

Out of the Blues

Tuesday 13 January, 2015, dawned bright, clear and cold, with a cloudless sky of Mediterranean blue.

Just before eight o'clock Danny the Postie delivered the bulky letter with her daily copy of the Eastwolde Investigator, apologising for being so early, explaining he must ask her to sign for the package as a priority delivery.

Dr Mel had been awake for hours, standing at the large picture window in her bedroom, watching the lights of the squadron of machines and vans as they arrived again, filling the fields around her property with shouting men. The high-pitched whine of drilling machines and the thud-thud-thud of pumps made it like a scene from Armageddon.

Dr Melanie-Ann Kolic had been 'down' for a few days: this morning she was coming up. She poured another strong black coffee and added three sugars. Easing her bulk warily back into her daybed, (a specially constructed hammock suspended from a large four-cornered frame), she ripped open the letter and skimmed through it.

'Bloody, bloody, bloody. The bloody bitch Crichton does it again!'

Rolling her twenty-odd stones upright onto her thick legs, Dr Mel shredded the two dozen pages of gobbledygook into confetti, tipped it into the recycling bin and slammed down the lid.

Sprawled elegantly on her couch, Sophie the aged Basset Hound opened her one eye briefly, sighed, and went back to sleep. Paragon (of Virtue) the African Grey hid his head under his wing and pretended disinterest. Ollie the Goldfish turned his tail to the outer wall of his tank, knowingly.

Dr Mel fired up her laptop, checked her inboxes, studied the latest information, and then logged onto the Eastwolde Council website. She used her phantom user password, mimicking the persona of that aforesaid bitch, Imelda Luciana Crichton, Assistant Head of Planning and Development, the bitch behind the problem, the bitch who was about to be torpedoed.

'Soph, how dare she assume that a mish-mash of lies disguised as facts would fool anyone, far less me? The obfuscating arrogance of the woman. This is personal now, Soph. Let's see how she wriggles out of this.'

Sophie listened in silence. This fleeting bravura was a familiar part of her owner's cycle of ups and downs. Today would be a happy day. But then there would be tomorrow.

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Dr Mel had gleaned the bitch's password by subterfuge, sneaking into the Council's system from the safety of her 'eyrie' at the University, where she still held onto a small office. For this first part of her intrusion the University system had provided her with anonymity. Her University post was a sinecure, (arranged by GCHQ), important because it gave her access to the top PhD students in the emerging field of Cybertronics. Like Dr Mel these were brilliant people, mostly young, some very geekish, whom she nurtured like a mother hen. Some went on to top posts, and through them Dr Mel, (and GCHQ), gained access to many of the world's most sensitive cyber secrets.

Dr Mel knew she had broken the rules: but so had 'the enemy', with Imelda Crichton as their willing cipher, dancing to their tune. The hard evidence was easily seen in the fields around her, where "Freeing-Gas-4Britain" was going about its fracking business, illegally and energetically.

To Dr Mel this was war - Cyberwar.

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As she focussed on her task, calm descended. Ollie investigated the surface of his tank for possible titbits that he might have missed. Paragon stretched his wings one by one, and resumed his preening. Sophie snored through another imagined walk across the fields of long ago.

Outside, in the sprawl of buildings that was home to a menagerie of around a hundred rescued animals, the cadre of pot-bellied pigs rooted and squealed happily, as the twenty-odd hens clucked and argued. Jasper the one-legged Rhode Island Red cockerel stridently shouted his dominance. Topsy and Topsy, the rescued seaside donkeys, stood head to tail and leaned into each other in companionable silence, interrupted from time to time by snuffles and shuffles as they sought to escape the occasional cold draught that whispered across their backs.

Located at the end of a long winding lane, "Bramble Cottage" seemed tranquil and, viewed from a distance, even attractive, in a rustic ramshackle way. For the last six months this rural idyll had been repeatedly disrupted by Freeing-Gas-4Britain. The company had been granted a licence by Eastwolve Council to investigate the viability of fracking, sending their giant machines bouncing along the fragile roadway, churning it up and damaging the hedgerows and gates, in order to gain access to the network of fields owned by the Right Honourable Edwin Droodle.

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At eighty-nine Edwin had long retired from Gentleman Farming. Nowadays his fields were let out to local farmers as rough grazing. Normally they were filled with sheep and cattle: now they were filled by machines, boring and pumping toxic liquids into the good earth under Bramble Cottage. Edwin Droodle, a patriotic chap, had been hoodwinked into signing their forms on the pretext that it was a 'government requirement'. He had also been advised by Imelda, (but only verbally), to await a £20,000 statutory compensation payment, which would be paid by Freeing-Gas-4Britain. Nine months later Edwin was still waiting.

