

What tomorrow brings

Glasgow Central Station, November 1955.

The telephone at the Manse rang unanswered. This was my fourth attempt to reach Melinda, my bride-to-be:

Where could she be?

I peered out onto the concourse, my view obscured by a large and very angry woman glaring at me through the door of the call box.

As this was a Saturday night, the Reverend John Poulsen, would be in his study, polishing up his sermon, furiously smoking his pipe, pacing around, orating, script in hand, pointing an accusing finger at Ben the family Labrador. My future father-in-law was at the start of his second year in charge at our Church, a man with evangelical leanings, a breath of fresh air after thirty-two years of slow decline under our previous minister, the Reverend Adam S. Thorton-Young, now in a care home.

Two years earlier, Mr Paulsen had resigned from the Royal Army Medical Core to take up his new vocation as a man of the cloth, arriving with us in Motherwell after his spell at Divinity College in Glasgow.

Mrs Gladys Poulsen would be at the Church with my mother Ellen and my aunts Janette and Sheila, the little group chatting loudly while brushing, dusting, polishing and laying out plates and cups and saucers in the side hall for the family lunch after the service tomorrow, an event organised to celebrate our surprise engagement. But, since there was no telephone at the church, I could not ring her to ask why Melinda was missing.

Abigail, Melinda's twin sister, would be at a Praise Choir in Hamilton with her fiancé Malcolm MacSween, the policeman who had trailed after the Paulsen family when they had moved south from Benbecula.

Melinda's pregnancy was supposed to be a secret but with so many sharing it, I was certain almost everyone in our Church already knew of our sinful behaviour.

A horrible thought flashed across my mind:

Had Melinda had a miscarriage?

If she had lost our baby, how would this affect the arrangements for the double wedding alongside Abigail and Malcolm?

I replaced the handset and pushed the button, retrieved my coins and stepped out of the box. The angry woman brushed past me muttering:

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'And about **bloody** time too. This is a PUBLIC telephone, not your bloody office. Bloody spiv.'

As I stood at the meeting point, my mind ranged back to Friday evening a week ago and the meeting at the Manse.

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Family Conflab

At the planning meeting for the rush wedding, Mrs Poulsen had emphasised that with my extended family invited, the double wedding would seem 'almost normal' in terms of numbers attending. Malcolm, from South Uist, was a Roman Catholic. To marry Abigail, he had converted to Presbyterianism. However, Mr Paulsen would not countenance invitations to his family.

Over recent weeks, through my mother, we had learned John was originally from a farming dynasty in Perthshire. From his wife Gladys, my mother knew a little of the background, something about a long-running family feud over a lost inheritance which John had been promised but did not receive. As a result, only a few of his relatives would attend the wedding. Gladys herself was originally from Southport with only an octogenarian aunt still surviving, a woman too frail to travel.

During the meeting with both sets of parents, it was clear our new minister was disappointed in me for getting his daughter pregnant, his angry bloodshot eyes glowering at me from behind his milk-bottle-bottom specs. Sitting beside me, Melinda did not seem to notice, squeezing my hand and beaming like a Cheshire cat while I kept my head down staring at Ben who lay fast asleep, his head on my feet.

Holding forth, Mrs Poulsen talked on and on about what she had described as 'our wee predicament'. My elder brother Edgar and Melinda's twin sister Abigail were not party to these 'negotiations'. Fortunately, my father was having one of his better days and although silent for most of the time, he was cheery, smiling, not as 'lost' as he had become over the last year or so.

With arrangements finally agreed and my parents on their way home in the pre-booked taxi, the Reverend Poulsen had ushered me into his study, telling his wife we were not to be disturbed before pointedly locking the door, wagging the key at me before dropping it into his desk drawer then slamming it shut.

John Paulsen was an imposing man, a Bible thumper, well over six feet, more than a head taller than me, a man of fixed views, not a person to be reasoned with. As I took my seat on the opposite side of his large, ornate mahogany desk, Ben waddled over to his basket in the corner and fell asleep.

I had already decided to say as little as possible based on a 'least said, soonest mended' approach.

"Archie, I cannot say this is a good day. Not for you, not for Melinda and certainly not for me. The only ones who seem to be happy about this debacle are my Gladys and your

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mother Ellen. Weddings and Babies. That's all they can think about, it seems. Well, at least at long last our twins are to be wed, and not a day too soon. Am I right?"

I lifted my eyes to face his glare and nodded, unsure what he was driving at. Was it because his twins were twenty-four when most of the other girls in the church were already married by the age of twenty-one?

"Now, Archie, I am sure you understand that as Melinda's husband it will be you and not me who will be responsible for her. And to be perfectly honest with you, that will be a huge relief. Am I right?"

"Yes, Mr Poulsen. I promise to do my best for her, for everyone."

