoever was sent to retrieve it would likely be a colleague, and therefore also part of this deception. That being the case, I would hand over a *special disk*, containing *special names*. Sherlock P Holmes, Flash J Gordon and Scarlet O’Hara would be amongst the initial batch of names. Georgie R Best, Bobby L Charlton, and a host of other fictitious names would join them. Ultimately it would prove

a futile gesture as I couldn't prevent them from gathering the data a second time, but I could delay or at least disrupt their insidious scheme.

BUS WINDOW INCIDENT

Eventually, the lesson ended, and I made my way to the bus stop after saying goodbye to Tom. My thoughts were firmly focussed on the disturbing conclusion that the list of names was compiled to pinpoint the precise moment to assassinate one unsuspecting individual. In turn, each layer of descendants would evaporate in the mist of time.

I kept returning to the same question: Is it possible that generations of a family that lived and breathed, and who raised children, made contributions to their communities and then died, could be wiped away in one stroke, never to have existed? And what of the ripple effect, the lives they touched, the people they interacted with. What of their achievements? Are these removed without comment? Would anyone know that a terrible wicked change has just occurred?

I boarded the bus at the Town Hall and sat quietly in a seat by the window near the rear of the bus. This was the oldest of the small fleet of buses that Brown's operated; old enough, in fact, to have wooden framed windows about six feet in length, each extended over three rows of seats. The bus was nearly empty which meant that it would climb Penny-garn hill with ease. *No walking for me today*, I thought, as I leaned against the window watching the world pass by, wondering if timelines had changed in my short life. Could it be that I had once known someone who had now ceased to exist?

At the top of the hill, suddenly and without warning, the window that I was leaning against moved. To my horror, the jerking and vibrating associated with this museum piece moved first one corner and then the other from its resting place. Slowly, like a free-fall diver launching himself off a cliff face, the window fell into the road and with a loud bang shattered into millions of pieces. I was stunned. The bus conductress, came running up the isle of the bus.

"What did you do?" she demanded, scowling at me.

"I did nothing;" I replied indignantly. "I only had my elbow resting on the window."

Scowling even harder she continued accusingly: "Windows are for looking through; you shouldn't touch them with your grubby little hands. You will have to pay for it; I will tell your mother when I see her."

"Even if I pushed the window with all my strength it shouldn't fall out onto the road like that, it's a safety hazard and I could have been injured," I said, annoyed that I was being accused of vandalism. "Anyway," I continued forcefully, "this bus should be in a museum."

The bus driver had stopped abruptly when the window hit the road exploding into a thousand pieces, and he was now stood in the middle of the carriageway busily sweeping the glass to the gutter with his foot. As our discussion took place, cars impatiently manoeuvred around him and the glass strewn over the floor. Eventually, a large pile of glass and parts of the splintered wooden frame lay in the gutter as the bus driver climbed back into his seat and we resumed our journey.

The dodgy window was the topic of discussion among the few passengers and me until we approached my stop. Standing up, I rang the bell and walked unsteadily towards the front of the bus which was swaying violently as the driver manoeuvred the bus around parked cars.

That evening I spent many hours creating fictional characters and dates chronologically from the 20th century through to the 16th century on ten A4 pages.

"Switch the light off when you come to bed," my mother reminded me as she turned in for the night. "And don't stay up too late," she added wearily, as she started up the stairs.

I continued scribbling names free from distraction; David was sleeping at a friend's house which enabled me to record the data undisturbed.

"Recording, please speak slowly and precisely," instructed the voice, when I pressed the third button on the console.

"Billy Williams 01.03.1920 to 10.05.1969,' I dictated slowly in a clear delivery. Son of Ivor Williams 12.06.1909 to 13.07.1941, bastard son of Ret Butler born Atlanta, USA..."

It was well past two o'clock when I turned off the recorder, my neck was stiff, and I was cold. The embers in the grate emitted a faint red glow but gave out very little heat. I turned out the light and climbed the stairs to my bedroom. *Stage one is complete*, I thought, with quiet satisfaction. The family tree I had created would lead the temporal assassins into a cul de sac delaying their wicked scheme for weeks, or even months.... I hoped.

MAKING A SPLASH

Throughout the week my soul belongs to the education establishment. My mother's penchant for Sunday worship prevents a late rise and demands a high degree of physical effort on our religious expedition. On a Saturday I decide my itinerary - with mum's permission of course. However, it's unusual for me to climb out of my pit before dinner time.

Today though was different, I sprang out of bed full of the joys of spring. Tom and I had arranged to meet at the Corporation baths on Stow Hill in Newport. It had a springboard and two diving boards, the high board towering over the pool at thirty feet. Given the choice, I would normally avoid a swimming pool like the plague on a Saturday as it attracts annoying children. However, when Tom tipped me off that Jayne had planned to spend Saturday afternoon at the baths, the decision was made.

"I will impress her with my diving skills," I exclaimed confidently. I was able to summersault on the school trampoline, so how hard could it be in the swimming pool? And surely water is softer than the gym floor?

Sometimes being an older brother can be an infliction, a fact of which I was reminded when I informed my mother of my plans for that day.

"Take David with you or stay at home,' my mother had threatened ominously.

"He's a nuisance and can't even swim properly," I moaned, with a pleading look, praying for her to relent.

"Well that's just the place to learn, and you can look after him as his older brother." That sounded final, so I shut up. To argue further risked her anger and being confined to my room for the day.

The thirty-minute journey gave me time to gather my thoughts on the technique I would employ to impress Jayne. I would begin with a summersault or perhaps a double summersault. This would increase in difficulty to include a summersault with a one hundred eighty-degree twist - looks easy enough on the TV, how hard can it be? After a faultless entry into the water, I would swim up to her nonchalantly and bask in the praise. I would offer personal tuition so that she too could perform amazing aerobatics. Of course, this would entail close physical contact as I stood behind her, my hands squeezing her hips to demonstrate the posture needed before leaving the diving board.

"You can stay on the bus if you want to end up in Cardiff," David said sarcastically, dragging me away from my fantasy. We had reached the Newport terminus, time to get off and impress the girl of my dreams.

Stow Hill is a ten-minute walk from the bus station and is about a quarter of a mile in length. Branching south at the intersection with Bridge Street and Skinner Street, Stow Hill rises steadily for four hundred yards and then turns sharply to the right. At this point, the road rises steeply causing most vehicles to change up the box to second gear. Heading west toward the M4 motorway, the road then flattens as it passes St Woolos Cathedral, situated on the right, and the St Woolos complex of hospital buildings situated on the left.

I was cream-crackered when we reached the pool entrance and literally staggered into the changing room. I undressed quickly not wanting to stay in the changing room any longer than was necessary, the floor was grimy.

I walked excitedly into the main pool area where I was overpowered by the heat and the strong smell of chlorine. Naturally, I sucked in my stomach until I slid into the water in case Jayne or any other babe in the pool caught sight of my manly physique.

The pool was crowded with children, some swimming, many playing, splashing water at each other and being chased around the pool. Every so often the shrill blast of a whistle would quell the mayhem temporarily as one of the pool attendants lectured a bomber. Bombing is a cool manoeuvre accomplished by pulling one's legs up to the chest just before hitting the water, causing it to erupt into a mini tidal wave. The offender was given a couple of warnings after which they were ejected from the pool.

Many children crowded together around the four feet mark resembling a group of penguins as they bobbed up and down chatting incessantly, preventing any serious attempt at swimming the length of the pool. Pragmatically, I moved to the deeper area determined to swim the width of the pool, but even around the five feet mark adults and taller children wandered into the imaginary lane I had created forcing me to navigate around them, slowing down and then swimming briskly to maintain my momentum.

I had just completed my fifth width of the pool when Tom appeared from out of the changing room waving and grinning as he caught my attention.

"Is Jayne here?" I asked eagerly, as he waded through the water towards me.

"Haven't seen her," he replied, "and neither was she on the bus."

Tom and Jayne live near each other in Abergavenny and frequently travel to school on the same bus, this led me to assume that they would travel, and arrive together.

"Do you think she still intends to come here today?" I asked, as a look of disappointment spread over my face. "She might have changed her mind and gone to the Lido instead." Unconcerned, Tom held his nose and disappeared under the surface of the water.

"Are you listening to me?" I questioned, a note of irritation creeping into my voice. A few moments later he emerged shaking his head like a shaggy sheepdog and wiping his eyes with his hands. I was annoyed at his nonchalant attitude, his lack of concern; he knew that I had looked forward to this apparent *chance meeting* with keen anticipation. Annoyingly he disappeared under the water for a second time, and I had to control the urge to place my hands on his head and hold him under to grab his attention.

Once again, he leapt up from under the water. "You worry like an old woman," he spluttered, as he coughed up a mouthful of chlorinated water. "Jayne will be here, she confirmed it on the bus yesterday."

We spent the next half hour messing around in the pool and diving off the springboard, nothing spectacular – just rotating in the air and entering the water at strange angles. Tom used the time to perfect his *praying* dive, crouching as he hit the end of the springboard which was only a few feet above water level. As he was propelled into the air, he quickly clasped his hands together and froze in the praying position. Each time he hit the water like a block of cement sending water cascading into the air but lacking enough force to attract the attention of the pool attendants. At length, I became bored of hitting the water

with my backside and began to focus on landing feet first, and by the time Jayne graced us with her presence I had pretty much perfected the routine – much to my delight. It was Tom that first spotted Jayne as she emerged from the changing room.

“There she is,” he shouted to me.

I spun around and gazed at her as she walked towards the pool, hips swaying rhythmically from side to side. Stopping at the ladder, she turned around and started to lower her body into the water. I exhaled slowly.

“Look at that backside,” I sighed, “isn’t she an angel?”

“Well, are you going to impress her by diving off the high board or not?” Tom challenged, reminding me of my earlier promise.

“Yes,” I replied confidently. However, I gulped as I gazed up at the high board towering overhead, I began to feel a sense of nervousness. Despite the bravado, I had never actually used the high board. I hadn’t even jumped from that height, much less dived headfirst. As I swam to the edge of the pool, I reasoned with myself: *Why not try a simple dive to begin with and then progress to something more complicated.*

I hauled myself out of the pool and walked towards the diving tower, water dripping off me as I began the slow climb toward the top board. Occasionally I looked over the handrail on my ascent; the deep end of the pool was relatively empty so there was little chance of hitting anyone as I leapt from thirty feet. I reached the first diving platform at about the twenty feet mark, I walked past it to the next set of steps that led to the top of the world, or so it seemed. My stomach started to churn as my initial confidence drained away and my legs began to feel weak. I had one final set of steps to climb, but even now it was much higher than I had visualised. Looking down at people bobbing about in the water I was struck at how small everything appeared to be. There was also a noticeable increase in heat as I neared the high board platform, and the smell of chlorine became overpowering.

Breathing hard, I finally reached the top of the diving tower and nervously shuffled towards the board which extended from the platform some six feet into thin air. I was grateful that the diving board was made of a solid marble-like substance; I doubt I would have summoned the courage to dive off a springboard at this height.

I assumed that Tom and Jayne would be watching as I performed a graceful dive into the pool, and though petrified as I approached the end of the board, the thought of Jayne watching spurred me on; and it was too late to back out now. *I hope she can’t see my legs shaking*, I thought, as I took a deep breath.

On the count of three, I leapt headfirst towards the pool below. My outstretched arms covered both ears and the palms of both hands were joined in the praying posture. My understanding of this technique is that my hands would break the water surface first; this in turn, would partially cushion my head as it hit the water a fraction of a second later. The theory was sound, but in practice, my head felt like it had been bashed by a cricket bat as it slammed into the water. I surfaced quickly coughing and spluttering.

“I thought you were going to do a summersault?” Tom shouted as he swam towards me.

“I wanted to begin with a plain dive and work my way up,” I lied. “Do you think Jayne was watching?” I looked hopefully in her direction.

Tom wasn’t sure but urged me to repeat the performance.

“I’ll swim over to her as you climb to the top board again and get her to look in your direction,” Tom promised.

What a pal, I thought as I climbed out of the pool.

I felt a surge of confidence as I started my second ascent to the top board. Other than my head being pounded as I hit the water my performance was encouraging. *Now for*

something more impressive, I thought eagerly, as I executed the summersault several times mentally focussing on the technique involved.

On the school trampoline performing a summersault is relatively simple. You bounce a few times to gain height, and then on the fourth or fifth bounce you begin to rotate your body by thrusting your elbows backwards. This manoeuvre throws your head and body forward and the summersault is completed by whipping your feet over and extending them as you descend, which I had demonstrated minutes earlier on the springboard. However, it occurred to me that you have more time when diving from thirty feet, and so I decided to perform the procedure at a more leisurely pace.

Once more I shuffled to the edge of the diving board feet firmly together, straight back, arms clasped firmly by my side. "Must keep a clean line," I murmured to myself and taking a deep breath I launched myself towards the pool.

Take your time, I thought.

"Steve, are you okay?" Tom's tone of voice displaying concern as I was hauled out of the water by the pool attendant. I was hardly able to breathe as my body was convulsed in a fit of coughing trying to force the water out of my lungs. I was bent in double coughing and spluttering for what felt like an eternity before my body's violent attempt to expel water from my lungs started to subside.

"What happened?" I gasped between breaths.

"You landed flat on your back from thirty feet is what happened," Tom said laughing loudly. "Oh boy, is your back red and blotchy. It made a loud slapping sound as you hit the water."

My upper back muscles were in spasm, forcing me to pant gingerly, painful proof that Tom was not exaggerating. "I suppose Jayne was watching?" I groaned, imagining the embarrassment I would endure when next I talked to her.

"Oh yes, she swallowed more water than you as she fell backwards with laughter."

My brother David paddled purposefully towards me. For a moment, as we made eye contact, I was touched that he was concerned about my welfare, but the temporary feeling of brotherly camaraderie quickly evaporated when he spoke.

"Can you do that again, some of my friends missed it?"

As I struggled gently to my feet people started clapping. *Typical*, I thought, *I try to impress Jayne and end up giving everyone a damn good laugh.*

In the changing room, I dressed slowly, carefully avoiding any contact with my back which was extremely tender; the burning sensation was intense as though I had applied a liberal covering of horse liniment. For that moment I was a minor celebrity, everyone wanted to look at my back; I think some expected to see torn or mutilated flesh. A few bore a look of disappointment as they gawped at my back and then walked off.

"It's only red and blotchy," one exclaimed gloomily to his friends.

"Your face will be red and blotchy if you don't bugger off you little turd," I snarled in response.

Outside, Tom was waiting impatiently for me. "I have to run to catch my bus," he said. "See you on Monday."

With that, off he dashed still tittering at my misfortune.

As I stood in a small recess by the exit waiting for the *little germ*, a group of girls emerged out of the female changing room, Jayne among them. She smiled as she walked towards me.

"How's your back?" she giggled.

"It's fine," I replied manfully. "It looked worse than it was," I lied with a smile.

“Well it looked painful to me,” she laughed, as she turned and walked off in the same direction as Tom towards the bus station.

I was elated. “She does care for me,” I cried out loudly, punching the air as I hobbled down Stow Hill with David in close pursuit.

I mused quietly to myself as we walked. *If I had to damage my back to grab her attention, what would be required to initiate physical contact - hurl myself off the school roof?* This could be the start of a painful relationship.’

CHAPTER 10

MORE QUESTIONS ABOUT THE FUTURE

The next morning, I exaggerated my injuries to avoid going to church.

“It’s really sore mum,” I said, bending gingerly, and then quickly added, “I don’t think TCP will help in this case,” before she entertained the idea.

“All right. Stay in bed until we return, love,” she said, tenderly running her fingers through my hair before leaving the room.

Stretching, with my hands clasped behind my head, I made faces at David as he reluctantly tied a knot in his tie.

“Hurry up and get your clothes on church boy,” I taunted.

“Mum there’s nothing wrong with him,” David whined. “He just pulled faces at me.” But much to his annoyance she ignored him.

As he left the room, he pulled the corners of his eyes down with his fingers and poked out his tongue.

“How childish, better say ten Hail Mary’s in penance fat head,” I shouted after him.

I spent the rest of the day playing on mum’s sympathy while lounging in my bedroom to recuperate, and of course, I continued with my investigations by quizzing the database operator. *Question: describe the body armour worn by 25th-century policemen?* I posed silently in my head.

Body protection worn by law enforcement officers in the 25th century is dark blue in colour and has a yellow stripe running from the armpit to the boot on each side. An optical helmet is also part of the body kit, the operator replied silently. Although this in part confirmed my suspicions that Officer Number Sixteen was not a policeman, so many things remained unclear.

Question: who wears plain black body armour, adorned with numbers on their shoulder pads? I inquired mentally.

Insufficient information replied the operator. *Black body protection is widely available, and insignia or numbers displayed on the shoulder piece is common amongst security personnel, building attendants, and other occupations - including some military units,* she replied.

Unfortunately, my day of leisure ended when I was busted at teatime. Mum had yelled up the stairs telling me that my food was ready. I quickly hid the armband before making my way down the kitchen. In hindsight, it is possible that I overplayed my dramatic entrance into the kitchen when I burst open the door and staggered to the table. Mum called me a fraud and made me wash up after tea as punishment. Ah well, all good things come to an end, eventually.

Later that evening we turned on the TV and sat down to watch The Avengers. The storylines were lame but like most young males I watched it for a glimpse of the delectable Tara King, another of my dream women. Though Linda Thorson isn’t as physical as Diana Rigg, and certainly doesn’t adorn herself in leather, she has a certain feminine charm.

I lost interest a little later when mum switched channels to a current affairs programme, even though Mr George had encouraged us to keep abreast of events.

“Things happening today are part of history tomorrow,” he had said philosophically during a lesson last month. He is probably right.

Time will tell.

When the presenter started to drone on about President Nixon and a hotel named Watergate, I slouched out of the living room. I was bored to tears and spent the next hour tinkling the ivory on my piano in the games room before retiring to bed.

RACE FOR MATHS

Though I expend as little energy as possible on cross-country runs, each Monday morning I apply maximum effort in the furious race for one of the front desks in the Maths class - room 2c. The distance between the science block and the top building is about one hundred yards which presents a serious logistical problem. At the sounding of the bell signalling the end of the Physics lesson, a mad rush through the lower building corridor begins.

As we burst through the main entrance doors like a pack of Wildebeest, elbows and fists are considered acceptable weapons in the struggle for strategic advantage. Speed and cunning are vital attributes as we hurtle up the steps under the covered walkway, two at a time, straining for a clear path. Panting as we reach the top of the steps, we are confronted by a large crowd of pupils who have also started on their journey in the opposite direction to their next lesson in the science building. As we zigzag through the stream of pupils, desperate to be amongst the first to reach the classroom, the more adept amongst us can easily nudge a contender resulting in a large pile-up as they *crash and burn*, another challenger eliminated from the competition. It's common for first-year and second-year pupils, totally unaware of the stampede, to be knocked over and trampled in the rush.

Today I decided to avoid the carnage and wasted effort expended in the *Miss Stephen's steeplechase*. My cunning strategy to steal a march over my hormone popping classmates was to leave before the bell sounded. And so, five minutes before the end of the lesson I walked casually into the stationery cupboard carrying my bookbag ready to enable the cloaking device. Next followed the great escape.

Cloaked, I walked to the door and yanked it open as though the wind had caught it. Mr Jordan stopped in mid-sentence and everyone looked at the door waiting for someone to leap into view shouting '*Ta-daar*.' Giggling quietly to myself I strolled to the top building, and at 10 o'clock precisely, I was stood outside classroom 2c as the bell sounded for the next lesson.

I had deactivated the cloaking device and wisely stood to one side as year two pupils poured out. When the class had emptied, I walked in and sat in the front desk saving a seat for Tom. Mission accomplished.