Edwin Droodle and Dr Mel's father Jerzy Kolic had met at Bletchley Park. Jerzy a young WW2 Jewish refuge from Poland was a brilliant mathematician. It was there that they had first competed for the hand of the tall buxom colleen Eithne Walsh, from County Cork. This rivalry had continued for over a decade as the Bletchley Team relocated in 1956 to what eventually became GCHQ¹.

In the end the more energetic Jerzy had won the competition. When he and Eithne had married, Edwin, a romantic sort, had declared his undying love for Eithne, and had gifted the newly-weds Bramble Cottage, conveniently situated in the grounds of his family's estate. Edwin had never married and the three adults had continued over the subsequent years as an amicable threesome, showering their 'shared daughter' Melanie-Ann, with every advantage material and educational.

The fact that her failing 'Uncle' Edwin was still able to live independently was largely due to Dr Mel. She did his shopping and helped sort out his 'issues medical and temporal' as and when they arose. Edwin was one of a clutch of similar elderly people who depended on the saintly if snappish and bossy Dr Mel. Her main helper in this caring enterprise was Irene MacNab, the mother of Danny the Postie.

In frustration more than expectation, Dr Mel had become increasingly involved with the as yet ineffective campaign for a "Frack Free Eastwold". This initiative had been set up by Harry Greene, a handsome and personable bachelor, who had recently manoeuvred himself to become First Spokesperson of the "Eastwold Eco-Warriors".

Becoming suspicious of Harry, Dr Mel had 'investigated' him. It did not take her long to discover that Harry, driving around in his vintage Rolls Royce Silver Shadow, was not the self-styled minor squire he purported to be. Before changing his name by deed poll, Harry Greene had been Bob Browne, Chairman and sole Owner of "RB Financial Advisors Ltd", based in Leeds. In the 2001 financial crash, his small empire had collapsed under unexplained circumstances. This included the

¹ Read more about GCHQ at: <https://www.sis.gov.uk/our-history/gchq.html>

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disappearance of his Clients' investments and RB Financial Advisors Ltd. employees' pension fund. After a short spell hiding out in Bulgaria, the foppish Harry had scuttled to Eastwolde, and set himself up in a small mansion, playing the field among the bored housewives whose husbands worked weekdays in the City of London. Weekends were reserved for divorcees and widows.

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At Bramble Cottage, Dr Mel returned from cyberspace.

'Done! Fuse lit! Stand back Team - and cover your ears!'

The emotional atmosphere changed from heavy grey to light blue, as it often did when Dr Mel was on a high. Now she was filled with energy and nothing was impossible. She raced around her property and checked up on her feathered and furry friends: searching for eggs, feeding, watering, medicating, mucking out, grooming and singing to them, echoing the songs ringing at full volume in her iPod earbuds.

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At about the same time as Danny was making his delivery to Dr Mel, the persistently thirty-something Imelda Crichton, freshly showered from the gym, was sitting behind her desk at Eastwolde Council HQ, sipping a cranberry juice. Her mobile sounded the "*Blue, blue, blue, blue moon*"² ringtone which heralded an incoming personal call. Seeing who was calling, she rose, crossed the room and switched on the "Meeting in Progress" sign, locked her door and lowered the venetian blinds, blocking out the corridor. Now she was safe to talk, she thought.

Imelda was unaware that for the past few months her personal and business calls had been monitored by Anisa Chubatti. Anisa was Chief Technical Officer at NITC, (the New International Telecommunications Consortium), a clandestine UK Government Foreign Office/GCHQ funded organisation that provided surprisingly cheap and powerful 'satellite enabling software' to both UK and International companies). As a consequence almost every telephone and internet provider in the world had this software embedded in its systems. Anisa was one of Dr Mel's most ardent acolytes and had been happy to track, record and forward the sound files to her mentor, without asking awkward questions.

'Oh, yes, Harry, that would be nice. Yes.'

² Blue Moon by the Marcells: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gwpbP9UeLMc>

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'No, not tonight, no can do. It's the big one. Don't you remember?'

'Sorry, no, I'll be whacked after it. No good to man nor beast.'

'Tomorrow? Ye-es.... Yes, that would work. But I've got Pilates until seven.'

'No, Harry, "Cristo's" is a lovely place but not just now, not with the way things are with, well, you know what I mean.'

'Yes, your place would be lovely.'

'I know it'll be from Waitrose, Harry, but I don't mind. Yes, it'll be lovely, honestly.'