"Ah, yes, yes. Well, yes, time will tell. Yes, time will tell. Am I right?"

I nodded again and he ploughed on.

"I take it Melinda has told you that Abigail is expecting too?"

I felt my jaw drop at this astonishing news. Abigail had always struck me as excessively reserved, holding herself under control, apart from that one incident, months ago.

As it had many times over recent weeks, my mind flashed back to the previous summer, trying yet again to figure out the jigsaw puzzle of the events which had led me into this situation. Although I knew I was guilty, there was something else in the mix, something just out of my grasp.

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Whirlwind

When the Billy Graham Crusade arrived in Glasgow in April 1955, Gladys Paulsen had organised a bus to take a large group of the congregation from the Church to a Rally at the Kelvin Hall in Glasgow. It was immediately after this Edgar and I started to go out with the twins, starting that very night after all four of us had gone forward to the stage, to give our lives to Jesus, an act witnessed by thousands.

As we walked the girls back to the Manse from the dropping off point, we ducked into the grounds of our Church, round to the back, kissing and cuddling for the first time. Both twins were stunning, tall redheads, statuesque with good fulsome figures, not quite identical but nearly so, except in their natures. I could hardly believe my luck that Melinda had chosen me over my older brother who was taller and far better looking.

But it was the other image which came back to me again as it had many times, haunting and taunting me.

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It was a perfect summer night in late July, warm, sunny with a cloudless sky. Melinda had told me she was at an evening class for 'advance shorthand typing', a class only available in Glasgow.

At a loose end, I went for a long run on my racing bike, ending up on the shady paths at Chatelherault Park where, in a clearing among the trees, a little way below the main path, I saw Edgar with the twins.

Why was Melinda here? And why was she kissing Edgar? And why were the girls wearing only their bras, their blouses draped over a bush? Why was Edgar's shirt front undone?

After a long lingering embrace with Melinda, he turned to Abigail and kissed her, equally passionately. What surprised me was how Abigail had responded: I could hardly believe my eyes. Her previous demure and reserved behaviour now forgotten, she was pulling him against her, pushing her breasts into him, pressing hands on his buttocks, writhing against him. Erotic, it bordered on obscene, especially with Melinda looking on, smiling oddly.

Feeling guilty, skulking like a furtive two-bit private detective, I had watched the whole scene from behind a tree.

I had no idea how long this had been happening before I saw them but while I was watching, Edgar kissed each of the twins in turn at least four times, maybe five, filling me with a horrible, jealous rage.

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Then, without any warning it was over. Laughing and giggling with their arms around his waist and leaning into him the trio made their way down on to a lower path beside the river. Keeping out of sight I had followed them to Dad's car, watching as they drove away, trying to work out what was happening.

The next evening, after the others had left, Melinda used the key I had given her and joined me in the fireproof document vault in the basement of our offices. With the heavy steel fire door locked from the inside, I had dared to ask her about her meeting with Edgar and Abigail.

Giggling, she had explained:

"Oh silly, silly Archie, please don't be jealous. Did you not see we were only acting? Has Edgar not told you about the play he is directing for the Wishaw Drama Club? Did he not tell you he was auditioning us for the lead female role? It was all just a bit of fun. Like charades."

As she smiled her explanation, she was unbuttoning her blouse and slipping out of her bra before reaching down to release my belt and undo my flies.

"Anyway, you know it's you I want, don't you? And please, please, please, don't tell anyone, especially not Malcolm. Promise?"

This was our fourth time of going all the way. As before, it was another crescendo of ecstasy, so much better than my inexpert, frustrating fumbblings with my previous girlfriend Beryl. What had made it all possible was that before our first time doing it properly, Melinda had provided a box of *Durex* condoms bought from *Boots the Chemists* in Glasgow.

"Archie, it was so easy. I wore Grannie's engagement and wedding rings and an old coat of Mummy's and one of her stupid old Sunday hats. The young woman on the counter just smiled when I asked for a large-sized box."

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Revelation

In the Manse, in John Poulsen's Study, after the planning meeting, I was dragged back to the present by his question, delivered for the second time, and with a note of disbelief in it.

"So, Archie, it seems you didn't know? Am I right?"

I was stunned. Despite the kissing incident with Edgar, I could not imagine Abigail having sex with anyone. She was Head of the Sunday School and had recently been appointed as Leader of the local Girl Guides troop after Beryl had resigned. Abigail was quiet, reserved, and had always struck me as very serious, very devout.

"No, Mr. Paulsen. That's a complete surprise. Does my mother know?"

"Oh yes, Ellen is in the know, on that aspect at least. As you well know Archie, your mother and my Gladys are like two peas in a pod, gossiping and gabbing away like hens clucking in a farmyard. Am I right?"