"You are on the ball today, Steve," commented Miss Stephens, as she looked up from a pile of forms she was collating.

"What can I say, I love Maths, and you are such a fine teacher," I replied casually, flirting with a woman six years my senior. "And may I say that you look stunning today," I added smoothly.

"Why thank you," she said, giving me a glowing smile before turning to clean the blackboard. I could swear she was wiggling her cute backside provocatively as she erased a board full of formulas and diagrams drawn in the previous lesson. And indeed, she did look stunning wearing a sleeveless pink dress that clung to her body like a second skin, and which ended six inches above her knees. Sadly, our romantic dialogue was halted by the first of the front runners bursting into the classroom, sweating and gasping for breath.

"Your classmates appear as eager as you are to learn, Steve," she giggled, obviously amused at the sight of pumped-up teenage lads crashing into the room fighting to sit in the first row of desks.

The front desks were quickly filled as the remaining love-sick male members of the class swarmed into the room. Tom who was amongst the last to arrive saw me and dropped his bag by the desk.

“Steve, how did you get here so quickly?” he gasped, collapsing into his seat with exhaustion. “Twice I collided with first-year pupils on my way here.”

“They didn’t trouble me. It’s like I was invisible,” I replied with a chuckle.

Eventually the last of the stragglers wandered into the classroom, and as the class settled down, the lesson began. After a few minutes a female voice piped up, “Miss, the boys are staring at your boobs.” Several girls demonstrated their disapproval by tutting and hurling insults our way.

Miss Stephens ignoring the heckling issued an instruction. “Now, all of you turn to page forty-eight of your textbook; we are going to continue our lesson from last Thursday on Algebraic expressions.”

Leaning over, I whispered to Tom, “I have a brain wave.” I gave him a wink as I called out to the nubile goddess that had bewitched every male in the room.

“Miss Stephens, I’m confused, how does $n - c$ equal four?” I asked innocently, as she moved to the front of my desk.

“It’s easy if you remember the two stages that I explained last week,” she said. As she bent over to demonstrate the process, I stopped breathing, hypnotised, as I gazed at her unsupported assets swaying before me.

Miss Stephens looked up at me and spoke quietly: “Steven pay attention, you should be looking at the problem, nowhere else.”

After she walked away, Tom exploded with exuberance. “That was awesome! It was better than reading a Playboy mag.”

Twice more during the lesson I summoned Miss Stephens, and each time she dutifully bent over so that we in the front desks had a grandstand view of her most generous attributes.

The remainder of the day passed slowly, finally ending with double Biology. Strangely, Mrs Bovill no longer singled me out as the recipient of her acerbic wit, instead, she used me as a sounding board often passing the question to me when it was answered incorrectly, and sometimes encouraging me to elaborate even when correct. Providing additional and even obscure details demanded little effort when wearing the armband, I was merely acting as the middle-man between teacher and an automated call handler living five hundred years in the future.

“Steven, you really are a joy to teach this term,” Mrs Bovill commented, as I gathered my books at the end of the lesson. “You have made astonishing progress,” she continued in lavish praise.

“It must be a testament to your teaching skills, Mrs Bovill,” I replied, tongue in cheek. Turning, I quickly exited the room before *the witch* recognised sarcasm.

Hurrying from the Biology lab I ran to the park gates in front of the Town Hall to catch my bus home. Earlier in the week, Mr Cropper had informed me that he had booked a badminton court in Cwmbran Stadium scheduled for six-thirty tonight. There was little time to spare as I gulped down my tea; I had to catch the bus back down to Pontypool in time to make the connection to Cwmbran. The last leg of the journey is a ten-minute trek from the town centre to the sports stadium located on the outskirts of the new town.

The stadium in Cwmbran is frequently used for National, and sometimes International sports events which are often televised. However, tonight we only required the use of a badminton court until eight o’clock.

BADMINTON ANYONE?

Badminton club is a select affair, only six of us attend regularly. Tonight, Dan and I arrived to find just two other die-hards in attendance, Christine, and Mr ‘*tug them by their sideburns*’ Cropper.

“What’s the betting that I am stuck with Christine?” I asked Dan with a grin, as we finished changing into our sports kit.

He gave me a disbelieving look and then lifted his eyes to the heavens. “In your dreams,” he chuckled, shaking his head as he walked to the door. He stopped abruptly and turned around. “I would say that you’re not her type but thinking about it, I am not sure that you’re anyone’s type,” he laughed, as he turned on his heels and walked out into the badminton hall.

Everyone’s a comedian, I thought to myself, as I followed him into the brightly lit arena, primed for combat.

Both Dan and Mr Cropper are strong players able to smash a shuttlecock to the back of the court with some force. Christine although nimble around the net, and able to disguise a short lob, lacks their strength when returning probing shots with the needed power and accuracy to place her opponents under pressure. However, we resolved the issue by rotating after each match, which meant that I partnered her every third game.

I am reasonably competent at *badders*, only my timing occasionally letting me down. Tonight would be different, I had at my disposal the immense power provided by the cloaked technology strapped to my forearm.

The first round of three games was predictable, Christine and partner lost by a margin of eight points or so to the opposing all-male team. The second round followed the same pattern, but as the last match approached, I left the badminton hall on a minor pretence taking the opportunity to activate the energy shield. I was determined to end the evening on a high note as I played alongside Christine in the last game of the night, and upon my return to the badminton hall, I positioned myself at the back of the court. With the energy shield activated, timing was no longer an issue, neither was the force of my returns as Christine patrolled the net and I guarded the baseline.

Initially, Dan and *Cropps* were generous with their shots as a gesture of sportsmanship not wishing to embarrass me and Christine, but that started to change as the match progressed. I began to return each of their power shots with a series of prolific returns, each one more powerful than the last pushing them to the back of the court before smashing the shuttlecock beyond their reach. Christine, enjoying the upturn in fortune and sensing an unexpected victory, aided the charge with several exquisite drop shots.

As we approached match point – seven points ahead of Dan and *Cropps* - she smashed a return shot that hit Dan in the middle of his forehead knocking him off his feet as he attempted to evade the speeding missile. In a surge of euphoria accompanied by a shout of ‘*Yes*,’ Christine threw her arms around my neck and kissed my cheek. Things were looking up.

Badminton is a gentleman’s game; the losers are always gracious in defeat. A fact that evidently escaped the notice of Dan and *Cropps* who sulked and made disparaging remarks as we showered.

“I lost the shuttlecock in the lights on three occasions,” said Dan, as he towelled.

“Yes, and I slipped on the last but one point,” added Mr Cropper.

“Sounds like sour grapes to me,” I replied, laughing at their feeble excuses. I dressed quickly, eager to reach the foyer before Christine, hoping to build on the brief contact we had shared at the end of the game. I raced out of the changing room and into the foyer where I waited nervously for Christine to appear, unsure of what to say. I hadn’t long to

wait as she walked out of the female changing room a minute or so later, combing her long hazel hair.

“You men are so lucky not having long hair, it’s a real nuisance sometimes,” she moaned, as she approached me. “Oh ... and did I mention it’s your turn to buy the chocolate,” she added.

“How so?” I asked mystified.

“Well we won, and you’re a male, so that makes it your turn to buy me chocolate,” she replied, as her face broke into a broad smile. I couldn’t argue with female logic and she deserved a free cup of chocolate for her cheek alone.

“All right. You win! It’s the least I can do for my cheek-kissing partner,” I said, raising my eyebrows at her suggestively. She bit her bottom lip as she looked down coyly at the floor.

“I got a little carried away by that last breath-taking match. You were outstanding. It’s the best you have ever played,” she said flatteringly.

Now it was my turn to feel embarrassed by both her generous praise and a twinge of guilt that my performance had been unfairly enhanced. Rather like an athlete using steroids ... but it quickly passed. I handed her a cup of hot chocolate from the vending machine as we continued our mutual admiration session.

“We really did batter them in that last match,” I said, smiling at the memory of our most satisfying victory. “You played a couple of superb drop shots, but the best shot of the night was the one that knocked Dan off his feet.” We were still laughing at the mental image when the sore losers emerged from the changing room; they too walked to the vending machine still discussing the final game of the evening.

“The winners should buy the drinks,” Dan said loudly to *Cropps* who nodded in agreement. Ignoring their sour comments Christine finished her hot chocolate and threw her plastic cup into the metal container that stood by the side of the vending machine.

“Good night,” she shouted to the others as she picked up her bag. “I’ll see you in class tomorrow, partner,” she said saucily. Leaning towards me she whispered softly in my ear, “If you play your cards right next week, I might kiss both cheeks.” She turned and walked out of the building without a backward glance leaving me speechless. Dan who had been deep in discussion with Mr Cropper walked over.

“Ready to go?” he asked. I sighed still elated after Christine’s last remarks. “Why are you so happy,” he asked with a puzzled look, “and what were you two talking about?”

“I think she wants me,” I grinned, rubbing my hands slowly over my body.

“In your dreams,” he laughed mockingly. “Only science would want that body.”

Mr Cropper called over to us as he walked to the door. “I can give you boys a lift into Pontypool, but I will have to drop you off at the Town Hall.”

“Excellent!” both Dan and I replied in unison. That would cut the length of our journey in half and save the return bus fare which we could put to better use – like a pint of beer in the Yew Tree on our way home.

PALE ALE OR GNATS PEE?

After bidding Mr Cropper good evening as he dropped us off by the Town Hall bus stop, Dan and I walked up through Church Wood intent on using our saved bus fare to sink a pint of PA, the watered-down beer served in the Yew Tree. Many in our year, Dan and I included, have already started our passage into manhood at the ritual watering holes.

John, the landlord of The Globe Inn, a pub situated at the top of Crane Street, tolerates our custom and offers sage advice as we enter, “Behave and you will get two pints, no more.”

In contrast, the strange little fellow at The Bell Inn, an altogether older and less-used establishment situated below Twmpath Secondary Modern, is more direct. "Sit in the back, and shut your gobs, or I'll throw you out." Charming!

The Yew Tree features among the few who tolerate our patronage provided we keep a low profile. Eddie, the landlord, merely says: "Take it outside but return the glasses before you leave."

"Here's my money," I said to Dan, as we hung nervously around the bar door entrance. "Eddie never challenges you. Just stand quietly at the end of the bar, I'll wait discreetly on the patio."

The Yew Tree had recently been refurbished and the old rotting garden furniture had been replaced with stylish pine benches. It would be quite pleasant to sit at the rear of the pub looking out over the fields and trees on this warm autumn evening.

Dan eventually emerged through the patio doors with two pints of beer and joined me. Placing the two glasses on the table he sat down. "Tastes like gnats piss," he said dejectedly, pulling a face.

"How do you know? Have you tasted gnats piss to be able to make the comparison?" I replied with a laugh.

"Hah, flaming, hah," he replied, as I took a large gulp.

"Aggh," I cried out loudly. "You may be right! If I had to describe gnats piss, this would definitely be it."

We sounded like connoisseurs, hardened drinkers that had tasted beer up and down the country, able to make a considered judgement, but we drank it, nevertheless. It was around nine-thirty when we finished our beer. Dan downed the last mouthful and gave a loud belch.

"Well that's me finished, I'm off home," he said, banging his glass on the table.

"Me too," I said looking automatically at my left wrist to confirm the time before remembering that I now wore my watch on my right wrist. Alarming my attention was drawn to a faintly flashing red light through my shirt sleeve. As Dan turned to leave, I quickly raised the shirt cuff to identify which of the indicators was issuing a silent warning. As I greatly feared, the proximity detector on the armband that was the culprit.

Shaken at the suddenness of the warning, I froze momentarily, my mind thrown into turmoil. Had someone found me already? Were they watching me even now? And most importantly were they friend or foe?

"Come on then. Let's go," I urged Dan, wanting to leave the area as quickly as possible.

As we left the Yew Tree, I glanced around without trying to appear too obvious. I saw no one, we appeared to be alone, but I knew that meant little. I ran my fingers over the buttons and located the power switch. I pressed it quickly and watched as the power light extinguished. I prayed that there was no locating device incorporated into the armband as I increased the length of my stride.

"What's the rush," Dan asked, breathing heavily as we hurried along Newman Road.

"I think it's about to rain and I haven't got a coat," I lied, unconvincingly. Dan turned off after a few hundred yards walking up the hill towards Central Drive, the road where he has lived most of his life, while I continued the brisk pace until I was only fifty yards from home. As I reached the gate, I looked around again before running down the steps to the front door, a shiver running up my spine as though I had company.

"I'm home," I shouted, rushing to my bedroom, taking the stairs two at a time. With some trepidation, I reactivated the armband as I entered the bedroom. To my immense relief, the red light was no longer flashing. *That's a good indication, I hope. It was probably a malfunction,* I kidded myself. But to be on the safe side I turned it off again

and hid it among the equipment beneath my stack of comics in the bottom of the wardrobe.

THEY DON'T KNOW ME

The next morning, I awoke extremely perplexed. The proximity indicator had been triggered by something the previous night, and short of skulking around the church with my armband enabled acting like a beacon shouting '*Here I am, come and get me,*' I was unsure how to proceed. Should I wear the armband or leave it at home? Should I fire it up every ten minutes to stare at the indicator? And what should be my plan of action when the indicator gave a bona fide warning?

I pondered my dilemma on the bus journey to Pontypool, and by the time I walked through the school gates I had a part-formed a strategy in mind. I would activate the armband only when necessary; this would severely limit any attempt to triangulate my position through any signal the power pack might emit. Unfortunately, this would apply to both good cop and bad cop.

The European Championship qualifier against Switzerland, due to be played that evening, dominated the conversation throughout the day.

"I see they're playing that carthorse *Chivers* again," Tom said dejectedly, during a slow walk up Crane Street. "I don't know what Sir Alf sees in him. He doesn't run, he gallops, and he couldn't hit the target if the goal was fifty feet wide, he added scathingly.

"I'm not sure, Tom," I interjected. "He's banging them in for fun at Spurs this season, and he was their top scorer last year. He also scored on his England debut and don't forget the two he scored against Malta in May," I further reminded him as he shook his head in disagreement.

"Hells bells, if I couldn't score five against the football team from a tiny Mediterranean island, I'd eat my shirt. Bet you a fiver he doesn't score tonight," Tom challenged, holding his hand out to shake on the bet.

As we entered Sidolli's the nauseating strains of '*Chirpy Chirpy Cheep Cheep*' assaulted our ears. We pushed our way through the queue of people milling around the counter entrance and walked quickly to the jukebox desperate to change the music to something more intellectual, like James Taylor.

"It beats me how such a crappy song reached number one," Tom said derisively, as he made his selections. "Come on Steve, let's thrash the pinball machine."

Over the next hour we played nine or ten games in a mini-tournament of which, much to Tom's annoyance, I emerged the victor. As I slurped the last mouthful of coffee, Tom was singing along to '*Reason to Believe,*' the 'B' side to '*Maggie May,*' while holding an imaginary microphone to his lips.

"Come on, you big girl's blouse," I shouted above his wailing. "If my cat made that noise, I'd shoot it." Tom shrugged off my odious slur with a shrug of his shoulders and continued to hum the melody line as we walked down Crane Street. Annoyingly he didn't stop until we approached the school gates.

It was during the final lessons of the afternoon - games, that I was able to spend time mulling over the facts. The return match with Twmpath was only a couple of days away and Mr Cropper decreed that we needed additional endurance training. Acting on the advice of *one cap*, he decided circuit work around the park perimeter was in order. We set off in two's, sprinting one hundred yards and then jogging for two minutes in rotation. Normally I detest endurance trials, but today I welcomed the opportunity for solitude, just me and my thoughts, following the person in front of me in a semi-hypnotic state. A mild breeze and a clear blue sky made running conditions relatively enjoyable. My skin seemed to soak up the rays of the waning autumn sun as I started the first circuit around

the park boundary. As I neared the bottom of the park, a family of Starlings, or possibly Blackbirds, hidden in the densely populated wooded area were chattering and whistling. Occasionally a few of them flew from tree to tree as we passed by, others scattering as we thundered through. After a while, I started to settle into a comfortable rhythm. The faster runners had forged ahead leaving the slower runners trailing behind. I was content to jog along giving thought to recent events and possible outcomes.

It was during the long straight from the park gates to the tennis courts when I was on automatic maintaining a steady pace that it slowly dawned on me. *They don't know who I am*, I thought silently. *How could they?* The dead time traveller who had impersonated a law officer hadn't time to communicate with anyone before he died, I could testify to that. Additionally, the tracer that I had placed on the dead body of the alleged thief wouldn't reveal any clues as to my identity. The 25th-century colleagues of Officer Number Sixteen would be unaware that an insignificant person five hundred years in the past knew of their deadly research. It would be pure chance that a cloaked time traveller detected the presence of an advanced power source as I passed their position, and only if they were close by. It could take weeks to sift through large groups of people. Watching, following, and then eliminating each one in turn from the group of suspects before they could positively identify the person possessing temporal equipment. And indeed, power signature detection must surely work both ways. If they can pick up the occasional faint trace of my power signature, I too can pick up traces of theirs and deactivate my armband, accordingly, reactivating it many miles away.

I was now on my second circuit of the park boundary; the faster runners were making rapid progress and would pass me before I reached the Victorian gates, but I cared little about the competitive element of the exercise. I continued with the steady pace that enabled me to concentrate on my recent awareness of astonishing events. If my logic was correct, I was in no imminent danger of being discovered, in fact, I could avoid detection until their research in this location was complete and continue to enjoy the many benefits of the armband. With a great sense of relief, I lengthened my stride in celebration.

Only a few carefree minutes passed before my nagging conscience began to trouble me. My conclusion had excluded the human element. How could I let them gather the data that could possibly lead to the genocide of an entire ancestral line by assassination in some quiet decade, or century, unopposed? And just who was the temporal analyst with *God-like* powers that had calculated the consequences of altering history and the extent of its distortion? And how would you test such a scenario? I realised that I couldn't hide my head in the sand until the storm had passed, because it was possible that my very existence was at stake. I too might be swept away as a link in the ancestral chain of a dynasty sentenced to extinction.

I suddenly felt very much ashamed and thoroughly selfish for thinking of my safety when there was a greater issue at hand. But it was an undeniable fact that my life or those of my friends and family could be threatened, now, or sometime in the future while these time assassins operated unabated.

After the shock caused by the proximity indicator bursting into life - albeit briefly - I was sure that their return was imminent, and I had a fairly good idea where their research would take place.

Present-day law enforcement agencies would prove woefully inadequate, they would surely certify me if I revealed that time travellers ... invisible time travellers ... invisible time travellers with energy shields, were performing a catalogue of the dead. I had to prevent the temporal researchers from completing their chilling task until 25th-century law enforcers arrived. But I had no way of contacting the Temporal Directorate, if it even existed.

I was now convinced that the area of St Cadoc, particularly the church and surrounding woods, was their centre of operations, but I had no idea when they would appear. It could be next week, next year or even into the next century. They were dipping in and out of time. I am taking the long route.

As I neared the school gates and prepared to turn on my last lap around the field Mr Jeffries, still wearing his faded welsh jersey, stood yelling and gesturing for us to make our way back to the changing rooms.

As I passed him, I joked, "Is that a new welsh jersey, Sir?" He just glared at me.

"Sod off to the changing room, you useless turd," he growled.

Some people are so touchy, I thought to myself as I headed off across the play area towards the lower school building. Inside the bustling changing room, the movement into and out of the showers was in full swing. As this was the last lesson of the day many were eager to *wash and run*. I too wanted to make this cleansing ritual as brief as possible and had removed my running shoes and socks when I noticed Glyn O'Keefe sauntering across towards the showers, all eyes were on him and the *appendage*.

"Gravity must be intense in his village," Tom added in admiration. I merely grunted in acknowledgement as I walked into the showers.