'Bye, and love you too. Mmm. Well, alright. I'll bring my overnight bag. Means I can have a tiny wee drinky-poo, eh?'

'Love you too, Harry, dearest. MmWah! Ciao, ciao, Bello.'

Now Imelda must clear the decks with her husband Cyril. Although the forty-mile drive from home to work through the Cotswolds could often be a nightmare, at times like this it proved convenient. If one of her many meetings ran on as they often did, she would stay over, as she planned to do tonight, after the Council Steering Group Meeting. Now she would extend her room stay at the Premier Inn to cover tomorrow as well, and pay with her Council card. She would claim 'back-time' and expenses for tomorrow evening and note in her time-log that she had urgent issues to deal with. Well it's true, thought Imelda, my needs are urgent; and Harry is still keen, still energetic, not like Cyril.

She tapped out her email.

"Cyrie, dear one, did you remember that I'm stuck here tonight? Well, sorry, but the bad news is that I'm stuck here tomorrow night too - a new development going sticky, needing a bit of easing. I'll try to phone you, but don't rely on it.

Remember the window cleaning man needs paid, and would you look in at the stables too, dear one, check that Stalwart is on the mend, see if he needs the Vet again. I'm supposed to be riding him out with the girls on Sunday afternoon.

Thanks dear one,

Meldie xxx"

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It was nearly noon on the same day before Jeff Townsend at the "Eastwolde Investigator" shook off his hangover and found time to check his inbox. He clicked

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through the list, deleting as he skimmed. When he saw the one headed "True Confession", he thought at first it would be a spoof.

"Dear Mr Townsend,

Do you remember we met once? My photo attached. It was after a Council Reception, I think. I remembered how nice you were, how passionate about environmental issues, so I'm getting in touch to ask for your help.

I find that I have been trapped, framed if you like, by someone in the Council who has access to my personal computer files and who has altered crucial details in papers sent under my name to key officials and interested parties. Actually, I think it's not just one person - it's a group, a cabal, if you like.

This is explained by the copies of the 'secret documents' which I have attached.

Contrary to what these documents claim, I can assure you that I have always opposed, on legitimate planning grounds, (see separate document attached), the fracking activities recently put in train by "Freeing-Gas-4Britain".

As these falsified documents show, my true advices have been altered, distorted and misrepresented.

There is also a horrible rumour circulating that I am in a romantic relationship with Harry Greene, a leading figure in the "Frack Free Eastwolde" campaign. It's just not true. If the truth be told, I don't actually like the man. There is something very shady about him, something in his past he is covering up. He is from Leeds originally, I understand. I have also heard malicious whispers saying that some months ago this man Greene made me a present of an expensive stallion. This is a blatant lie. I bought Stalwart, (photo attached), following a big win on "Lord Windermere" at last year's Cheltenham Gold Cup.

I hope that you will be willing to do your duty to our Electorate and use your position as Editor to expose this subterfuge for what it is, a tissue of lies.

If you need anything else, treat me as your 'mole'. Just let me know what you need, but for heaven's sake, not by email. I will completely delete this email from the system, as soon as I have the receipt saying you have opened it. So, please do not try to contact me here at the office, as I am sure that I am being watched. If you want to contact me, ring my personal mobile number below, but not before Thursday morning, please, when I hope to have everything I need to clear my name.

Yours sincerely,

Imelda L. Crichton

Imelda L. Crichton MA (Hons)

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Assistant Head of Planning and Development

Eastwolve Council

Mobile: 07880 836 730

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At 5.33pm the next evening (Wednesday 14 January), Cyril Crichton eased his tired knees downwards and reached forward to empty the dishwasher. He had a King Prawn stir fry planned and had already finished half of his first bottle of Oyster Bay Sauvignon Blanc.

He felt his iPhone vibrate in the back pocket of his designer jeans. He had no reason to suspect the email had come from anyone other than his loving wife.

“Cyrie, dear one, could you possibly help me with a bit of back-up on tonight’s smoozing?

Our ‘mutual friend’ from you know who, has called me to meeting at H. Verde’s place.

Could you join us there? Come just before ten tonight. By that time the heated stuff should be settled. I’ll leave the back door open and you can suddenly appear, as a nice big surprise! That would be fun!

Thanks, you are a treasure, Cyrie. Really and truly, you are.

Meldie xxx

PS I have a nice room for us at the Premier Inn so leave your car there beside mine and take a taxi. This is a Champers occasion! And then there will be ‘afters’! Promise!”