When undressed, most of us felt inadequate in the presence of *super-size* O'Keefe, and in common with many, I washed my prize specimen quickly. I didn't want it to get jealous and shrivel into oblivion.

I'm sure you will grow one day, I thought to myself as I glanced down. But not this year, it seems.

CHAPTER 11

CHEWING GUM ANYONE?

As I made my way to the Town Hall to catch a bus home, I stopped at Hughes the Stationers to buy chewing gum, but not just any sort of gum. O'Hare and his cronies were still troubling me, and during a lesson last week he had snatched a packet of chewing gum from my hand and laughed in derision as he shared them out, which embarrassed me in front of the class.

Now as chance would have it, there is a laxative chewing gum that's the same size as the PK variety I favour, which presented an opportunity for revenge. I bought two packets of PK and two packets of the laxative gum and swapped them over on the bus journey home.

As the bus neared the shops at the beginning of Newman Road - around one hundred yards North East of the Church of St Cadoc - with extreme apprehension I activated the armband with my eyes fixed intently on the proximity detector. For three seconds I stared at the indicator, and for three seconds it remained dormant. A wave of relief swept over me as I realised that I was alone, my identity still unknown - for now. Deactivating it I began to refine the strategy in my mind. My priority must be to detect the arrival of the temporal criminals preferably without being caught, and a few old fashioned 20th century stealth techniques would greatly reduce the chance of detection.

I had made a few assumptions, one being that the proximity detector is limited in range to perhaps a few hundred yards, well within the range of the shops. I would make a daily check from the safety of the newsagents surrounded by people, thereby protecting my identity, the perfect camouflage. The temporal criminals would be unable to locate and identify me if I quickly disabled the armband after each check. My daily routine would therefore be performed with military precision. I would check for their temporal footprint on my way to school, and again on my way home without fail.

Creatures of habit! Those three words could have been written with my mother in mind. Each Wednesday evening, she visits Aunt Florence in Abersychan, with David and, me, reluctantly, in tow. Extremely affectionate and with arms thicker than my thighs, Aunt Flo insists on grabbing me and smothering my face with kisses. Yuk! After the slavering comes the bear hug as she pulls me into her matronly bosom where the life is squeezed from me. Mum issued a gentle reminder as I was flying out of the door on my way to school.

"Don't forget we are visiting Flo this evening," she shouted from the kitchen.

"I will have stacks of homework tonight," I responded despairingly, praying that mum would relent as she had done last week.

"That was your excuse last week and the week before. She wants to see you," replied mum, with a slight note of irritation in her voice. My heart sank, it would be pointless to prolong this discussion, I knew where it would end if I pushed too hard.

"Fine," I shouted angrily as I slammed the door. Whereupon I made a hasty exit up the steps and through the gate, just in case mum chased after me.

I sulked and muttered under my breath the entire length of Newman Road. It was maddening enough to waste a whole evening listening to the two old women righting the world's wrongs. However, both David and I must operate under mum's strict code of conduct which she recites on our mountain trek to Abersychan. Through the summer months, we often walk to Aunt Flo's along terrain at which most ramblers would balk. Our route takes us north along the mountain top towards Blaenavon, initially trudging through a string of fields and then along a path that winds its way through Lasgarn Wood.

When we emerge from the other side of the wood, we have a breath-taking view into the valley below as the edge of the mountain falls away due to the intense quarrying that has taken place over generations.

As much as I enjoy our *sound of music* experience, the last stage of the journey is hair raising and potentially lethal as it demands unwavering concentration, a degree of stamina, and the sure footedness of a mountain goat as we descend towards Abersychan below, along a narrow path that clings to the mountainside. Gingerly we negotiate the extremely hazardous mountain ledge leading to the safety of Lime Kiln Road below, during which mum begins her long list of reminders:

“If she offers you cakes take only one slice and politely refuse any more. If she offers you biscuits, take one and then just one additional biscuit if pressed. If she offers you a glass of her home-made lemonade, accept only one glass full and compliment her on the taste.”

She trots out more than a dozen directives, finally ending with three immutable rules: “Don’t interrupt, don’t listen to our conversation, and no fighting.”

Mercifully, the torturous evening would end at nine o’clock precisely as the bus home was due five minutes past the hour.

Thoroughly depressed, I walked into the newsagents to buy a bar of fruit & nut which gave me the opportunity to check the proximity detector. Standing at the back of the queue I surreptitiously activated the armband while monitoring the detector ... not a flicker, life was still good. I deactivated it quickly, paid for the chocolate and then walked through Church Wood to the bottom of Pen-y-garn hill and into school.

My first encounter of the day with O’Hare and the Hareite’s took place in History, shortly after the lunchtime break. As usual, O’Hare was performing in front of the class but turned his attention to me as I attempted to open a pack of chewing gums covertly under the desk. I had been deliberately flamboyant in my actions as I extracted the packet from my shirt pocket, and as I brought the open packet into view O’Hare swooped.

“Morris is going to share his chewing gums with us again,” the inane oaf said loudly, as he snatched the packet from my hand. Laughing, he squeezed a couple out of the packet and threw them into his mouth before passing the packet to Mitchell. Appearing unperturbed, I pulled the second packet out of my pocket with a grin.

“Oh look, I have another packet,” I declared loudly, knowing that O’Hare couldn’t resist the opportunity to belittle me further.

“I think I’ll have those as well,” he said triumphantly, as he grabbed the second packet out of my hand. My plan was working entirely as predicted.

Feigning annoyance I pleaded with him. “Don’t eat them all O’Hare at least let me have a couple.” Smirking, he took another two out of the packet and threw them into his mouth. *It’s like guiding a monkey*, I thought quietly to myself as he passed the contents of the second packet to his friends.

Earlier I had revealed my plan to Tom sitting beside me. “Just sit and wait,” I said, “it should take about half an hour.”

O’Hare and the Hareite’s continued chewing the life out of the gum in their mouths while laughing at me and hurling insults. As the minutes counted down, I mused over the saying, ‘*Revenge is a dish best served cold.*’ I couldn’t have agreed more as I waited with a smug look of satisfaction. Order was restored when Mr George, late due to a staff meeting, walked into the classroom.

“Okay settle down, morons,” he shouted, and as a hush quickly descended, he instructed us to open our textbooks.

The lesson was well underway and for the tenth time Tom glanced at his watch. "Twenty-five minutes gone," he whispered excitedly, "we should hear something shortly."

And indeed, he was right. A few minutes later the sound of a stomach rumbling could clearly be heard in the classroom. A second stomach joined it in, forming a duet. Not long after a third, and then a fourth, turned it into a quartet of rumbling and churning. The gut and bowel sounds got louder and more violent as the minutes ticked by. I looked over at O'Hare; he was extremely pale and was squirming in his seat. After a loud outbreak of wind, he suddenly leapt to his feet and dashed for the door, promptly followed by Mitchell, and moments later, the others.

"Does anyone know what that was about?" asked Mr George, clearly startled at the commotion.

I raised my hand. "I think they were taken short Sir; shall I go and check on them?"

Mr George nodded, "Granted, but don't take all day about it."

I walked out of the classroom and down the corridor to the toilet where I was greeted by loud moaning and lots of bowel movements.

"You all okay in there?" I shouted cheerfully. "You haven't been eating curry, have you? It's not good for young stomachs you know." The only reply I received was more groaning and explosions of wind that echoed around the toilet bowls.

Returning to the classroom I announced loudly, "I think they must have food poisoning or something Sir, all I can hear were loud farting noises." At that, the classroom erupted into howls of laughter and a string of toilet-related comments followed.

That was the last we saw of O'Hare and his numbskulls that day. Rumour has it that they had messed themselves and were made to sit on newspapers at the back of the bus on their way home.

"I don't think O'Hare will grab my chewing gums anymore," I remarked to Tom, as the lesson ended.

"No, but he may want to grab a dangly part of your anatomy," he warned ominously.

"We'll see," I replied, lightly tapping my arm.

Finally, the school day ended, and I walked to the bottom of Panygarn hill where I started on my journey up through Church Wood. As I approached the back of the Yew tree at the top of Church Wood I stopped and knelt on one knee. I fiddled with my shoelace, while at the same time scanning the area ahead of me. Directly in front of me was St Cadoc Church protected by the high stone wall that formed its boundary. Inside those walls lay the remains of scores of Pontypool's sons and daughters, their ancient graves and elaborate headstones - some stretching back to the early 16th century - marking their final resting place.

I tried to appear natural, a teenager enjoying the late afternoon sunshine and light breeze, listening to the birds in the woods behind singing and chirping to each other. I was searching for any clue that might reveal unseen visitors.

As I walked up to the gate at the end of the field and prepared to exit onto the road, a couple of cars slowed and sounded their horns as they approached the tight bend and then they accelerated out of sight. I too hurried feeling a little uneasy; right now, I needed the company of people.

I reached the shops and hung around inside the newsagents for a couple of minutes picking up and reading the latest copy of Shoot, a football magazine that I collect avidly. When the coast was clear I activated the armband and examined the proximity detector, it was still inactive ... "and long may it remain so," I uttered quietly to myself. I deactivated

the armband and replaced the magazine - one that I wouldn't have bought anyhow as its main feature this issue was the red half of scouse-land.

The walk along Newman Road was quite pleasant now that I was relatively certain no unseen presence was stalking me. My thoughts turned to tomorrow's match with Twmpath. I was determined to avenge the bloody nose and cauliflower ear received in the confrontation several weeks ago. The relentless offensive power and focussed aggression manifested by Smith was remarkable in a man so young; but he had better beware, tomorrow the armband would swing the balance of power firmly in our favour.

CHAPTER 12

RETURN MATCH WITH TWMPATH

There was a lack of the usual banter and general chaos that normally accompanied sixth-form lessons on a Thursday morning; even Maths with Miss Stephens didn't have its usual arousing effect. Everyone was keenly aware that the return match with Twmpath was only hours away.

Dan Platt, though naturally quiet was more pensive than usual, and Jester was uncharacteristically silent, yet both wore a resolute look of determination all morning. Evidently, Dave Ryder too was absorbed by thoughts of the afternoon's contest as he absentmindedly played with the knot in his tie during Maths and English, he must have reduced its size by half when the bell sounded to end Tech Drawing. Even Jonesy was caught up in the period of contemplation as he had failed to notice Miss Stephens in one of her trademark short skirts bending over only several feet in front of his desk earlier in the day. His lack of concentration was apparent during the English lesson when Mr Fletcher had to repeat a question three times, to which he had no answer. His head was clearly in a different place. All in all, there was a real sense of menace manifested by my teammates in the few short hours before kick-off.

Just before the dinner break, I ran into Mr Cropper in one of the corridors, it appeared that he too had a case of revenge fever. "Are you ready to grind them into the ground today, Morris?" he asked, clenching his fist in an outward show of aggression.

"Yes sir, we're going to annihilate them," I growled, in an equally impassioned response. As I turned to walk away a mischievous thought hit me. "Mr Cropper," I called after him. "Why don't we put Twmpath warriors in the girls changing rooms instead of sharing ours?" It will certainly provoke and belittle them and could, in turn, disturb their concentration.'

Mr Cropper paused for thought. "I like that idea Morris, good thinking. Yes, they can change in the girls changing rooms," he muttered, as he resumed his journey along the corridor.

At one o'clock we assembled and began to don our distinctive kit. The school colours consist of thick vertical light blue stripes with an intermittent combination of thin dark blue stripes and yellow stripes, white shorts and sky-blue socks. Shortly after changing we left the building and ran out through the school gates towards the rugby field. Anyone nearby could have mistaken the rhythmic clatter of studs on tarmac for that of a platoon of soldiers doubling-up on the parade ground, engaged in teamwork building. And indeed, we were a team, a united team of worriers heading for battle.

The rugby field too looked impressive with its freshly painted lines and corner flags flapping gently in the breeze. The pitch felt firm as my studs sank gently into it, unlike the slippery mud-bath in our last fateful meeting.

"Let's do some gentle warming up exercises," yelled Mr Jeffries, determined to put us through our paces ... '*As the professionals do,*' he reminded us. At his command we formed a line and sprinted up and down the field several times while working on our handling skills, passing the ball from one end to the other and then back again. Occasionally someone would drop the ball and the line would break up as we ground to a halt, whereupon *one cap* began hurling insults at the ham-fisted miscreant.

"You couldn't catch a cold let alone rugby ball, you bone head," Mr Jeffries roared in the face of one errant ball dropper.

"Begin again."

This continued for fifteen minutes or so before he gathered us around one of the posts for a team talk on strategy.

“Play it tight, pass the ball and when you tackle a man make sure he goes down.”

No wonder he only had one cap, there was no brain to fill it.

As the home supporters gathered, the Twmpath team ran onto the pitch issuing threats and taunting us with predictions of how many points they would run up.

“Thirty points against other teams, fifty against you girls,” yelled Smith, as he pounded across the pitch. He stopped and began sprinting on the spot. After a few seconds, he began to leap into the air lifting his knees into his chest grunting loudly in a display designed to intimidate us. His teammates also joined in with a tirade of insults.

“My sister tackles harder than you maggots,” one yelled.

“I’m going to stomp all over you and then grind your head into the dirt” shouted another. They have a strange idea of sportsmanship in the eastern valleys.

The away supporters, a pitiful thirty in number, huddled together along the pitch side that was lined with trees and bordered by the Afon Lywyd. On the opposite side the trickle of pupils that had started to assemble a few minutes ago had now become a torrent, and with five minutes remaining before kick-off there must have been nearly three hundred St Alban’s fourth, fifth and sixth-formers lining three sides of the pitch. The noise of chatter grew louder as their number increased and some began to chant football slogans.

I was engaged in conversation with Tom as Jayne and a couple of her friends squeezed in behind him. “Good crowd,” said Tom, his head sweeping from left to right.

“Yes,” I replied, with a furtive glance in Jayne’s direction, “and I hope they’ll give vocal support.”

The whistle blew signalling the end of the warmup period and I ran over to the middle of the pitch ready for the game to commence. Twmpath had won the toss and stood ready to kick off, accordingly I lined up alongside Dan Platt and Jester James ready to receive the ball. Mr Jeffries, the Referee for this match, asked both Captains if they were ready and then blew his whistle to start the game.

Accompanied by a huge roar from the spectators, Edwards, their centre half, kicked off. As the ball hung in the air the Twmpath forwards, with faces contorted, ran towards us bellowing in an unseemly attempt to unnerve us. However, this would prove to be one game out of their control as I was wearing the armband in invisible mode with the energy shield enabled.

Dan caught the ball and we all huddled around him to protect it. The opposition piled into us and after some pushing and pulling the ball was released to Jonesy. An extremely nimble centre half, Jonesy sidestepped a flying tackle and pulled away from a tugged shirt before hurling the ball to John Evans. Eventually, it was fed out to Dave Ryder on the right-wing. Dave is fast and tricky and made it to their ten-yard line before he was grabbed illegally around the neck. *One cap* immediately awarded us a free-kick. The cheering crowd went wild when Williams took the kick, slotting it right between the posts - first blood to us.

An unbelievable start became exceptional a few minutes later when a series of rucks positioned us on their ten-yard line where a scrum was awarded. As our pack formed, Smith, their giant hooker, taunted me, “How’s the nose, scum bag?” he sneered.

“Why don’t you try to hit it again dickweed,” I replied sarcastically, flashing him my pearly whites.

As our pack stood poised ready for the engagement, Mr Jeffries yelled, “Now!”

Unlike the game at Twmpath, I felt no pain or discomfort as the players in the scrum started to push. In fact, I felt unusually strong, and as the ball was thrust in, I hooked it with my foot and pushed with all my might.

Gaining a good forward momentum, we pushed their pack backwards and continued to push them over the line where I fell on the ball for a try. Our supporters were ecstatic, both at the score line and how it was achieved. Dai Williams again converted the kick giving us a ten-point lead.

“Someone, please pinch me,” Dan shouted, as he made his way back ready for kick-off.

“Maintain concentration,” yelled Jester. “It only takes a silly mistake for them to put points on the board.”

Prophetic words indeed for as the game re-started Smith plundered the ball on our twenty-five-yard line and ran over the top of Dai Williams, our last line of defence, leaving him on the ground clutching his stomach. Dan Platt who had chased back leapt in desperation and gamely held onto Smith’s right leg, but he barely slowed, dragging Dan over the line as he touched down. Edwards’ conversion was accurate and Twmpath were back in the game.

We lost the ball on the next drive, and they started to throw the ball around in an impressive display of crisp clean handling. Intuitively I tracked Smith, their inspirational talisman, whose combination of brute strength and a vastly superior weight advantage made him virtually unplayable. Invariably he would end up with the ball and liked nothing better than to charge like a battering ram stampeding over any and all opponents that stood in his way. However, Twmpath’s progress ground to a halt at our ten-yard line as their big prop ran into a wall of defenders and fell over the ball where a ruck developed.

A ruck is a strange phenomenon, the player with the ball falls to the ground shielding it with his body as often anywhere up to eight players fall on top of him, pinning him to the floor. Whereupon still more players pile in trying to retrieve the ball with their feet, occasionally raking their studs over the prostrate players causing some pretty painful wounds.

On this occasion, the ball was fed to Smith who charged for the line, once again only Dai Williams stood between him and a try. However, I was hot on his heels and making up ground rapidly. Dai bravely attempted the tackle but again was brushed aside, swatted like a fly; nevertheless, he did enough to impede Smiths progress. Now only feet behind him I launched myself at his hips, as I made contact, I slid down his legs holding on for dear life. I am sure the laws of physics state forward movement is impossible with both legs pinned, and that was true of Smith who fell like a mighty oak hitting the ground and bouncing a few feet before grinding to a halt. Like someone who had inadvertently sat on an ant nest, I was up and onto my feet faster than greased lightning quickly snatching the ball off Smith who was rolling on the ground gasping for air, the wind having been knocked out of him.

With the ball firmly tucked under my arm I set off up field sidestepping a couple of clumsy challenges. As I approached the halfway line their heavy tight head prop pounded towards me. Bracing myself I crouched low and thrust my shoulder into his midriff as I had done a few days previously with O’Hare. Much to my satisfaction, the result was the same; he too let out a loud grunt as he bounced off the energy shield landing on his backside a good eight feet from the point of impact.

Now at full speed, only their full back stood between me and the line twenty yards ahead. Swaying from side to side he held out his arms like two barriers with the obvious intention of launching himself at me as I drew near. However, out of the corner of my

eye, I spotted Dan running alongside. In a move reminiscent of Barry John, I feigned to the left drawing the full back towards me while swivelling my body and hurling the ball to my right which Dan caught and crossed the line unchallenged.

The crowd was cheering excitedly jumping up and down and thumping the air. Some of our players ran to Dan in jubilation, however, they had to contend with sections of the crowd that had surged onto the pitch to congratulate him.

If we were delirious with the outcome of the first quarter of the game, and particularly our exceptional passage of play, the Twmpath players were totally confounded by the change in fortune. What had been anticipated as a routine slaughter was inexplicably slipping away. Rarely had they trailed in a match, and certainly not to a team with a long history of heavy defeats.

Visibly deflated, the Twmpath players prepared for the restart in silence, clearly, they were rattled. Over the next ten minutes, their composure began to crack. Suddenly they lacked the crisp precision of earlier exchanges and they were increasingly being pulled out of position. Two of their players collided with each other in one attack, and knocked the ball forward on another, their confidence was rapidly draining away.

I had drifted back, positioned just in front of Dai, as their next attack gathered momentum. Inevitably the ball was passed to Smith who charged towards me snorting like a bull intent on goring his victim. I had intended to perform a simple tackle and push up field, but that changed when Smith screamed obscenities at me. "Tosser!" he yelled loudly, as he pounded the turf towards me. Now I could have stood firm, like superman and allowed him to bounce off me like a spring, and I was sorely tempted to hit this colossus - and his gutter-mouth - with all the force at my disposal. But mindful of the energy field's explosive force, and the mental link that seemingly magnified the reaction by a factor consistent with the strength of my emotions, I reluctantly crouched low and threw my shoulder towards his stomach. A moment later I heard the air being forced out of his lungs as my shoulder made contact just below his sternum, and even using proportional force, his momentum was instantly absorbed by the energy shield and he was propelled backwards with an even greater force. Once again Smith was left writhing on the ground gasping for air. As the Twmpath offensive players ran towards us I seized the ball out of Smith's arms and threw it to Dai who kicked the ball up field and into touch on their twenty-five-yard line.

"Are you okay?" I asked Smith, with a thin veneer of sympathy as he staggered to his feet. "I didn't tackle you too hard, did I? Would you like me to step aside next time?" I sniggered and continued to laugh all the way up field as I prepared for the throw-in. Payback's a bitch.

The final confrontation with Smith happened during the next scrum. As our pack formed Smith's withering gaze turned my way.

"You'll be picking bits of your nose up from the dirt after this, scrum" Smith yelled at me, red in the face with anger.

"I think he means business," said Dan seriously.

"Perhaps," I said with a quiet confidence, extremely grateful that I had the protection of the energy shield.

After both sides engaged, we waited for the ball to be thrown in during which time Smith ranted on about filling my face with his fist and then, as often happens, the scrum collapsed. As we staggered up to reform, Smith swung an almighty right hook which hit me right on the end of my nose, whereupon he immediately let out a scream of pain as it connected with the invisible protective shield. His encounter with pain took a further twist when his arm was propelled backwards with the velocity of a bullet. Unfortunately, the

jaw of his tight head prop stood in the path of his elbow, resulting in his teammate being knocked off his feet and Smith yelling out in pain a second time.

The game stopped to carry the unconscious tight head prop off to the school nurse, and the last I saw of Smith was his bulky frame trudging off the pitch with his games teacher holding his arm delicately as they walked slowly towards the school. His fist, which looked disjointed, seemed to swell visibly as they walked away. Both players were replaced by substitutes allowing the game to restart.

“What the hell happened just then?” asked Mr Jeffries running up alongside me.

“He hit me,” I replied, in mock indignation. “Luckily he missed my face and hit me in the head which hurts like hell,” I lied.

“Are you okay to carry on?” he asked, in a similarly false tone.

“Try stopping me,” I said determinedly. They would have to carry me off unconscious before I would consider being substituted in this game. This was a rugby match that would be talked about for many years, long after I had graduated, and I was determined to make a name for myself.

The two substitutes were pale shadows of the players they had replaced, and the tide of the game turned irretrievably in our favour. Aided by the incredible strength the energy shield produced, our pack won scrum after scrum and scored further tries before half time. At the whistle, we had amassed an unbelievable forty-eight points to their pathetic seven. During the interval we stood in the middle of the pitch chewing orange segments for refreshment.

“Give me a beer any time, the orange bits get caught in my teeth,” moaned Dan Platt, pulling faces like a *gurning* contestant as he used his tongue to clear the bits.’

“Morris,” shouted Mr Cropper loudly, striding across the pitch. “Are you wearing some sort of padding or taking drugs? You’re playing out of your skin.”

“No to both, and thank you, sir,” I said, smiling as he stopped in front of me.

“I swear I saw that mountain of a hooker hit you in the face, but you don’t have a mark on you. How is that possible?”

“Simple, sir,” I said, trying to sound convincing. “He hit the top of my head which has left me with a pounding headache.”

Mr Cropper just stared at me. “If you say so,” he said suspiciously, his eyes scanning my head looking for signs of impact.

“Morris, get over here and pay attention,” shouted *one cap*, as he gave his half time talk. “Hold the ball up, tackle hard and pass them out of the game.” No one was listening to his inept drivel; we eagerly wanted the game to restart. We could sense victory and it would taste so sweet after so many years of humiliation.

Jonesy kicked off to commence the second half, and shortly afterwards Twmpath’s fly-half fumbled a pass which saw the game stop to form a scrum. The ball was pinged in and I trapped it with my left foot. “Come on! Push!” I yelled, and once again we built up an unstoppable momentum. We pushed them back fifteen yards before their pack began to break up and the ball was released to Jonesy. He set off on a weaving run, side-stepping two players before passing to Evans. Like clock-work, the ball eventually reached Dave Ryder near the right-hand touchline and he ran twenty yards to score our eighth try.

We now had total control of the game.

The Twmpath players were shattered, their passing was lethargic, and no one wanted to take responsibility, they even started to argue amongst themselves.

I scored two of the next four tries, and when the whistle eventually blew, we had racked up a mind-boggling seventy-two points. Twmpath, who had failed to add to the paltry seven points they gained in the first half, trudging off the field a shattered team.

The jubilant crowd swarmed onto the pitch shouting, yelling, cheering, and punching the air to salute our victory. Each of us was surrounded by the frenzied mass, almost unable to move as they surged forward trying to touch us. We were sporting heroes.

Some hugged me, many slapped my back. I even received a couple of kisses...from girls, I may add. Tom pushed his way through the heaving throng to congratulate me.

"Steve, you were awesome!" he shouted above the din, "and I'm not the only one who thought so," he said with a big grin as Jayne appeared just behind him. She pushed past Tom and put her arm around my neck while whispering softly into my ear.

"Well played, Steve! I love a man that knows how to be physical."

I was shocked; dumbfounded, completely lost for words. "Th... th... thank you," I stuttered. "I'm glad you watched the game." Try as I may, I couldn't think of a witty response, my mind was a blank; I was fresh out of suggestive comments and double entendre. Pulling me closer, Jayne continued whispering words of lavish praise into my ear while rubbing her thigh against mine. I was inclined to blame the crowd for her movements, but she left no room for misinterpretation; there was no attempt at subtlety. Clearly, Jayne the girl of my dreams was aroused. I was stunned; this goddess was obviously turned on by testosterone-fuelled aggression, not intellectual compatibility which had formed the basis of my approach these last five years.

People continued to swarm around me and my teammates, hugging us, touching us and praising our performance. We were minor celebrities. Pupils excitedly recalled individual moments of the match asking me why I tracked Smith, how I executed certain manoeuvres, what body-building routines I employed that produced such sustained power. However, the question that was asked repeatedly was why I bore no evidence of the monster punch that Smith threw at my nose.

It was during an intense conversation with Dan Platt that Jayne touched my cheek with her hand to catch my attention; apparently, she had asked me a question that I had ignored. Turning to look at Jayne I caught sight of a group of jostling pupils positioned directly behind her, one of whom was Christine. She stood motionless, staring at me with a fixed gaze; she wasn't displaying any of the euphoria that had swept through the crowd of jubilant spectators. After a couple of seconds, she turned away quickly and moved through the pulsating crowd.

"Steve, Steve," Jayne said loudly. "Did you hear me?"

"Sorry, I couldn't hear above the cheering," I lied.

"I asked if you would like to take me to the Autumn Ball next week."

Thunderbolt seemed to follow thunderbolt this wonderful autumn afternoon. I had experienced a truly spectacular victory over our fiercest rivals, an undreamed-of assignation with an Amazonian Princess - hot with desire, and hysterical popularity possibly rivalling that of the Beatles in their heyday. And now to add to my already overflowing cup of joy, the Amazonian princess rubbing her body against mine was asking *me* to accompany her to the most eagerly awaited event of the year. I was staggered, and for the second time in a few minutes almost speechless.

"I... would be delighted," I stammered joyously. I fully expected to wake any second from this fantasy.

At length, the crowd began to break up as pupils drifted back to the school and *one cap* began to round us up. "Make your way to the changing room for the match assessment," he yelled. "The end of match assessment is an integral part of the international rugby setup," he declared pompously shortly after his arrival at St Alban's. It turned out to be as useful and informative as his grasp of tactics.

I caught sight of Dan Platt and Dave Ryder trotting towards the school gate and reluctantly pulled myself away from Jayne to follow to them. "I need to wash this mud off me and change into my uniform," I explained apologetically as I chased after them.

I experienced a bewildering array of feelings as we trotted wearily towards the changing rooms; sheer elation at crushing Twmpath, utter astonishment at Jayne's unexpected attention, and confusion at Christine's reaction to the embrace initiated by Jayne. All in all, I was thoroughly baffled.

As we entered the building many of the team were already in the showers celebrating with great whoops of joy and striking up a chorus of 'Bread of heaven,' a favourite at the Arms Park. *Bread of heaven, bread of heaven, feed me till I want no more*, they sang at the top of their voices. This was quickly followed by a round of *Ugy ugy ugy, oi oi oi*.

The Twmpath players were experiencing the other side of the coin. Crushed and humiliated they were filing into the girls changing room next door drained of all emotion. As the last of them entered the building Smith walked out already having changed following his first-half substitution. His hand was heavily bandaged.

"Is it okay?" I asked, genuinely concerned.

"Yeah, nothing broken," he replied. He hesitated for a second and then continued, "You played really well, and that's a hell of a shoulder tackle." Glancing down at his injured hand he added sheepishly, "Hope I didn't hurt your face when I punched you?"

"No, you only caught the top of my head, but I have got the mother of all headaches. You are a damn big person to stop," I said in grudging admiration. We exchanged a brief nod of acknowledgement and then headed off to our respective changing rooms before an uncomfortable silence developed.

Even though I discarded my soiled kit wearily, when the shower area started to clear I grabbed my towel and soap and walked briskly to a vacant area, I was in no mood for anatomical jokes. I was absolutely and completely knackered. When I had finished lathering myself, I stood with my back to the streaming shower in silence, the hot water cascading off the back of my neck and shoulders. I found it soothing, and the tension from the game seemed to ebb away with the relaxing effect of the water.

"Come on, superstar," said Mr Cropper, disturbing the meditation. "Get dressed I want to lock the changing room; you are the last one in here."

Reluctantly I grabbed my towel and scurried to my bench. "Sorry, Sir," I mumbled wearily, "I was lost in thought."

Later I sat patiently on the steps of the Town Hall waiting for the bus; though the steps were grubby I was thoroughly exhausted and far too tired to stand in the queue. The bus was overdue by eight minutes. Some things in this universe are a constant.

At length, a bus appeared in the distance, it eventually drew to a stop and everyone shuffled on board. I was the last passenger to clamber up the steps and moved to the back of the bus praying that it would navigate Pen-y-garn hill without mishap. The conductress was my recent accuser. She walked slowly up the aisle quizzing anyone she suspected of fare dodging. "Tickets, tickets, have you got a ticket my love?" After issuing tickets to those that had boarded the bus at the Town Hall ahead of me, she stopped at my seat.

"Single to the Beeches," I said brusquely.

"Keep your sticky hands off the window," she said sourly, as she issued the ticket and snatched the money out of my hand. I ignored her jibe lacking the strength to even to muster up a reply. However, as we passed the shops in Trevechin I duly activated the armband to check for activity. Mercifully there was no response, but I was far too shattered to care.

Slowly I disembarked at the Beeches and staggered down the hill in the direction of home. Reaching the gate, I stumbled down the steps and almost fell through the front

door. Dropping my games bag in the hall I cried out weakly, “I’m going to bed.” Somehow, I made it to my bedroom and fell onto my bed exhausted where I remained until the next morning.

CHAPTER 13

WHO'S A PRETTY BOY?

I was dimly aware of a voice calling my name, but it wasn't until mum shook me firmly that I opened my eyes. "It can't be morning already," I groaned, pulling the pillow over my head. "I don't think I can move; you will have to write me a note."

"Well it is, you can, and I will not," she replied humorously, yanking my curtains open allowing the morning light to illuminate my crypt.

After mum had left the room, I removed the pillow and reluctantly climbed out of bed. As I dressed my thoughts drifted back to yesterday, not to the momentous rugby match, though I was still extremely buoyant following Twmpath *the revenge*. Rather it was the stunning encounter with Jayne. I was still in a state of disbelief. I had worshipped this divine creature from afar since my first year at St Alban's, and now, incredibly, she sought my company. But then there was Christine.

I was lost in thought as I ate breakfast, excited by the possibility of a relationship with Jayne, and my less clear and confusing feelings for Christine. Why is life so damned complicated?

Today was one of the rare occasions that David and I caught the same bus to Pontypool; he sat at the back of the bus while I sat in one of the front seats by the window. I was glad he refused my company because it afforded me the opportunity of checking the proximity detector as we passed the shops. *All clear on the western front*, I thought, as I viewed the dormant indicator, and then I quickly deactivated the armband.

As I entered the classroom for English, I was besieged with handshakes, claps on the back and glowing accolades about my heroic performance, particularly for disabling Smith. I spent five minutes or more answering questions about aspects of the game, even Pervy Fletch joined in the discussion. However, as the lesson finally quietened down Tom leaned over to me and gave a wink. "Jayne was really impressed with your game yesterday," he whispered. "She hardly stopped talking about it on the way to school this morning; she's really looking forward to the Autumn Ball."

"I'm sure she is," I replied nonchalantly, trying to hide my excitement. "She made that abundantly clear yesterday by rubbing her body against mine." I glanced over at Christine sat in the next column of desks, she was busily scribbling text in her notebook. As she paused for thought she looked over in my direction but quickly jerked her head back again as our eyes locked. At the end of the lesson I walked over to her desk.

"Hey," I said a little awkwardly. "Did you enjoy the game yesterday?"

She gave me a weak smile, "Yes, you played well." An uncomfortable silence followed as she looked away and began to gather her books.

"Will you be at badminton on Monday?" I asked hopefully, anxious to smooth things over. I wasn't sure what was at the root of her indifferent manner.

"Probably not, why don't you ask Jayne," she replied sarcastically, narrowing her eyes in a look of contempt.

Ahh, the penny dropped.

"Look! I was really surprised when she threw her arms around me," I said pleadingly. "She hasn't spoken more than ten words to me in five years, and then suddenly she was all over me like a rash."

Susan and Carol who had been waiting patiently at the classroom door trying to earwig interrupted our conversation, "Christine, are you coming or not?" they shouted.

“I have to go,” Christine snapped, tucking her books under her arm. With that she joined her friends; however, she gave a quick backwards glance as she exited the classroom.

Later that morning Tom and I walked slowly over the Town Bridge, heading for Crane Street, the mauling of Twmpath was the subject of our discussion.

“You were really outstanding in the match yesterday. That one tackle knocked Smith off his feet as though he had been hit by a bull. How did you do that?”

“It’s all about timing and adopting the correct posture and angle of trajectory before you block the person,” I said, attempting to baffle him with sports science.

He was quiet for a second as if digesting my answer. “I suppose,” he said reluctantly, but I was not sure that he had completely swallowed the cock and bull tale.

Just below Sidoli’s lies Sandbrook and Dawe, an otherwise unremarkable hardware store but for the fact that it houses Jackdawe, a parrot famed for its command of foul language. “Shall we see if Jackdawe has learnt any new phrases?” I asked Tom, as we approached the shop entrance. Entering the building we squeezed past a couple of customers near the doorway who were busily searching through a box of screws. We walked past shelves containing a selection of hammers, saws, screwdrivers, drills and other tools neatly arranged to entice the DIY enthusiast.

At the rear of the shop, standing on an ornamental pedestal was an impressive cage containing the famous Jackdawe. A plaque on the front of the cage bore a description of Jackdawe and his native surroundings; finally, it ended with the words, ‘As seen on TV.’ This was no ordinary parrot; he was a minor celebrity and had been the subject of a couple of television snippets due to his large vocabulary of vulgar phrases and expletives.

I peered through the bars of Jackdawe’s cage to make eye contact with Pontypool’s most famous tropical bird; however, he paid me no heed as he pecked around the floor of his cage trying to eat the smaller seeds with his hooked beak. However, Tom gained his attention when he whistled three high pitched notes in quick succession; Jackdawe stopped pecking and looked up. He fixed his gaze on Tom who whistled three additional notes, and then Jackdawe finally spoke. “Bugger off you pervert,” he screeched in a strangulated voice which caused me and Tom to burst out laughing.

“It seems to know all about you Tom,” I giggled.

“Fat arse, fat arse,” squawked Jackdawe.

“It also knows Mrs Bovill,” Tom laughed.

A group of customers had joined Tom and me, and over the next few minutes Jackdawe played to the gallery puffing out his green and yellow plumage as he screeched out a string of curses and profanities. Tom and I eventually tired of the *Jackdawe show* and left the building to the strain of ‘Rule Britannia,’ followed by more rude suggestions.

“Do you think it’s even physically possible to perform the act that Jackdawe yelled?” he asked in horror as we made our way to our favourite haunt.

“If it is, you wouldn’t walk for a week,” I replied, cringing at the thought.

“Two coffees please Louisa,” I said, as we passed the counter. “We’ll be out the back playing the pinball machines.”

“Where else would you be?” she replied sarcastically.

TIME TRAVEL ON A SATURDAY

“You are up late!” remarked my mother as I walked into the kitchen. “It’s Saturday morning,” I declared bleary-eyed, “I deserved a lie in after the rugby match on Thursday.” I slumped onto a kitchen chair stretching and yawning, it was past midday and I had things to do. The Autumn Ball was scheduled for mid-October, only six days away, and I still had to raise a sizeable amount of money to purchase some nice togs.

“Mum,” I said, in a sickeningly sweet voice, “can you lend me twenty pounds? I need a new suit for the ball on Friday.”

“Yes, dear,” she replied, matter-of-fact, “and you can borrow the Bentley to go to the ball. No horse and carriage for you Cinders.”

“There’s no need to be funny about it,” I said sharply, giving her a hard stare. “It’s not a laughing matter I have to look good.”

“Not with my money,” she replied, laughing at the serious look on my face.

“Actually,” I continued angrily, “I need to have a haircut today and return a couple of books to the library.” This was no lie, I did want my hair styled and the books were due to be returned, just not this week.

“Alright,” I replied pragmatically, lowering my tone and thinking on my feet. “What’s the chance of three quid to pay for my hair and books?” I looked pleadingly at her; this was the bare minimum needed to finance the ingenious solution to my cash flow problem.

Mum searched for her purse and fingered the change inside it. “Here’s two and a half pounds,” she said surely. Mum is still coming to terms with decimalisation and hasn’t quite grasped the concept of one hundred new pence to a pound. She still pines for guineas, ten-shilling notes and the half-crown piece. “That was real money,” she would often be heard to mutter, “not like this European funny money.”

One hour later I was dressed and ready to make my way to town. As I climbed the steps, I received a final reminder, “And make sure he cuts a sizeable amount,” she shouted after me as I reached the gate.

I had accumulated nearly three pounds throughout the week by saving most of my dinner money and bus fare, which added to four pounds remaining from my conker annihilation, I had a total exceeding ten pounds when I walked into the Yew Tree.

“Hi Dave, hi John,” I said cheerfully, as I sat down at their table nestling in the corner of the room directly in front of the television. The television was suspended by a bracket on the wall and according to Dave was the best seat in the house. Dave, brother of the delectable Diane, is twenty-one and can always be found in the Yew Tree on a Saturday afternoon, drinking and watching the horse racing. However, he is galvanised into action when a horse takes his fancy, dashing next door to the betting office to place a wager. He claims to have reliable inside knowledge of a horse’s form, allegedly passed to him by a friend that works at the stables in Monmouth.

“Are you here for a pint Steve?” he asked quietly.

“Yes, and to watch the racing before I visit the barbers in town,” I replied casually.

Dave began to laugh. “Has your mum been nagging you to have your hair cut again?” He knew how unshakeable mum’s resolve could become when it came to shearing time. I just shrugged my shoulders, resigned to a few inches being taken off my golden locks.

“Three horses to look out for,” he said with a knowledgeable wink: “Storeman in the one-forty, Ever Ready in the two-ten and Treetop the 14-1 outsider in the two-forty at Kempton.”