After he read it Cyril began to whistle *“Tie me Kangaroo down, Sport”*, enthusiastically if rather out of tune. Whistling was forbidden when Meldie was at home. He would have to remember to fill the car with petrol before the long drive. Cyril hated night driving nowadays, but when Meldie was in the mood she could be quite passionate. Because of his knees, all that was required of him was to lie back and ‘do his best’ and ‘try not to spoil it for her’.

A few minutes later a copy of this email was forwarded by ‘Imelda’ to a very surprised Jeff Townsend. Since receiving the “True Confession” email, Jeff had restricted his alcohol intake and, fuelled by takeaway pizza, black coffee and heavy duty e-cigarettes, he had had become a vibrant memory of his former competent investigative journalistic self from the old days on the News of the World.

He re-read this latest email and smiled. Jeff had been about to submit his piece to the print-shop. It would be a front page expose setting out an ‘informed version’ of the intrigues behind the Fracking Controversy, the back-stabbing at Eastwolve Council

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and the allegedly illegal dealings of Freeing-Gas-4Britain. For good measure he now spliced in the lurid side-show of extra-marital sex, horses and horse racing, all topics close to the hearts of his rural readers.

Over the last thirty hours, Jeff had learned a great deal about Harry Greene & Bob Browne, and about the Head of Freeing-Gas-4Britain. It was this latter thread that made Jeff realise the National and perhaps International potential of his findings. He had struck a deal with his ex-wife Louisa at the Grapevine News Agency, sending her the bare bones of the fracking controversy story and copies of everything that 'Imelda his Mole' had sent him. Louisa had promised to keep it from his competitors in the print press, and to push it instead to her new lover Trudy at the BBC Newsdesk.

Jeff assumed that this second email had been sent to him as a fortuitous error. This latest information could add extra spice to his already excellent scoop, keeping the story going for another few days. Although he was desperate for a proper drink, he would abstain for another few hours and pay a late night visit to Harry Greene's place, watch from the shadows, take some snaps and record a video on his brand new iPhone6. If what he got was fruity enough he could sell it on to Louisa.

He glanced up at the clock then pressed the "SEND" button, emailing his piece to the print-shop, requesting a first set-up, but asking Susan his DTP Wizard to do a first prep then keep it on "HOLD" and asking her to remain on available on Standby for a possible Final Edit. If he could get some juicy pics he would ask her to add them in, adjusting their sizes to increase his article from five to six pages.

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Friday 16 January, 2015, dawned bright, clear and cold under a cloudless sky of Mediterranean blue.

A weather and emotional 'HIGH' sat stubbornly over Bramble Cottage.

Fortified by a third mug of strong coffee, Dr Mel waited for Danny and his little red van to bring her copy of the Eastwolde Investigator with her mail, and collect her daily gift of a dozen free-range eggs for his mother Irene, who was a keen baker. 'Uncle' Edwin, like most of her elderly charges, had a very sweet tooth.

Dr Mel smiled out of the picture window, looking down along the lane from her bedroom. There were no noisy vehicles this morning.

On Thursday night the "BBC Newsnight" team had reported that Imelda Crichton (nee Laundi), Assistant Head of Planning and Development at Eastwolde Council, had

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been suspended, pending an internal investigation. Harry Greene of Eastwolde Eco-Warriors was helping Police in Eastwolde and Leeds with their enquiries.

Paulo Laundi, Chairman of Freeing-Gas-4Britain was being held by officers from Scotland Yard. Bail had been refused. Signor Laundi was believed to be wanted for questioning in Calabria, Italy. There, it was alleged, Laundi had operated several furtive fracking businesses, using them to dispose of toxic liquids, contravening a raft of planning and environmental regulations. The Carabinieri were helping the Scotland Yard with supplementary information.

The Friday morning "BBC Breakfast Newswire" program had revealed that all 'fracking' operations by Freeing-Gas-4Britain had been halted, that their licence from Eastwolde Council had been withdrawn. Pundits had howled that that fracking in the Cotswolds was a national disgrace and the Prime Minister should order English Heritage and the Environmental Protection Agency to carry out an in-depth investigation.

Eastwolde Council's Communications Officer had Tweeted:

"Eastwolde Council is appalled by what has been uncovered and will vigorously pursue every party responsible and will be seeking substantial financial reparation, without fear of favour."

Dr Mel poured another strong black coffee and added three sugars. Easing her bulk warily back into the hammock, she held the newspaper aloft and scanned through the six pages of Jeff's padded pap and smiled.

'Well, Soph, what do you say? Another success? Oh yes, I think so!'

Sophie answered with a sigh, closed her eye and slipped back to her dream.

Paragon muttered: 'Pieces I've ate. Pieces I've ate. Pieces I've ate.'

Ollie investigated the surface of his tank for possible titbits that he might have missed.