John, a lifelong friend of Dave, is an infinitely more serious punter who usually has a quick pint in the Yew Tree, and then camps out in the betting office each Saturday afternoon until the final race of the day. He wins more often than he loses, and like Dave boasts insider knowledge. True to form at one-thirty he downed the last of his pint and wiping his top lip with the back of his hand, departed for his afternoon pilgrimage to the bookies next door.

Moving to a table near the exit Dave and I watched the televised races while supping a pint of PA, though cigarette and cigar smoke created a mist that partially shrouded the screen. Eagerly I watched the proceedings and was greatly impressed when all three horses crossed the winning post in first place, just as Dave had predicted.

“If I had put ten quid on those three in an accumulator, how much would I have won Dave?” I asked hypothetically.

He stared up at the ceiling for a minute or so muttering numbers and calculating odds.

“One hundred and forty-eight pounds, after tax,” he said triumphantly. A surge of excitement swept over me as I finished my pint. I thanked Dave and left the bar.

“Time to try the time travel function,” I announced triumphantly to myself as I walked through the swing gate.

Earlier, I had performed my daily check with the armband as I loitered around the shops on my way to the Yew Tree. Predictably all was still quiet, which was fortuitous. Today offered a suitable opportunity to test the cream of the armband functions – time travel.

I walked down into the woods and ducked behind a cluster of trees and bushes checking that I was alone. Satisfied that I was free from prying eyes I looked at the armband focussing on the date indicator. It looked simple enough, needing just date and time coordinates. I set the date to 16101971, the current date, and checked the time on my watch. It was one minute after three, and as I anticipated needing at least two hours to accomplish my task; I set the time indicator to one o’clock. I took a very nervous deep breath, screwed my eyes tightly, and apprehensively pressed the time travel button.

I had no idea of what to expect, would I be aware of the move through time as my atoms separated? Would I experience feelings of exhilaration or near unconsciousness? In the end, it proved somewhat of an anti-climax, as I was unaware of any sensation. I opened my eyes and looked around, there appeared to be no change to my surroundings. No futuristic flying machines dotted the sky, and the rural surroundings appeared ... well, rural. I was hidden by the same trees and bushes that I had stepped behind only moments ago. Glancing down at the time indicator on the armband I was reassured to see that it was still set to one o’clock. Now for the moment of truth. Nervously I raised my wrist to look at my watch. I gasped at the sight that met my eyes; the hands read... one o’clock. I had really travelled through time, albeit only a couple of hours. A chill suddenly ran down my back as I was hit by a sobering thought - it might well be one o’clock, but in which year?

I hurried up to the top of the field and through the swing gate. Nervously I approached the pub and edged my way to the first window through which I peered cautiously. Inside everything looked normal, the customers I had left only minutes ago were sat in the same positions they had occupied when I had entered earlier. I spotted John and Dave sat beneath the television talking to someone. As their companion turned his head to look at the television, I was able to study his features more closely which caused me to gasp in surprise. My legs nearly buckled from under me; in fact, I had to support myself on the windowsill to prevent myself from crashing to the ground in astonishment. Dave was talking to ... me. Stunned, I recoiled away from the window and pressed myself against the wall hoping that no one in the bar saw me; my mind was in turmoil, what had I done? A few minutes ago, to the best of my knowledge, there was only one Steve Morris in Trevethin, but now two of us existed, one inside the Yew Tree and the other outside.

Each morning I look at the mirror and my reflection peers back at me. However, two separate, living, breathing Morris’s in the same location was anything but normal, and too confusing for me to grasp. From deep within my mind a voice screamed at me, *Cloaking device, turn on the cloaking device, fat head.* I fumbled with the buttons on the armband momentarily unable to remember which of the buttons controlled the various functions. For an instant, I thought about pressing them all, what was the worst that could happen? Perhaps I would fly through time, cloaked and with the energy shield enabled. Or time and space would implode. Thankfully the fog surrounding my thinking abilities started to

evaporate and I quickly pressed the correct button before retracing my steps through the swing gate, running swiftly towards the safety of the woods.

When I was certain that no one had followed me, and that I was completely alone, I searched for a secluded spot where I could sit and attempt to make sense of the last few minutes. In amongst a group of trees, I found a few boulders and promptly slumped onto the nearest.

I was disturbed by the realisation that time travel during my lifetime presented the very real possibility of meeting another me, two Morrises in the same time and space. A feeling of dismay washed over me as the awful question of consequences ran through my mind. What would happen if I had touched the other me? Can the same atoms exist in the same space and time without creating a paradox, and if so, what would be the outcome? Would one or both of me disappear? Would one or both of me explode, implode, or die a similarly horrible death? The thought was too gruesome to contemplate, however, I decided there and then to refrain from testing my theory. The answer was simple, avoid my other self or use the cloaking device.

Glancing at my watch I realised that the first of the three races that would bankroll my new togs was due to start in less than twenty minutes which provided me with a predicament, how could I place my money on the accumulator?

At sixteen I could buy a pint in most pubs around Pontypool and Trevethin; unfortunately, the bookies were far less accommodating. I had to find someone older that knew how to play the system, a regular. Instantly a face flashed through my mind... John. He would willingly place my bet and deliver the winnings without a second thought. However, that left predicament number two, could I catch him as he left the Yew Tree to walk the ten yards to the betting office next door. I jumped up and sprinted through the woods and out into the field, I had a maximum of three or four minutes to reach John before he disappeared for the afternoon into the inner sanctum. Reaching the top of the field, I manoeuvred quickly through the gate and stopped just before the entrance to the Yew Tree, where I stood puffing and panting waiting for John to appear. Timing would be crucial. I had to catch his attention after he passed by the Yew Tree so that he couldn't accidentally catch a glimpse of the other me through one of the bar windows as we talked, but before he entered the betting office - or turf accountants, their preferred title.

The creaking hinges of the bar entrance door acted as an alert; someone was leaving the bar. I knew it would be John as he was the only person to leave the bar while I sat talking to Dave earlier. Still cloaked, I watched as John emerged into the courtyard heading for the betting office. Silently I followed him and as we passed the last window, I deactivated the cloak and called out quietly, "John." He swung around to face me, clearly alarmed.

"Steve, you frightened the crap out of me, stop sneaking around," he exclaimed angrily. Giggling at the surprised look on his face I offered a quick apology and then asked him to place the ten pounds accumulator, quickly reeling off the names of the three nags.

"I'll pop my head around the door to collect any winnings when I pass by on my way back from town around three o'clock?" I said nonchalantly, while lowering my voice as someone does when sharing confidential information, "I am approaching you as I don't want Dave to know that I am placing a large bet, it would probably get back to my mum and then I really would be in trouble."

John readily agreed to my proposition, and after parting with the said amount, I watched as he entered the betting shop. Quickly I activated the cloak, I felt uneasy being this close to another me. Heaven knows how I would explain away two Steve Morrises if

confronted by anyone in the Yew Tree. Though on second thoughts double vision is probably normal for many of its customers.

At two-fifty-eight, I approached the Yew Tree and opened the bookies door, a cloud of smoke billowed out half choking me in the process. *Perhaps inhaling large amounts of smoke is part of the ritual when worshipping at the altar of avarice*, I thought, as I coughed twice trying to clear my lungs. I peered into the dark, gloomy, smoke-filled room trying to spot John. A dozen or more punters stood huddled together looking up at the overhead monitor positioned in the corner of the room, completely engrossed in the closing stages of a race.

“John,” I shouted loudly, attempting to be heard above the excited voice of the commentator who was yelling feverishly as the horses approached the finish line. I waited a few moments to allow the cheers and cries of anguish to die down before calling his name again. This time a figure turned and walked towards me, as he walked into the light flooding in through the open door, I recognised the tall figure of John, his long brown straggly hair hanging limply over his shoulders. He closed the door behind him before pulling a wad of notes out from his shirt pocket. “You lucky bugger,” he said playfully, as he handed me my ill-gotten gains. “One hundred and forty-eight pounds; spend it well.”

I grabbed the money eagerly and thumbed through the notes. “Here John, the drinks are on me,” I said, handing him a fiver like some high roller living it up in Las Vegas. Slapping me on the back in appreciation John re-entered the betting office. As the door closed, I activated the cloaking device and trotted down through Church Wood. This was turning out to be a great day; I had enough for a haircut, a shirt and a suit for the ball, plus a little nest egg for the coming weeks.

By five o’clock I was sat on the bus home clutching a stylish dark blue suit from John Colliers, *the window to watch* according to the television adverts. A white shirt, a dark blue tie and a pair of black shoes completed my new outfit. I was ready for the most important evening of my school life.

The final purchase of the afternoon was a big box of Cadburys chocolates for mum as a ‘thank you’ for her loving efforts, and a bribe. When I presented her with the chocolates mum was thrilled. “It’s been a long time since a young man has given me chocolates,” she said, with a tear in her eye, “How did you manage to afford these on two and a half pounds?” I had concocted a believable explanation on my way home which I now began to relate.

“I won a sizeable amount on the one arm bandit in Sidolli’s mum.” With a smile, I returned the money she had given me earlier.

“You know I don’t agree with gambling,” she scolded me, but I could tell that she wasn’t really annoyed. “However, on this occasion,” she continued, “you are forgiven,” and gave me a big hug.

SUNDAY DINNER AT TOMS

Later that evening I caught a bus to the Town Hall and connected with the six-thirty to Abergavenny, I was eagerly anticipating an overnight stay at Toms. Earlier in the week, during a tension-filled battle on the pinball machine, Tom surprised me with an invitation to spend Sunday at his house. I willingly agreed. Unfortunately, even the regional bus service has a late start on a Sunday morning, which is why I had to spend Saturday night at his house. I saw no reason to wear the armband while at Toms. O’Hare lives ten miles to the South in Cwmbran and I didn’t envisage trouble of a physical nature, so I cloaked the armband and hid it in the bottom of my wardrobe.

By seven-thirty I was walking through Abergavenny town centre where Tom met me at the Cenotaph, a large memorial structure listing the names of local lads that had

tragically perished in the two world wars. I related the tale of my large win that day but omitted the true extent of my financial good fortune. I told Tom that my success on the one-arm bandit amounted to fifty pounds which was still a handsome amount to jobless students like us.

When we reached his house, Tom's mum was sat in an easy chair deeply engrossed in a new show on BBC1, *The Generation Game*. Watching contestants trying to imitate professional dancers, or display the culinary skills of Fanny Cradock, was mildly amusing but nothing special. "I remember watching Bruce Forsyth on Sunday night at the London Palladium," recalled Toms mum. "He's a very good dancer and has a passable voice," she reminisced, as the programme ended.

"Yeah but the prizes are naff," Tom interjected, "I would want more than an alarm clock and a cuddly bear to make an arse of myself on the television," he grunted, clearly unimpressed. "Come on Steve, let's go out for a fag," Tom said, walking towards the patio doors at the rear of the room. Shocked, I looked straight at his mum expecting her to explode in fury as my mum would surely have done, but she just smiled.

"Do you smoke as well Steve?" she asked politely. I nodded nervously, "Here use mine," she offered, handing me a packet of Peter Stuyvesant, Tom's favourites.

My jaw dropped in astonishment. "Thanks," I whispered taking two from the pack before handing it back.

"This is surreal," I muttered to Tom, as we stood in his back-garden puffing on his mum's fags. "My mother would have had a coronary if she harboured even a suspicion that I smoked. Your mum's a star," I declared in admiration.

We went to bed around eleven-fifteen but lay awake talking about school and the upcoming Ball in particular. That led to reassessing the mental list of potential belles upon whom we would bestow our favour.

"Jayne is fortunate that I have an opening in my extremely hectic social calendar next Friday you know Tom," I yawned.

"Yes, it must tire you out being so popular," Tom replied sarcastically, "I can only juggle five girls at one time myself." He giggled quietly as he visualised himself with five passionate bikini-clad ladies. "I heard there are awards for the best-dressed man and most glamorous woman."

"Really," I replied, with a lack of interest. "I'll go for the best-dressed man; you go for the other award."

"Haw, haw, haw," Tom replied sourly, curling his top lip.

It was my turn to laugh quietly as I too conjured a picture in my mind. However, my mental image involved Tom in a pink tutu.

A silence descended for a moment, and then we moved swiftly on to more important matters, such as United's narrow victory over Derby earlier in the day.

"Frank O'Farrell seems to have rejuvenated United," Tom said, "I think we could win the league this season." It was hard to disagree as the team had unexpectedly embarked on a winning streak; however, it was an ageing team and Besty, Dennis and Bob were living on borrowed time.

"I just don't think an East Midland's yokel should be running our team," I answered gloomily. "They should have begged Cloughy - he's far more impressive than O'Farrell," I concluded.

Though I felt tired, yawning regularly, I found sleep to be elusive. Tom had fallen asleep shortly after we proclaimed that United were odds on favourites to win the league, even with O'Farrell in charge, and was snoring softly. The unfamiliar surroundings of Tom's bedroom, the creaking floorboards, the windows rattling in the wind, and a noisy toilet cistern aided by my overactive imagination disturbed me each time I started to drift

off. Sleep must have come around three o'clock, as my last time check was at two-forty-five.

The next morning, we awoke around ten o'clock, and after dressing, made our way down for breakfast, following the mouth-watering smell of bacon and coffee to the kitchen. Tom's mum had prepared bacon and eggs with sausages and fried bread which we devoured ravenously.

"You're an excellent cook Mrs Maxwell," I said in appreciation.

"Thank you dear, but you haven't tasted dinner yet," she joked, busying herself collecting the empty plates.

Following our late breakfast, Tom and I took Suzie, the family Scottish terrier, for a leisurely walk into Abergavenny. It was more of a crawl than a walk because of her extremely short legs, exacerbated by her insistence to mark every bush, tree and lamp post that she passed. We encountered a few of Tom's former junior school friends, James and Adam, as we approached the open-air market. We milled around by the empty pens and stalls for ages while they discussed mundane issues. I smiled occasionally as they recalled funny events and talked about people that I didn't know. I even found myself nodding in agreement as they lavished praise on Abergavenny Thursday, the local football team, following their four-goal thrashing of Pontypool United earlier in the week. When they progressed to ridiculing Pontypool and everything associated with the town, I smiled awkwardly, but had to bite my tongue more than once. As they departed Tom uttered a quiet apology. "Sorry Steve, they are very enthusiastic about our local footie team, glad they didn't ask you where you lived."

I wasn't particularly bothered by their provincial attitude and changed the subject. "Don't fret about it Tom, Thursday are hardly Manchester United, are they?" Suzie caught our attention as she cocked her leg for the umpteenth time signalling yet another delay as she marked her territory, and then sniffed to check for consistency and coverage.

"What are you going to do about Jayne?" Tom asked, as we waited patiently.

"I haven't the faintest idea Tom," I replied, uncertainly. "I think I'll take her to the Ball and see what develops."

Eventually, Tom, Suzie and I arrived back at his house and spent the next hour or so playing cards while his mum was setting the table. I was a little surprised when she asked me what type of beer I drank. "Any beer I can get my hand on Mrs Maxwell," I replied cheekily.

"Tom usually has a couple of bottles with his Sunday lunch, would you like one?" she asked politely.

I was astonished. "Yes, please," I replied eagerly, as a large grin spread over my face. "Tom," I whispered quietly, "your mum is wonderful, not only does she let you smoke, she also buys you beer for Sunday lunch."

When I arrived home later that evening, I related the day's events, omitting any reference to nicotine products of course. "Mrs Maxwell even lets him have beer with his food," I said, glancing hopefully in mum's direction.

She looked up slowly from the magazine she was reading. "The best you are going to get here is lemonade," she said icily, returning to her magazine.

Yeah, that seems about right, I thought with a sigh of resignation.

SHOULDER RUB

I was walking aimlessly up Park Lane on a bright and breezy Monday morning when someone called my name. "Steve, wait for me." As I turned the figure of Chris Powell panting heavily approached in a great hurry.

“Are you going to join us on Friday? I need to know as there are only two seats left in the minibus.” Chris is the class anarchist; he regularly joins anti-war rallies, protests and demonstrations. His latest passion is the Vietnam War and the American Imperialist suppression of the Socialist agricultural peasants. He badgers anyone that will listen, viewing us as recruits to the cause. He claims to have read *The Thoughts of Chairman Mao*, and frequently peppers sentences with phrases such as ‘Imperialist War Mongers,’ or ‘Bourgeois Capitalist Domination.’ Most of us couldn’t even spell such lofty definitions; much less form an intelligent debate on them.

“I don’t think attending a protest rally in Hyde Park will influence the Americans to withdraw from Vietnam, Chris,” I replied awkwardly. I knew that my excuse sounded a little lame, but I didn’t relish the long journey into Central London only to listen to the anti-war pacifists drone on about American aggression, undoubtedly in the pouring rain, if the British weather held true to form.

“You’re hiding your head in the sand if you don’t think that American puppet, Heath, won’t send British troops to join Australia and New Zealand - Commonwealth countries don’t forget. And how long do you think it will be before conscription is introduced?” Chris was now in full flow, nostril flaring; jaw clenched angrily. His long greasy hair was blowing in his face as the wind gusted up the lane causing him to swat it away from his eyes between sentences.

“I thought Australia and New Zealand were pulling out of Vietnam?” I said a little puzzled. “Didn’t they announce that on the television the other night?”

Chris was suddenly lost for words. “Err ... it’s a political ploy, you mark my words.”

Mercifully, Chris had to break off the conversation as we had arrived at his registration class leaving me to head for mine, a very relieved man.

Never was a lesson so keenly anticipated as Maths. Today Miss Stephens looked delightful in a short blue dress. She seemed to have caught on to our ploy of asking her to explain the process of various functions so that we could stare down her cleavage; increasingly she used the black board to demonstrate how this was achieved. As normal the boys filled the front desks to catch a glimpse of her underwear when she sat atop the desk, but even this failed to capture my attention this morning as I was deeply engrossed in trying to form a solution to the problem of Jayne and Christine. “Steven,” she said shaking my shoulder, startling me. “Are you with us this morning?” Everyone was staring in my direction awaiting my reply.

“Sorry Miss Stephens,” I said quickly trying to think of an excuse. “Err, did you watch the match last week?”

“Yes, I did,” she replied softly. “What does that have to do with your lack of attention?”

“I think I tore a muscle in my shoulder, and I have been taking painkillers to dull the pain, but the side effects make me drowsy,” I lied, staring longingly into her eyes for sympathy.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” she said, quickly snatching her hand away from my shoulder to avoid causing further pain to an already painful area.

“Actually, your warm hand was quite soothing,” I replied. “Could you put it back for a few seconds?” I must have sounded genuine as she did as I asked. “Could you just rub it a little?” I added hopefully. Incredibly she complied with my request and began to rub it gently.

“Is that the right spot?” she asked tenderly.

Suddenly a voice from the back shattered the magic of the moment. “Oh yeah, rub it baby, rub it harder. Oh yeah that’s the spot baby.”

Miss Stephens recoiled, snapping her hand to her side. "That's enough of that," she said sternly. "Get on with your work, and whoever made those thoughtless comments, please try to have a little more sympathy for Steven's injury."

The class roared with laughter. Tom slipped out of his chair dramatically and onto the floor howling. I tried desperately to stifle my laughter, but I exploded into a fit of the giggles and had to wipe away the tears as they ran down my cheeks.

As we packed up at the end of the lesson, Tom turned to me, "You know, Miss Stephens is a fine-looking bird, but she doesn't have much upstairs, does she?" I nodded in agreement as I pondered on how long the charade might have continued but for some killjoy at the back of the room.

"Are you alright now Steven?" Miss Stephens asked as we passed her desk.

"Yes, and thanks for the therapy Miss Stephens," I said grinning, as we exited the classroom heading for 2a and English with *pervy* Fletch.

Tom and I were followed by Jonesy, Williams and Platt who ribbed me the entire length of the corridor. "Can I rub you harder Stevie?" they cried in unison in high pitch falsetto voices.

"Is there anything else you would like me to rub Stevie?" asked Dan Platt suggestively.

"Yeah baby, rub this," shouted Jonsey, in a deep voice gyrating and thrusting his hips obscenely.

"Okay," I shouted. "It seems to me that you are all just a little bit jealous." As they began to quieten down, I continued in a reflective tone. "I've given it some thought, maybe rubbing my shoulder was symbolic of a subconscious desire to rub the more manly parts of the rugby team hero." With that, I sprinted away as I knew they would want to exact revenge by childishly tugging my trousers down or giving me a nipple twist. They were boys in the presence of a man.

Reaching the English room, I slowed to a walk, but my three detractors caught up and deliberately collided with me thrusting me into the room with enough force for Mr Fletcher to look up from his work. "Are you in a hurry Steven?"

The *three monkeys* giggled as they entered the room behind me and sat down at their chosen desks. "His shoulder is sore from the match last week and I think he wants you to rub it Sir," shouted one of the wags.

"If that's the case he needs to visit the school nurse," replied Mr Fletcher sternly. "Please be seated and remain quiet until your classmates arrive."

The lesson was long and uneventful and as the bell sounded, signalling the end of English, I hurriedly packed my books into my bag, the desire to speak to Christine was overwhelming. I squeezed between the queues of pupils trying to rush out of the classroom and stopped at her desk.

"Christine," I said quietly, but loud enough to attract her attention. "Will you be at Badminton tonight?"

Unhurriedly, she finished packing her bag before looking up at me slowly. "Why would you want to know?" she asked coldly, with a face like stone.

I was about to apologise once again when my patience snapped. "Forget I asked," I said angrily, and turning on my heels I stomped out of the classroom.

I was miserable for the rest of the day barely paying attention in Music and Biology, and I was relieved to hear the final bell that signalled freedom.

"See you tomorrow Steve," said Tom, as we parted company at the main entrance to the Science building.

“Yeah,” I grunted, as I turned to make my way to the gates at the top of the school grounds. I needed to clear my head and a walk-through Church Wood seemed as good a way as any.

I joined the mass exodus walking out through the school gates towards the Town Bridge. Pupils jostled for position, some barged past and others squeezed around the fringes of the mass. Lost in thought I followed the surge forward and had almost reached the end of the lane when I became aware of someone calling my name. Looking around I saw Christine a few paces behind me, she was attempting to push through the bodies that stood in her way.

“I need to talk to you,” she said loudly. Her soft voice was strained as she tried to be heard above the noise generated by exuberant pupils that had just been set free.

“Okay,” I replied somewhat surprised at her appearance. “Move to the side,” I shouted as I edged towards the stone wall protecting the side of the bridge.

“I’m sorry for being bitchy this morning,” she said apologetically. She looked sad and vulnerable as she searched my eyes for a reaction. “I’ve liked you for such a long time and I was overcome with jealousy when I saw you being cuddled by the *Black Widow*.” I gave her a puzzled look. “That’s what the girls call Jayne the *man-eater*,” she explained. She acts aloof and distant, slowly enticing the boy she fancies, and then traps him in her web.’

I smiled at Christine’s fanciful description of Jayne. “You may be right, she was the one that initiated the intimate contact, and yet she had ignored me for years.”

Christine moved closer as we talked. “I will be at badminton tonight and if you attend you can partner me for the whole evening,” she said, her hand lingering on my arm.

I smiled and nodded eagerly in agreement. “I’d be honoured,” I replied, bowing my head like a commoner in the presence of royalty. Her face broke out into a broad smile, large enough to lift the gloom that had enveloped me since our encounter earlier in the day. With a final squeeze of my arm, she turned and joined the now thinning crowd crossing the Town Bridge.

As I began the tiresome journey up Pen-y-garn Hill I played out various scenarios in my mind. I imagined Jayne hot with desire, kissing me in a passionate embrace, Christine breathless with excitement lying in my arms. Fantasy’s for the moment maybe, but who knows what promise they held. If only I could see into the future ... oh wait a moment, I can.

Chapter 14

CAUGHT OUT IN THE OPEN

I walked slowly up through Church Wood taking in the beauty around me. Looking up I was struck by the wondrous variety of leaf colours. Autumn gold's, browns and reds, orange and yellows, contrasted by a clear blue sky, I could have been looking at a picture postcard.

The birds, too, were playing their part in this panorama. Blackbirds and Thrush's singing and chirping in unison joined occasionally by Chaffinch's in this symphony of song. Now you may wonder how I can identify the variety of flying creatures engaged in song in what could easily be mistaken for a scene in a Walt Disney extravaganza. Simple, *the Boy Scout Guide to British Birds*, a Christmas present several years ago when I was going through my 'fascination with birds' stage. It was accompanied by the 1968 Beano annual; I seem to recall. And in essence, I am still fascinated by birds, but now it's the featherless, long-legged sort.

I started to whistle the main theme of the Moldau as I approached the end of the wood leading to the open field at the back of the Yew Tree, life was extraordinarily good.

Suddenly, and without warning, the hairs on the back of my neck stood up. I froze as a feeling of panic swept over me. I felt like a rabbit in the open caught in the headlights of a car or the cross hairs of a sniper's rifle. Something was terribly wrong. I was aware that I had stopped, too terrified to move. I closed my eyes and held my breath as I strained to listen, trying to filter out the bird song and trees rustling in the gentle autumn breeze.

Perhaps ten seconds passed before a voice from behind me said: "It's the nanites alerting you to my presence." I spun around ready to confront whoever had stealthily crept up behind me ... but there was no one. I spun a further 360 degrees.

"Damn it!" I cried, scrambling and diving into the undergrowth to my right. Seeking shelter, I frantically crawled behind a large tree. How could I have been so careless? I had been caught unawares because my head was full of love songs. "You stupid love-struck dolt," I shouted angrily at myself as I slowly moved my head to glance out at the path from which I had just fled, but it was empty.

What a day to leave the armband at home, I thought to myself in frustration. Dressing, without attaching the armband this morning had seemed the most natural thing to do; I hadn't missed it until mid-morning, far too late to retrieve it from the bottom of my wardrobe.

"How long do you believe you can hide from me," asked the voice?

He sounded very close. I slumped back against the tree letting out a long sigh. "Okay," I said, resigned to defeat, "you have me at a disadvantage. Who are you? What do you want? And for god's sake show yourself."

"My name is Jedzeel," said the voice. "I am deactivating my cloaking device as you have requested."

An immense figure materialised about eight feet away from my position. Jedzeel was around six and a half feet in height with the build of a large powerful rugby player. His dark features and tight curly hair suggested he was of African descent. He wore body armour similar in design to that which Officer Number Sixteen had worn. However, his padded uniform was red and bore no markings other than a three-bar insignia on both shoulder pads.

Jedzeel stepped forward and stretched his hand out in greeting. "I have been watching you since your use of time travel a few days ago, it activated an alarm which placed you in this location," he explained, with a broad smile.

“I wasn’t aware of your presence,” I said testily. “Why hasn’t the proximity detector picked you up, I only checked it Saturday?”

“The nanites in your cortex emit a short-range power wave which bounces back if anyone with similar technology encroaches within a ten-meter radius, rather like your native bats. Unfortunately, I strayed too near just now and you detected me,” he said, his face still fixed with a smile. “The armband you have been using is an early model that has a low-grade power source which limits its functionality that is why the detector failed to perform in the manner you expected.”

Jedzeel continued with his introduction. “I am limited in the amount of information that I can reveal to you, however, I am an officer with the Temporal Directorate. It is my job, and others like me, to identify anomalies that occur in the timeline. As a result of your movement in time a few days ago an alarm was raised which I was sent to investigate.” Looking around he took my arm and led me further into the woods. “We need privacy to discuss the circumstances relating to your acquisition of secret, highly sophisticated technology. Tell me everything, leave nothing out no matter how small the detail,” he said seriously. “This breach of protocol is considered so serious that the Directorate facility is under lockdown and all temporal activity has been suspended. Such is the gravity of this situation,” he added in a sombre tone.

I began by relating the circumstances of my encounter with Officer Number Sixteen and the disk he gave me for safe keeping. I told him how the body of the dead thief was transported back to the 25th century using a tracer and how Officer Number Sixteen eventually died of his wounds.

As I had no way of determining whether this time traveller was the genuine article or just the latest conman spinning his bit of yarn in a growing web of deceit, I made no mention to Jedzeel that I had viewed the contents of the disks. My gut instinct was all that I had to rely on.

Recently I had given considerable thought to my next encounter with folk from future days and had made several assumptions. Realistically, I would be viewed as *scientifically primitive* by anyone born five centuries from now, much in the way I would view the scientific comprehension of a person from the Elizabethan era.

And then there was the *need to know* principle. If secrecy was of paramount importance during the cold war with the Soviet Union in my era, how much more that would apply in their dealings with a *scientifically primitive* ancestor. I also fully expected a demand for the return of the armband as they would surely wish to remove all evidence of their temporal activities.

Finally, what do you do with someone who knows too much? I could think of only four options: Do nothing. Commit the individual to an institution. Erase their memory or erase them. *Please God let it be option one*, I prayed. I didn’t much like the thought of the other options.

My fragile strategy hung on three critical elements: An extremely cautious response to questions. A suspicious consideration when answers and explanations were offered. And crucially, divulge nothing until absolutely certain that I am dealing with the right people, because until my gut tells me otherwise I would not be returning the armband and disks to any Tom Dick or Harry claiming to be guardians of a tedious timeline.

As I concluded my version of events, I posed one of three loaded questions that I hoped would make my *spidey-sense* tingle if answered falsely. It works every time for Peter Parker.

“So, was he really a timeline protector as he claimed?” I asked Jedzeel innocently. I waited with bated breath, searching his face for the faintest sign of deception. Anything less than total conviction would surely point to a lie. I was watching for a flicker in his

eyes, hesitation in his voice, a wandering gaze, his body language, something that might give him away. Similarly, confirmation of Officer Number Sixteen's spurious claim of law enforcement would surely indicate collusion, perhaps as colleagues or even rivals.

Of course, my logic wasn't fool proof; the *need to know* principle might preclude further details in a damage limitation exercise. Conversely, a denial could just as easily be a bluff. Hopefully, my *spider-sense* would know.

"Yes, he was an officer with twelve years distinguished service," he said unwaveringly, his eyes giving nothing away. "He will be missed by many of his colleagues, but particularly by his wife and two children." His voice was reduced to barely a whisper as he made mention of Officer Number Sixteen's family and his face was suddenly contorted in apparent grief. My heart sank; my *spider-sense* told me that once again I was subject to 25th-century deceit. I too could put on my best poker face as I gave a sympathetic nod of condolence. A few seconds of silent respect followed.

Jedzeel broke the silence as he took a kick at a rock sending it hurtling through the undergrowth in an act of frustration, whether choreographed or genuine, I was unsure.

"Do you still have the disk?" he asked angrily. "His death must not be without purpose." His face now wore an expression of fierce determination.

"Of course, I have the disk," I replied, my voice displaying a hint of indignation as if the question had hurt my feelings and had questioned my integrity. "I kept it safe just as your colleague requested before he died."

The sincerity of my reply appeared to soften Jedzeel's tone. "Excellent," he said more calmly. "Where have you stored it?"

"In a safe location," I promptly replied. "No one has access to the locked secure unit in which I have stored it." *Unless mum has the key to my wardrobe*, I thought silently to myself.

Seemingly content with my explanation Jedzeel changed the subject. "Of course, I will also have to confiscate your armband," he stated officiously. "It is unthinkable for you or anyone else in this time period to have unrestricted access to time travel. I shudder to think of the consequences," he added, shaking his head in disbelief.

It was time for loaded question number two.

"What would the reaction be back at HQ if I told you that I have lost the armband?" I gritted my teeth, prepared for a lashing.

There was a moments silence, his mouth fell open and his eyes widened.

"Lost? How can it be lost? You used it only two days ago. How could you lose such a valuable resource? You must be mistaken," he said, a hint of panic creeping into his voice.

I coughed nervously. "No, I'm afraid that it's, err ... missing. I stayed at my friend's home yesterday, as you may be aware, and I hid the armband at the bottom of my old toy box. When I arrived home last night, I found that my mother had given the box of old toys to someone who was trawling the area collecting for the local hospitals. The only comfort is that no one can use it without the command codes and nano technology," I added meekly. "Don't you have the means to track its power source?"

He deliberated for a few seconds, scowling and muttering under his breath before answering. "This is most regrettable. Though it is unusable, the power pack could still pose a significant danger if not disposed of properly. But my principle concern lies with the scientists of this time period, that they do not become aware of its existence. Unfortunately, many things prevent me from locating it in this polluted, radioactive century. How your generation survived the great chemical and nuclear age is a mystery."

He shook his head and breathed a deep sigh. "There are other obstacles such as shielded buildings, underground facilities and the many power stations and cables

supported by large metal structures so prevalent in this period. Regardless, the disk containing the location of the plutonium that my dead colleague gave you is vitally important, so without delay please journey to your home and retrieve it for me; I do not wish to remain in this time any longer than is necessary.”

I climbed to my feet, struggling to gain my balance on one of the tree’s large roots exposed by many years of erosion.

“Yes of course,” I responded, as I started off in the direction of the path I had taken earlier. I stopped after five or six paces and turned to face Jedzeel. “What was your colleague’s name? After witnessing his brave sacrifice I’d like to know his name.”

Jedzeel stared at me for a second.

“Edvan, he was called Edvan.”

I walked home at a brisk pace my mind in turmoil. I had anticipated some form of contact. Indeed, I had sought it checking the proximity detector daily, but the arrival of Jedzeel troubled me greatly. Perhaps he was simply trying to limit my knowledge and involvement of future events, but my gut suggested otherwise. With a face made for poker, Jedzeel had played me like a fiddle, I was sure of it. Edvan was no more a law enforcer than I was a Vulcan.

I knew it was futile, but I glanced over my shoulder periodically to see if he was following me, though it seemed unlikely that he would tail me home only to scurry ahead of me back to Church Wood. Everything about Jedzeel felt wrong, particularly his casual acceptance of the loss of equipment so staggeringly advanced that it’s classified Top Secret even in his time. Surely protectors of the timeline would be duty-bound to retrieve equipment – the stuff of fantasy - and tidy up loose ends regardless of the effort.

I was also disturbed by the urgency he had shown to retrieve the disk. Perhaps he had a crisis to deal with in a different period; perhaps his wife had warned him to be home for tea on time this trip. But could it be that he was anticipating the imminent arrival of genuine law enforcement officers from the Directorate.

By the time I reached home I was convinced that Jedzeel and Edvan were colleagues or rivals of some shadowy organisation, and therefore could not be trusted.

I ran upstairs and dragged the chair into position. Standing on the chair I tugged at the duffle bag as I leapt to the floor. Time was in short measure, which was ironic for someone who possessed the technology to move through time like a fish in the ocean.

Feverishly I yanked the wardrobe door open and quickly retrieved the armband; I had to know if Jedzeel had followed me. As the armband snapped into position on my forearm, I stared at the proximity detector and waited impatiently. Hallelujah, it remained dormant.

Flopping onto the bed I breathed a large sigh of relief as I rifled through the duffle bag, finally pulling out the data recorder. I prised open the cover and retrieved the disk which was the copy I had made a few weeks earlier. For a few moments I agonised over whether or not to take the armband on my journey back to Church Wood, and though I was reluctant to expose it; I had to know whether the proximity detector would have alerted me to the presence of Jedzeel.

The *bat-like* detection system provided by nanites lodged in my cortex was an unexpected, but extremely welcome addition to my limited defence system. Unfortunately, it was indeed limited in range, unlike the proximity detector on the armband. Nevertheless, I had to test the proximity detector to confirm or disprove Jedzeel’s assertion that it was an inferior model unable to raise the alarm when others were approaching.

It would be folly to wear a cloaked armband when I returned to Jedzeel for fear of him searching me, and the very real possibility of its discovery by his supposed *superior*

proximity detector. I, therefore, planned to hide the armband in the vicinity of the Yew Tree for quick retrieval. Perhaps in a bin, possibly concealed in a hedge or hidden under a pile of rocks - I wasn't choosy.

As it transpired the winner was a small mucky metal rubbish bin that stood outside the Yew Tree bar entrance door; I spotted it as I approached the vicinity of the church. Rushing over to it I removed the lid and concealed my games bag which contained the armband under a couple of discarded newspapers. Quickly replacing the lid, I rushed to the gate and started down toward the wooded area. It was essential that the armband be close at hand for retrieval within a maximum of thirty seconds, otherwise, he would be gone before I could test my theory.

"You took longer than I expected," Jedzeel said impatiently, as I approached him breathing heavily.

"You try walking the length of Newman Road and back in under thirty minutes with these short legs," I replied irritably, as I handed him the disk. "Here, take it, I'm off home. I have a badminton match tonight with a babe, and I'll be late if you keep chomping. I assume that's my responsibility discharged?"

"Yes," Jedzeel replied, tucking the disk into a slot on his right forearm. "You will not be troubled further. Go and play with your infant, I must leave now." He shook my hand firmly. "The Directorate thanks you for your assistance."

"She's not a baby," I objected, shouting after him, but he ignored me and marched off down the stony path towards Pontypool. Suddenly he was gone.

"Please God let it be the cloaking device that he has activated and not the time function," I muttered under my breath, as I raced through the field desperate to reach the Yew Tree.

Feverishly, I retrieved the armband and activated it as fast as was humanly possible.

Heaven be praised! My suspicions were confirmed by the flashing proximity detector, yet a further example of 25th-century deceit. "I doubt these people would recognise the truth if it bit them in the gonads," I growled in exasperation.

Greatly alarmed, my attention was drawn to the red flashing light which was inexplicably getting brighter; additionally, the flashing was increasing in frequency.

"The lying toad," I cried. "He tried to throw me off the scent by doubling back to the church." I turned off the armband, praying that he hadn't been alerted to my presence and hurried through the lichgate into the church cemetery, ducking down behind a large headstone near the entrance.

St Cadoc's Church is bordered by stone walls roughly eight feet high which means he would almost certainly enter the cemetery as I had through the lichgate, and then proceed up the gravel path which would provide me with a means to track him. On the Western side of the cemetery wall stood a particularly big thick bush, partly obscuring a large headstone. I decided that it offered a better vantage point and more importantly would conceal my presence more effectively.

I scurried over to the bush and squeezed behind the headstone. Gently I pulled a few branches apart which allowed me to scan a large part of the cemetery undetected; unfortunately, the light was beginning to fade as I waited for him to make his cloaked entrance.

Minutes elapsed and although I could hear the occasional chatter between birds sat on the roof of the Yew Tree opposite, it remained still and peaceful. I was beginning to doubt my analysis of the situation when an almost imperceptible crunching noise signalled Jedzeel's arrival. If I hadn't been listening intently, I would almost certainly have missed it.

I focussed my attention, straining my eyes for any sign of his journey through the cemetery, but without success. Suddenly the soft crunching noise stopped. *Damn, he's on the grass*, I thought to myself in frustration, and then I noticed a headstone about fifteen yards away shift slightly to the right. Eerily, after a few moments, it moved back to its previous position.

How interesting! Was he hiding something, or had he come to retrieve something stored previously?

The sound of pebbles rubbing against each other again signalled Jedzeel's intention to leave the cemetery. I guessed that he would leave the same way he entered – through the lichgate. When the crunching stopped, I realised that he was gone. I assumed that he would head for the field and the seclusion of the densely populated woods before leaping through time, it seemed logical as those co-ordinates appeared to be a beacon for time travellers.

For a few agonizing moments, I struggled with my need to remain undetected and my desire to activate the armband to confirm my theory. Waiting as long as I dared, I threw caution to the wind and swiftly activated the armband. Though the proximity detector was flashing intermittently, the strength of the red light was diminishing as was the length of time between each burst, indicating that he was leaving the area. Suddenly, it stopped.

“Well that's that, he's gone. Probably back to the 25th century,” I whispered to myself with a sigh of relief. Potentially, of course, he could have moved to any point in history.

All things considered, my second encounter with a temporal traveller hadn't gone too badly. I was comforted by the fact that I had a medium-range scanner capable of detecting visitors from the future, even though it was a two-way transaction. What really hacked me off, however, was missing badminton with Christine, she would think me inattentive. Tomorrow I would have to dream up a peach of an excuse.

I walked over to the headstone that Jedzeel had moved and tried to move it to the right as he had done, but without success. “Well he was a man mountain,” I hissed through my teeth as I strained to budge it. Suddenly I had a brainwave, *Turn the energy shield on stupid*. It did seem to increase strength exponentially, and indeed that proved to be the case. With the energy shield enabled I managed to move the headstone a few inches, enough to see inside a small dark chamber. To my great surprise, I spotted the black disk that I had handed to Jezeel only minutes ago. I was dumbfounded. Why would he hide the disk after I had returned it to him? I moved the headstone back into position and quickly left the cemetery, puzzling over the latest conundrum as I marched the length of Newman Road.

A FIGHT AND A LECTURE

A large school estate, teeming with pupils of varying shapes and sizes provides ample cover to blend in like a chameleon, apart from Maths which I ducked. Our conflicting schedules enabled me to avoid Christine for the morning period, though my stomach churned at the thought of the inevitable confrontation. Try as we may, Tom and I had failed to concoct a plausible excuse for missing badminton the previous evening.

“Why don't you tell her that your mother wouldn't provide the money for bus fare,” Tom suggested, as we walked up Crane Street to our favourite haunt during our free period.

“I don't know Tom, it makes me sound like a wimp,” I replied gloomily.

“Well, you should be thinking about Jayne. The Ball is only three days away and you promised to take her as your date not Christine,” There was a hint of condemnation in his voice.

“Thanks, mate, for cheering me up,” I replied sarcastically. “I want to take Jayne; she’s all I have thought about for five years. But I think Christine also fancies me, I’m totally confused?”

Over the next half hour, we discussed our preparation and various arrangements for the big event on Friday night. Tom was hoping to take Liz Turner who he had been sweet on for a while, but he was still searching for the courage to ask her. Eventually, we finished our food and headed back to school. By the time we approached the side entrance gate we had finally settled for a family crisis that was too painful to discuss, an excuse that was believable, but that also demonstrated a caring quality.

Tom and I made our way through the long corridors to the Music room, ready for the first two lessons of the afternoon. As I pushed through the bustling throng of pupils making their way to their various classroom assignments Jayne accompanied by couple of her friends approached me from the opposite direction. “Hello honey,” she whispered sexily as she put her arms around my neck. “What time are we meeting on Friday?” The answer was about to leave my mouth when out of the blue a fist hit me square in the face.

I fell to the floor like a sack of spuds as my legs buckled from under me. I was vaguely aware of a commotion around me as I shook my head two or three time to clear the fog clouding my brain.

Dazed, I staggered to my feet. My head was spinning and my cheek bone and eye throbbed with pain. O’Hare, who had a face like thunder, stood before me.

“That one was for the chewing gums, filth,” he yelled, grabbing me by the throat and pushing me up against the wall. His face was crimson with rage. “My arse was sore the whole weekend; I’m going to take it out on your ugly mug.”

Groping around, I struggled to find the armband controls to enable the energy shield, when miraculously Mr Cropper appeared on the scene. “Break it up,” he said, forcing himself between me and O’Hare. “You know that fighting is not tolerated in school, both of you wait outside the Headmasters office, I will be there in a minute.”

The crowd that had gathered to witness a fight, quickly dispersed in disappointment as pupils hurried off in all directions to their next lesson before Mr Cropper selected them as a target for his acerbic wit.

“This isn’t finished, I’ll sort you again,” said O’Hare, as we walked into the foyer outside the Headmasters office.

“Well bring a few friends,” I taunted, “you hit like a girl.” We stood silently in the foyer waiting to be summoned, staring at each other like prize fighters at the weigh-in, neither flinching, lips curled at the edge with teeth bared. Occasionally one of us would mutter a veiled threat prompting the other to respond with a more bizarre counter threat.

“I’m going to rip your head off and stamp on it,” O’Hare snarled.

“I’m going to rip your face off and make you eat it,” I countered.

“I’m going to break every bone in your body,” O’Hare sneered, raising the stakes.

I was about to offer a menacing reply that involved beating him to death with his own torn off limbs when the headmaster’s door opened.

“Come in both of you,” said Mr Benson, a relatively new appointment as Headmaster. He appeared to harbour liberal values, unlike the last Headmaster who had been a stickler for discipline, administering it freely with *tickler*, a long thick leather strap that he kept up his right sleeve.

Mr Benson is a believer in self-discipline and tolerance, preferring to psycho-analyse behavioural disorder rather than punish it. Unfortunately, adolescents scoff at such a free-thinking concept. Needless to say, discipline and morale had plummeted during his tenure, to the point that the school dress code, once rigidly applied, was barely

discernible. Too conservative to be thought of as a rebel, even I had discarded my blazer for a light blue jumper.

Mr Benson handed me some tissue paper, "Your cheek is bleeding; use this to stem the flow of blood." Thanking him I dabbed my face tenderly. The damage was minimal, it probably resulted from the ring O'Hare wore on his little pinkie - the big girl.

"What do you think is at the bottom of your aggression?" asked Mr Benson, as he beckoned us to sit in two easy chairs positioned in front of his desk. "Young lads like you should be engaged in wholesome pursuits not brawling like pugilists." He continued in that vein for an eternity, reminiscing about his school days and the heavy responsibility we would bear as adults.

"Yes, I can see that now Sir," I said, suddenly interrupting his effusive eulogy.

"Me too," piped O'Hare, recognising my strategy.

"Thank you for your guidance Sir," I said, rising as a signal that the lecture was finished.

"Well feel free to call in again," said Mr Benson. "And let that be the end of the matter" he shouted after us, as we both scarpered through the door.

"What a turnip," I said, as we walked through the foyer.

"Stupid arse," said O'Hare. For once I agreed with the blockhead.

At the end of the school day, wearily I made my way to the Town Hall. I attracted a few odd looks as I waited for the bus to Trevethin on account of my eye, which was slowly closing. Also, it was unbearably sore. In addition, I had developed the mother of all headaches and my vision was slightly blurred.

When the bus arrived, I made my way to the back where I sat and pondered the extraordinary events of the last few days. I had been seduced by Jayne, ambushed by Jedzeel, and thumped by O'Hare. *Well, life is anything but dull at the moment*, I thought to myself as the bus started up Pen-y-garn hill.

We had barely covered sixty yards when the engine began to struggle. The driver changed rapidly from second gear into first with a crunching sound, causing the bus to jerk back and forth as it leapt in bursts of acceleration. This continued for a few moments and then suddenly the engine made a strange screeching noise and died. The driver got up out of his seat and turned to address everyone on the bus. "Sorry folks, but as you have just witnessed the engine has expired. I am afraid you will have to walk back down to the Town Bridge or walk to the top of Pen-y-garn Hill and catch the next bus."

I was furious, the last thing my pounding head needed at this moment was the strenuous excursion required to climb to the top of the hill. I huffed and I puffed as we disembarked and joined a few passengers venting their frustration at the driver. One middle-aged woman offered some sage advice, though I am not sure that it was legal.

I decided against waiting for the next bus, because life's too short, and I wanted to rest my weary head at the earliest opportunity. Reluctantly I elected to continue my journey homeward through Church Wood which presented a gentler climb to the old homestead.

Enabling the armband, I set off at a slow pace ambling through the wood deep in thought. However, that changed as I approached the area where yesterday I encountered Jedzeel. Even though the proximity detector implied otherwise, I was on high alert, listening for any unusual sounds, watching for any sudden movement. A swaying branch could be the result of a gust of wind, or it could indicate a clumsy invisible presence. I was less than fifty yards from exiting into the sunshine, but I was on edge until I walked out into the field breathing a sigh of relief. Though a cloaked individual could potentially be lurking in any location up ahead, there is something sinister about prying eyes in the confinement of a dark creepy wood. However, the armband had once more proved

reliable, and as I reached the beginning of Newman Road, I felt safe enough to disable it and continue the journey homeward.

NOT TCP AGAIN

I was particularly grateful to reach home that evening where I could close the door and shut out all that troubled me. Dumping my bags in the hall I called out to let mum know I was home as I headed for the kitchen. My noisy entrance caused mum who was stood at the sink engaged in washing up duty to inhale sharply and then let out a cry of anguish when she caught sight of my face. "Not again," she exclaimed. "Whatever have you been doing this time?" Mum rushed towards me tearing the yellow rubber glove off her right hand to examine my wound.

"I had an argument with someone's fist," I replied, giving her a weak and painful smile as she sat me down while reaching for the medicine box.

"This will hurt," she said, as she held a large cotton wool blob over the end of the TCP bottle she had extracted. She tipped it upside down a couple of times to ensure the cotton wool was thoroughly wet. Then she began to vigorously dab the injured area, causing me to wince with pain.

"Aggh, you're a damn sadist," I yelled through gritted teeth. "Don't you dare rub any of that near my bad eye."

"My, what a baby," mum tutted. "Cut out the profanity or you'll recite the Lord's Prayer twenty times when you next go to confession."

My church attendance had been sporadic for a while, and I hadn't been to confession for many months. I acknowledge that repentance can lead to a healthy state of mind, but I cannot understand the logic of repeating the Lord's Prayer incrementally in penance for wrongdoing as defined by the clergy. I just feel that there is a profound lack of sincerity in repeating prayers over and over again.

Firstly, I want to talk to God, not babble the same words until I reach an arbitrary figure. It reminds me of the many times I have had to write lines whilst straining to reach the magic number.

Secondly, I frequently lose count. I just hope that God allows for feeble-mindedness.

"I'll get some ice for your eye," mum continued, "That should bring the swelling down." A serious look came over her face as she placed the TCP back into the medicine box. "I will phone your school tomorrow, I'm not at all happy that you have been assaulted by an overgrown bully."

"Mum, I will take care of it," I said, patting her arm appreciatively. "Anyhow, I think I am a little old for you to fight my battles, but thanks for the thought."

"You are never too old, you will always be my baby," she replied, handing me the ice wrapped in a tea towel. "Here, place this on your eye it will reduce the swelling."

And that's where I sat for the next thirty minutes, head back, balancing ice on my eye, and to be fair it did reduce the swelling considerably. The moral of the tale is that mums usually do know what's best.

I didn't attend school on Wednesday or Thursday. Mum thought it best to stay off my feet for forty-eight hours until the blurred vision had cleared, and I needed the time to restore my battered pride. However, by Friday morning the swelling was gone, and I was left with only very light bruising.

I dithered about attending school on the last day of the school week. Though I desperately wanted to confirm the arrangements with Jayne, I was sure that the tender shoots that had sprouted between Christine and me would surely be destroyed when she saw Jayne draped on my arm at the Ball.

Mum offered to help lighten the bruising as I sat eating a bowl of cornflakes at the breakfast table that morning. "A little foundation around your cheekbone would hide the bruise," she said, producing her makeup bag.

"I'm not going to a Ball with the girl of my dreams wearing makeup," I said indignantly, but perhaps a little too forcefully as my mother looked slightly startled.

"Well, the bands you like have long hair and they all use makeup," she explain in a matter-of-fact tone.

"I don't think Rod Stewart or the Stones or 'Zepplin use makeup," I scoffed. However, after a few moments silence I was forced to concede. "Yeah, you might be right; they all look like a bunch of girls." I giggled at the thought of Robert Plant and Mick Jagger applying makeup and a bit of lippie. "Anyhow," I said, thrusting out my jaw, "I'm inclined to let Jayne see my bruise in all its glory - it will add to my macho image."

Mum was sat at the table in her dressing gown drinking a cup of tea when I bent over to kiss her. "Here's a note for your form teacher explaining why you have been absent," she said, puckering for the kiss.

I raised my eyes to the heavens. "I think it will be obvious when he sees my face." Chuckling, I gave mum a kiss on the cheek and headed for the door.

Reluctantly, I picked up my bag hanging on the banister; it was loaded with the books needed for the day's lessons. Unusually David and I left the house together and made our way to the unofficial bus stop.

"Are you going to the Ball tonight? I wish I was going. There are at least five girls I would like to ask out," he blurted out, without stopping for breath.

"Yeah, when you are a little older," I replied in a supercilious tone. *That's if you live that long you little germ*, I thought privately.

"You don't look as bad as I thought you would," said Tom, as we shuffled into the English classroom following registration. "Rumour was that you had a black eye and that both your jaw and nose were broken."

I patted his back and laughed. "I would have to be hit in the face by both Joe Frazier and Mohammed Ali simultaneously to suffer those injuries Tom. It was only a swollen eye, and speaking of injuries, where is O'Hare?" As we sat down Mr Jeffries walked into the classroom and the noise level dropped as the lesson began.

"He hasn't been to school since the fight," Tom whispered, "I heard that he has a broken fist."

"Which I suppose he broke on my nose and jaw," I said sarcastically.

"Steven, have you been involved in an altercation?" asked Mr Jeffries, as he walked past my desk.

"Just a small disagreement Mr Jeffries," I answered cheerfully. "My nose pulverised his fist."

"I do hope it happened off school property," he responded sternly. "This generation is obsessed with violence; it would not have happened in my day."

Turning to Tom I whispered, "That would be the peaceful war years then I guess," causing him to stifle a laugh.

As the class settled down, I scanned around the room keen to locate Christine. Eventually, I spotted her. She was sat a couple of rows behind me and was fiddling with her pen. I waited a few moments to catch her attention. Ss she looked up, I gave her a smile and wiggled my eyebrows playfully. She gave a little wave and mouthed the words, "Are you better?"

"Something you want to share with the class Steven?" asked Mr Jeffries, his booming voice causing everyone to turn in my direction. I quickly swivelled in my chair to face

him, "Err...no, I'm fine, thank you, Mr Jeffries," I said politely, while whispering out of the side of my mouth to Tom, "he's obviously in a strop."

I kept my head down for the remainder of the class; it seemed the best course of action given Mr Jeffries apparent dark mood. As the bell sounded, I thrust my books into my bag and shuffled over to Christine's desk.

"Your eye looks better than I thought it would," she said, showing tender concern. "Are you recovered enough to attend the Ball tonight?" She gave a coy look from under her eyelids. "If not, I might be able to cancel my date with Warren Beatty and drop by to mop your fevered brow. But only if you beg," she said playfully.

This was the dreaded sixty-four-thousand-dollar question that I had hoped to avoid. Oh well, here goes.

"Yes," I said gloomily, "I am going with the black widow, unfortunately. She's like a limpet, I can't shake her off."

Christine shook her head sorrowfully. "You may not live to regret it. Rumour is that the last sap met a pitiful end." The expression on her face changed and she gave a hearty, scornful laugh, as she turned and walked out of the room.

Music, last session of the morning, was cancelled. The Headmaster announced that Mr Sinclair had the flu and had taken to his bed, affording Tom and me the opportunity to head for Sidolli's.

"I told Jayne that you would meet her at the Ball, as you haven't been able to make the arrangements," he said, as we crossed the Town Bridge.

"I guess I haven't got a choice," I said despondently. "If I go to the Ball I will please one girl and infuriate another, and I am beginning to have second doubts as to my selection."

Entering the Café, we sauntered to the back where we sat at a table near the juke-box. Tom started to fidget, searching through each of his pockets. "Have you got fifty pence?" he asked. "I don't seem to have any change."

I dug around in my pocket and emptied the contents onto the table: some coins, a small eraser, some lint and my front door key. "Here, but please no love songs today," I pleaded, flipping a fifty pence coin in the air towards his outstretched hand.

While Tom pondered over his music selection, I walked into the back room to warm up the pinball machine. I had the third highest score. *Top dog* - whoever he might be, was in pole position. Tom was a creditable second, just a mere one hundred fifty points behind the canine, and today declared he would go top.

Some two hours later we emerged, like vampires from their crypt. Tom was narked as *top dog* remained unchallenged. "Stupid mutt," Tom said vehemently, "I hope he has fleas."

Chapter 15

THE AUTUMN BALL

That evening I spent the best part of an hour preparing myself, bathing and blow-drying my hair, finally adding a little hair lacquer to hold it in place. The evening of the eagerly awaited Autumn Ball had arrived!

I liberally doused my body with Brut cologne to smell good. Then I shaved, even though it wasn't necessary. Normally I shave every four days as the growth is extremely fine, but tonight I wanted a face that was as soft as a baby's bottom. However, the baby's bottom effect wasn't achieved without considerable discomfort as I nicked myself under my chin and then hopped around the bathroom squealing after splashing my face with Old Spice.

Finally, I put on my crisply starched new shirt and tie, donned my suit and slipped on my new shoes. "Damn, I look good," I yelled at the mirror, impressed by the reflection before me. *She won't be able to keep her hands off me*, I thought, as I wriggled my hips down the stairs, running my fingers through my hair like some 60's greaser.

Mum produced her trusty Kodak insisting on a commemorative snap before I departed out into the night. Rather touchingly she then presented me with a pocket watch, which was, she insisted, more than one hundred years old and still in good working order.

"My father gave me this watch just before he died," she said, as a look of sadness swept across her face. "He was adamant that I gave it to you on the night of your first social event." With a faraway look in her eyes she recounted a moment from her long distant past. "It's strange really, because he was given this watch many years ago by a regular visitor to our home." She paused as she struggled to recall the fractured memories. "I can't remember his name or his face now, but I am told that he instructed my dad to give the watch to my eldest child on the night of his first ball."

She shook her head as the memories disappeared, flashes from the past buried deep in the recess of her mind. "Anyhow, I think a pocket watch adds that finishing touch to a three-piece suit," mum said, tenderly kissing my cheek as I prepared to leave. "Don't be too late, and don't get drunk. No girl will appreciate you throwing up all over her," was mum's parting advice. Her final reminder came as I climbed the steps to the road. "Remember to act like a gentleman," she shouted after me.

I felt good as I boarded the bus, this evening was going to be interesting, a night to remember. However, I wore the armband in invisible mode as insurance, I had a feeling that O'Hare would attend the Ball, and if he had been drinking it could turn ugly.

I could hear the raunchy guitar chords of 'Brown Sugar' drifting out across the playground as I followed a few couples walking towards the main assembly hall which had been converted into a dance hall for the evening. I walked through the double doors and then along the corridor that led to the main hall. Inside the lighting was subdued but a multi-sequenced lightshow threw colours and shapes over everything in the hall. Though a few people were dancing, a much larger crowd had gathered around the drinks table. I looked around to see if either Jayne or Christine had arrived, tonight was going to be very tricky.

Dan Platt who was stood by the punch bowl called me over. "Steve," he shouted, trying to be heard over Mick Jagger's gritty voice, "come and try this fruit punch." He waited until I was by his side before adding excitedly, "someone's poured a bottle of Vodka into it," and then he exploded into a roaring laugh.

“Blimey Dan, how many have you had?” I asked in amazement. “You’re three sheets to the wind already.”

“Don’t know,” he giggled. “Can’t remember.”

I filled a cup with the fruity Vodka punch and took a gulp; the concentrated fruit juices completely masked the vodka, only a connoisseur would identify the hint of alcohol amongst the fruits of the forest. As Dan moved away, I scanned the room slowly looking for my friends and teammates. I caught sight of Tom’s swarthy features near the DJs booth where he stood chatting to a couple of girls. The hall had been decorated for the evening with bunting, balloons and streamers, Christmas type decorations hung from the ceiling, honeycombed balls and lengths of linked shapes. A row of tables lined the retaining wall that separated the lower block corridor from the assembly hall. Each table was covered with large white tablecloths which would undoubtedly be badly stained by the end of the evening. Platters of assorted sandwiches, carefully covered, filled each table. Neatly arranged alongside - with military precision - were plates of sausage rolls, scotch eggs and other finger foods. The sight of this sumptuous feast caused my mouth to moisten as I passed by. In my extreme haste to adorn my body earlier I hadn’t time for tea, I was reminded of this fact as I felt my stomach growl.

I walked quickly around the edge of the dance floor to the DJs booth and shouted, “What time did you get here Tommo?”

He acknowledged my presence with a nod before reluctantly excusing himself to join me. “I arrived about twenty minutes ago,” he yelled into my ear. “I’ve had a couple of cups of the good stuff and I’m about to make my move on one these two lovelies.”

“Has Jayne arrived yet?” I yelled nervously, ignoring his fanciful remarks that were most unlikely to come to fruition. A part of me hoped that Jayne had cancelled at the last moment.

“I think she was going to catch the seven o’clock bus.” Glancing down at his watch he added, “She should arrive anytime now.” Catching sight of my heirloom as the strobe light show bounced off the metal surface Tom laughed. “What the hell is that in your waistcoat, you look like Sherlock Holmes? Did you buy it from an antique shop?”

“It’s called a pocket watch, Watson,” I answered loudly in an upper crust accent assuming the role of the sleuth. “Undoubtedly it is a rare timepiece and probably worth a fortune,” I added with a smile.

I glanced at the hall entrance intermittently as we attempted to converse over the deafeningly loud music. Pupils decked out in their finery were now arriving in streams. A few lads looked uncomfortable in their suits and tie, regularly tugging at their shirt collars. The ladies, however, had outdone themselves looking resplendent in their long gowns of chiffon, silk and other exotic materials.

Wolf-whistles drew our attention to two belles as they glided into the hall. Sue James, a close friend of Christine, wore an eye-catching evening dress in royal blue that clung to her shapely upper frame like a second skin, but flowed freely from the waist. Her long chestnut brown hair had been styled into French twist buns and pinned at the back of her head with pins. In true Audrey Hepburn fashion Sue wore a silver tiara strategically placed in front of the rising hair piece, she could have freshly stepped off the front page of Vogue.

In contrast to the classic look, Linda Darling, a serious challenger for the award of most glamorous woman, sported a fashionable geometric cut. Exuding a glossy shine her dark hair hung like a pair of silk curtains which tapered into her neck. She too wore an exquisitely designed evening dress. Sleeveless, and with no straps to hold it up, it defied gravity, it appeared to be pasted on. It was a dark shade of pillar box red that matched her glistening red lipstick and elegantly paired with long red evening gloves. In a remarkable

display of balance, she glided around the dance floor in a pair of heels that must have been all of five inches.

I nodded to Tom with approval when I caught sight of Jayne arriving with Sandra, one of her close friends, both looked stunning.

“There she is,” shouted Tom excitedly digging me in the ribs. “Go and speak to her, and for God’s sake try to look happy.”

Jayne smiled as I walked up to her nervously. “You made it,” I said enthusiastically, returning the smile. “You look gorgeous, I love your dress.” She really did look stunning, wearing a long sky-blue sleeveless dress which accentuated her wonderfully curvaceous figure, her long blonde hair flowed over her bare shoulders. “You do look dazzling,” I said, as I guided her over to the drinks table on my arm.

“Thank you,” she replied, “you look quite handsome yourself. Do you think my backside looks big in this?” She swivelled her hips for me to get a good look at her delightful derriere.

“Er ... no, it looks fine to me,” I replied cautiously. Even I knew that an answer to that question had to be treated like an unexploded bomb - obviously a girl thing.

I filled a plastic cup with punch. “This is a Vodka fruit punch,” I shouted above the striking opening guitar solo of ‘Whiskey in the Jar.’ Each note struck echoed dramatically around the hall, punctuating the air.

She grabbed the cup from my hand and took a large mouthful. “It’s very warm in here,” she shouted, “I wish they would open a window.” As if by her command, someone drew back one of the large curtains that covered the windows and doors of the assembly hall. After fiddling with the emergency door release bar, one of the three teachers present opened two of the large doors allowing a rush of cool air to enter the room.

“Can I arrange anything else for you madam?” I asked loudly, taking the credit while bowing deeply.

“Yes, you can get me another drink,” she commanded, as she downed the contents of the plastic cup. “I’m going over to the food table to talk to my friends.” she turned and walked away daintily, exaggerating the movement of her hips. With my attention still firmly fixed on her enchanting backside, I shuffled towards the drinks table, twice colliding with others.

I stood patiently in the queue watching those at the front filling their cups to the brim. “This punch is quite tasty,” said Jonesy, a latecomer to the drinks queue, brazenly squeezing past people as he talked to them. He is a cheeky sod; you couldn’t help but smile at his nerve. Jonesy is only five feet four inches in his bare feet, but he has a disarming manner which makes him extremely likeable, and he is a damn good rugby player - could you ask for more?

As Jonesy pushed forward to talk to Dave Ryder and Liz Baxter, Dave’s escort for the evening, I caught sight of Christine. My heart skipped a beat and my collar suddenly felt tighter than it had moments earlier, she looked heavenly. A stunning calf-length lemon-coloured dress clung to her hourglass figure. The six-inch-high heels she wore made her look elegantly taller than normal and accentuated her legs.

By the time I reached the punch bowl it was nearly empty, so I quickly filled two cups to the brim and pushed my way through the queue holding the drinks above my head to avoid spilling the contents. Intentionally I walked around the edge of the room so that I passed the food table where Christine now stood talking to Susan Richards and Carol Evans.

“You look lovely tonight,” I said, whispering softly in her ear as I squeezed past, she turned her head quickly in my direction.

“Steve,” she said, her face breaking into a smile. “My, don’t you look handsome.”

“For you,” I said, handing her one of the cups.

She nodded in thanks. “I see the black widow is your partner this evening.” She raised an eyebrow and pouted her lips. “Watch out for her bite.” The words had barely left her mouth when I was shoved sharply in the back. For a second I thought O’Hare was the culprit until I turned to see Jayne glaring at me.

“I thought you went to get me a drink not to chat with HER,” whined Jayne petulantly, casting Christine a filthy look. Even though the room was vibrating to the sound of Rod Stewart’s ‘Maggie May,’ there was an embarrassing silence for a few seconds. Christine was locked in a staring competition with Jayne; while her friends looked at the floor as though deep in contemplation.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” I asked angrily, taking her by the arm and pulling her towards the dance floor. “I was only talking to Christine and her friends, and you and I have no history to speak of that would give you licence to throw a jealous fit.” I thrust the cup I had been holding into her hands.

“Why would you want to talk to her?” Jayne whined. “She’s not prettier than me, is she?”

“What!” I yelled incredulously. “Where in the hell did that come from, I never mentioned her looks. Did you start drinking before you left home?” Jayne ignored my outburst and put her arm through mine.

“You do think that I am the best-looking girl, don’t you? I am wearing my prettiest dress just for you,” she purred, as I stared at her in disbelief. Jayne sank her second drink without stopping, “Come on let’s dance,” she said, as the DJ changed the pace with a couple of ballads. She pulled me onto the dance floor and placed both arms around my neck, “I love this record,” she said, as the soothing tone of Art Garfunkel’s voice filled the room. “Let’s not fight.”

She pulled me closer, our bodies were locked together as we swayed slowly back and forth, and she placed her head on my shoulder where I could feel her breath on my neck. The song was reaching a crescendo, the crashing drumbeat, and the straining violins climbed higher and higher as Jayne turned her head to look at me and gently kissed my lips.

I had waited five years for this moment, regularly fantasising about the intimate contact, the feelings of pleasure, the passionate heights that our first kiss would reach, accompanied by an imaginary musical orchestra. Paul Simon had certainly provided the haunting melody, only a musical moron could fail to appreciate the closing chords of ‘Bridge over trouble water.’ How disappointing that the reality fell far short of the romantic notion. Don’t get me wrong, the kiss was pleasant, but her lips were cold. There was no genuine feeling, no passion. It was like kissing a cod.

“There ... that’s better isn’t it?” Jayne said in a patronizing tone. “I know you have fancied me for years, Tom told me. I bet that’s your first kiss with a girl,” she gushed condescendingly.

“Jayne, do you want another drink?” An overwhelming desire to escape from the clutches of this neurotically vain mind-numbing vamp swept over me. Without waiting for a reply, I walked off the dance floor heading for the drinks table where the punch bowl had again been filled.

“Are things going well with Jayne?” Tom asked, as he joined me in the queue. “I saw you kissing her you old dog,” he said, giving me a knowing smile.

I shook my head slowly. “Actually Tom,” I said most dejectedly, “Jayne kissed me, there’s a big difference.”

I filled two cups with punch and made my way back to Jayne who was once again deeply engrossed in conversation with her friends. I took a sip of my drink. “Someone’s

added alcohol to the punch again,” I said to Jayne, trying to initiate conversation as I handed her a cup.

“Works for me,” she said, as she took a large mouthful, and then she carried on conversing with her friends.

The evening wore on slowly with Jayne drinking copious amounts of punch, talking endlessly about herself, and demanding compliments every few minutes. “Are you sure my bum doesn’t look fat in this?” she asked, for the umpteenth time.

I sighed in exasperation. “No Jayne, it looks the same size that it was the last time you asked, which was about five minutes ago.” I was thoroughly fed up with this whole situation, in fact I wished that I had stayed at home. I was in the company of possibly the vainest girl in the country who was boring me to death, while somewhere in the building stood the girl I really wanted to be with.

I excused myself to visit the toilet and as I walked down the corridor Christine passed me on her way back to the hall. I stopped to talk to her. “You were right about the web,” I said despondently. “She’s choking me with the damn thing.”

Christine laughed, “I notice that she has a miner’s thirst as well. I did warn you.” With a consoling pat on my arm, she walked off.

When I returned to the hall the lights were on and everyone was crowding around the food table filling their paper plates with sandwiches, sausage rolls, pieces of chicken, and quiche. I was the last in the queue, and by the time I finally reached the table it looked like a plague of locusts had descended. Only a few remnants remained - a couple of sandwiches, half a sausage roll, and a few blobs of quiche.

I scanned the room for Jayne who was stood near the open door talking to her friends, munching merrily. “Did you get me anything, Jayne?” I asked in growing irritation as I reached her. “There was nothing left by the time I got to the table.” Jayne completely ignored me. “I am quite hungry,” I continued.

“Sssh,” she hissed abruptly. “I’m talking to my friends, don’t bother me now. I’ll talk to you later.” Her hand fumbled in empty space as she tried to push me away without turning around. Finally, it made contact with my chest and she made a weak shoving motion. As I stepped back, she swayed and then stumbled slightly as she tried to remain upright. She was completely inebriated.

“JAYNE,” I yelled.

Startled, she turned her head in my direction, and because there was a musical interlude while we ate, others likewise startled also turned in our direction. I now held the attention of many in the hall as my patience finally snapped.

“You are the most conceited girl I have ever met. You are boring, rude, and you’re drunk.” Leaning towards her I whispered loudly, “and your arse is definitely the fattest in the room.” With a look of horror on her face Jayne started to shriek, her friends likewise gasped in dismay. Other girls in the room started to whisper excitedly, giggling in small huddles. Many of the boys laughed out loud, patting me on the back as I pushed past them. I needed fresh air badly.

As I walked down the corridor, towards the main entrance, I could hear Jayne in a screaming tantrum, pleading with her friends. “My bum doesn’t really look big does it? Please, God, tell me it doesn’t?”

I sat outside feeling miserable, it seemed that everything that could have gone wrong, had done so. What a fool I had been. I would surely have to search far and wide to find a girl more conceited than Jayne.

I closed my eyes and took long slow breaths to calm my agitated state. Eventually, the music started, and the dancing resumed. The Rolling Stones ‘Honky Tonk Woman’ with

its haunting guitar chords wrapping themselves around Jagger's gritty voice blasted out through the open door and off into the night.

"Boy, you really told her," said Tom, as he walked out of the hall into the cool breeze. Chuckling loudly, he hauled himself up onto the wall beside me. "Your parting comments about her rear end sure did hit the mark."

I grunted in disdain; my jaw clenched angrily. "Tom," I hissed, "she can plonk her fat arse anywhere she wants, except near me. I've put up with her incessant demands for attention all night; the only relationship in which she would feel comfortable - is with a mirror."

Tom gave an empathetic nod before dropping to his feet and striding out towards the end of the building. "I'm off for a fag," he shouted, as he disappeared into the darkness. "Try to stay out of trouble until I return."

My attention was drawn to the heavenly light show above me as the stars twinkled majestically in the thinning autumn air. Quietly, I recited the only three constellation names that I knew, The Plough, The Bear, and Orion's Belt.

"Very impressive," said a voice that I knew so well. "Care to pick them out for me?" Christine appeared alongside me rubbing her arms vigorously as she shivered in the cool night air. Turning, I gazed longingly into her deep soulful eyes.

"Haven't the foggiest, they are up there somewhere," I grinned. "Anyway, what brings you out here?" My downcast spirits lifted at the appearance of Christine, her soothing voice had a calming effect.

Christine was silent for a moment as she too looked skyward. "I thought you might be out here brooding," she answered, without shifting her gaze from the heavenly expanse. "You have a unique method of ending a relationship," she said thoughtfully, in the manner of a barrister offering a considered observation. "Brutal, but unique, nevertheless. I don't suppose you will be taking her home then?" she laughed.

"Go on, say *I told you so*," I prompted her. "You know you want to say it."

Christine put her arm through mine. "Does this mean that you are available for a dance?" she flashed those big brown eyes that both hypnotised and excited me.

"Only if it's a slow one," I said hopefully, leading her into the hall.

The lights had been dimmed as a medley of slow numbers began. Christine put her arms around my neck, the second girl to do so in the same evening - definitely a record. She smiled as she moved closer and sensuously placed her cheek against mine. Slowly she caressed the side of my face with hers. She repeated this arousing motion gently a couple of times before withdrawing her face, and then turning she kissed me tenderly. Her lips were warm and soft, and I felt a powerful spark of emotion surge between us causing my breathing to labour and my heartbeat to increase until I could feel it beating strongly within my chest.

I felt as though I were a car that had just accelerated from zero to one hundred in the space of a heartbeat - mine. The fragrance of her perfume numbed my senses and I felt a deep stirring within. Time seemed to stand still. I felt as though I had been taken to a place where no one else existed.

Slowly our lips parted. Christine looked deep into my eyes. "Not bad," she said softly. "I'd like to say I have had plenty of practice," I said, feeling slightly lightheaded. "We should have done this a long time ago, and not just at badminton," I added light heartedly, as we clung tightly to each other, afraid to let go in case the moment vanished, never to reappear.

The final songs of the evening provided the perfect accompaniment as we moved slowly, lips locked together. This was the passion that was missing when Jayne had kissed me earlier. There may have been a hundred people in the hall - or none. At that

moment there was just Christine and me. Gently we swayed, slowly from side to side, the deep throbbing base guitar chords of Fleetwood Mac's 'Albatross' dictating the tempo.

I was sure that these tender moments were an indication of an exciting, hopefully passionate, relationship ahead. The signs were unmistakable, gorgeous babe wrapped in the arms of handsome youth; lips welded together as all resistance melts away. Casablanca - eat your heart out.

Sadly, as the melody faded, the lights came on and the music ceased. "That's the end of the evening's entertainment girls and boys," shouted Mr Cropper, standing by the side of the DJ's booth. "Collect your coats and any belongings and take care on the way home."

Everyone started to mill about in the brightly lit hall, girls headed for the cloakroom to collect their coats while the boys started to lark about, telling jokes, and swapping tales of conquest. Jonesy began to describe in detail what he was going to do with his escort for the night as he took her home.

"Have any of you got a rubber?" he whispered urgently, "I left mine at home."

The six of us gathered around him rocked with laughter. "That would be the same one you bought in the first-year" yelled Dan Platt, tears of laughter running down his cheeks. "If you ever take it out of its packet it'll crumble."

The ribbing ceased abruptly as Christine and Susan Richards returned from the cloakroom with their coats draped over their arms, and we all began to shuffle to the open door where we spilled out into the evening. I blinked repeatedly, my eyes trying to adjust to the darkness as we made our way around the building towards the gate at the bottom of the playground, only the reflected moonlight lit our way.

Christine had her arm through mine and was still laughing at the remarks I had made to Jayne as we approached the gate, where suddenly we were confronted by O'Hare, Mitchell, and two other Hareite's. As they stepped out from the dark shadows it was obvious from the stench of alcohol that they had been drinking in one of the local pubs.

"How's the eye, you son of a bitch?" O'Hare yelled in my face. He reeked of booze and was swaying slightly as he moved forward trying to intimidate me.

"O'Hare why don't you go home? I don't want any trouble this evening," I replied coolly. I hoped that I could defuse an awkward situation that could erupt and spoil a wonderful evening. However, O'Hare and Mitchell could not be placated and began poking me in the chest, slowly forcing me backwards.

"Is this your little slut, your whore?" he shouted venomously, slurring his words as he hit my head with his. A look of fury was etched upon his face. "I'm going to kick your face in," he shouted, as he swung a fist at me. Of course, he missed by a country mile as I stepped back while sliding my hand up my left sleeve to activate the energy shield.

"O'Hare you are too drunk to hit anything, now go home before I kick your arse," I said calmly. He swung his fist a second time; again, he was wide of the target as I moved sideways. However, his momentum carried him forward into Christine who was stood just behind me. She fell to the floor screaming in pain as he fell on top of her.

A red mist descended upon me as I grabbed O'Hare and yanked him to his feet. I couldn't hit him with the energy shield enabled as I would probably have killed him due the intensity of the anger, he had provoked in me. Instead I merely squeezed his fist, increasing the pressure incrementally.

He started to squeal, and then began to beg for his pathetic, sleazy life. "Please, that hurts. I promise I will never threaten you again, I won't even look at you," he yelled, the pitch of his voice rising higher and higher. "Please, the pain is too much. Please, I am begging you." He screamed, hitting a note that any Soprano would be proud to reach. I ignored his pleas and would have continued to compress his fist into the size of a golf

ball, but I was dragged back from the red mist surrounding me by the sound of a soft, gentle voice.

“Steve, Steve, please let him go; you’re a much better person than he is.” Christine was stood between us holding my face in the palms of her hands. “He didn’t really hurt me, please let him go, I don’t want you to get into trouble for injuring him.”

Upon her request I released his fist which fell to the floor causing O’Hare to shout out in further pain. And that’s where we left him ... sobbing on the path, as we walked out into the park towards the bus stop, hand in hand.

Too soon it seemed we reached the bus stop opposite the Town Hall where we waited for the arrival of her bus to Cwmbran.

“You protected me,” she said softly, gently caressing my cheek with the back of her hand as she gazed lovingly into my eyes.

“I was consumed by an anger that has built up over the last few months,” I said angrily. “I should have shown more control, but that low life has really aggravated me, and when I saw you on the floor...” I shuddered at the thought of the injury that jerk could have inflicted when falling on Christine.

“I don’t think he will bother you again for a while,” she said, cuddling me tightly.

We continued to kiss and hug until her bus arrived and parted with a long final lip bruising encounter. She boarded the bus and sat in a window seat where she blew me a kiss and waved repeatedly until the bus pulled away.

“What an evening!” I said in exhilaration, as I strolled slowly towards the bus stop on the opposite side of the road. “What an evening!”