Again, I nodded. This was true, my mother was a terrible gossip and she had made firm friends with Mrs Poulsen, often dotting in and out of the Manse at odd hours to help with housework or taking meals round for the minister while Mrs Poulsen was away to Edinburgh overnight to her Committees and during her recent trip to the General Assembly as a delegate from the Women's Guild.

"So, Archie, here we have it, eh? Both of my daughters expecting while unmarried but at least they are now engaged. But why did our Abigail have to get back together with Malcolm? Look, I know he has 'converted' to *our* True Faith but what does he really believe in his heart? You know what they say, 'once a Roman Catholic, always a Roman Catholic'. Am I right?"

"But Malcolm does seem like a very pleasant lad. Quiet but always smiling. Cheery. And he clearly adores Abigail."

"*Still waters, Archie, still waters.* Well, I suppose there is no avoiding this now. Since they are pregnant, they must be wed without delay. And you have a right to be told. It's bound to come out eventually I suppose, so here it is, the unvarnished truth."

His pipe needed relighting and when he got it puffing satisfactorily, he leaned back and restarted:

"Archie, I moved us here to Motherwell to get my girls away from Malcom MacSween and his tribe of rogues and fornicators. Have little doubt *that* particular Hebridean predator

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has *not* changed its feathers. The only blessing in this situation is that at least Abigail had the decency to get engaged *before* she had intimate relations with him. Or so she has told Gladys. And if I might add Archie, this whole engagement business between MacSween and my Abigail was done behind my back, without my permission. Gone are the common decencies. All gone. Am I right?"

I looked down and said nothing. This was clearly another dig at me.

The silence continued as he knocked out his pipe, refilled it and got it going again. I looked up then immediately down, closing my eyes to his anger.

"Honestly Archie, I would never have thought you would be the sort to put my daughter in the family way. Never in a month of Sundays. And I was surprised that you chose our Melinda. I was sure that Beryl was much more your type. I hear her father is now in a care home. Best place for him. At least she will be able to reclaim her life again. I've had a confidential chat with her and thankfully she has agreed to take over the Guides from Abigail, after the wedding. I still have to find someone for the Sunday School. But **not** that awful Miss Mulgrew woman, the older one, the one with Sweet Sherry always on her breath and sucking Mint Imperials to hide it, as if we didn't realise. Am I right?"

"About Melinda, Mr Paulsen, I'm so, so sorry. It all happened . . ."

"NO ARCHIBALD BAXTER! NO! Not another word. Do **not** make your sinful act worse by giving me detail I do not wish to know about. I get enough reports of those sorts of confessional outpourings from Gladys about those do-gooding charlatans at the British Legion and, if I might add, from quite a few of my parishioners. There is no shortage of sin in Motherwell, I can tell you. Am I right?"

I decided to try to deflect him.

"I hear Malcolm is expecting to become a Sergeant; soon too, Abigail told Melinda. He seems to be a very hard-working lad, putting in the hours, saving hard,"

"Yes, so I've heard. He was never much of a worker back there in South Uist. Gladys says they have three hundred pounds in the bank. I just hope it is true, our Abigail is like her mother, money just runs through her hands like water. Our Melinda too, so don't say you've not been warned. And have you noticed Archie, there's always a whiff of the drink on him."

"Oh, is there? I don't have a great sense of smell, never have had. But he seems like a very pleasant man, and he is very well spoken. I understand his father runs a successful hotel."

"**A hotel!** Is that what he told you? No Archie, not a hotel, a pub with rooms which he lets out by the hour. A den of iniquity, more like a licensed brothel with Malcolm and Sergeant Seamus MacSween his uncle in on it with the father, turning a blind eye to what

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the reprobates from the military base referred to as their 'night manoeuvres' with those so-called barmaids brought up from Dublin. The number of times I have had to deal with cases of syph No, no. Enough said. I thank our Good Lord, that is all in the past, all in the past. Am I right?"

"Yes, we should all give thanks that Malcom has escaped from such temptations."

I immediately felt uncomfortable with this utterance. It felt off-key, overly pious, given my own recent behaviour. But how had it happened, Melinda's pregnancy, since we had both been very careful, or at least so I thought, restricting ourselves to just once a week.

"Yes Archie, what you say is true, of course it is. Your right, we should always hope for the best even though we might ever fear the worst. *However*, now that your family and mine are to be as one, as it were, I thought I should clear the air, just in case you might hear any untoward scurrilous chatter at the wedding. But now, before I impart this further information, please promise me here and now that you will share what I'm about to tell you with caution. Indeed, I would go further and ask that you keep it entirely to yourself. So, here is my Bible. Will you swear before God to tell not another soul. Please."

Filled with curiosity, I placed my hand on the Bible and said: "I swear before Almighty God that I will keep secret what I am about to hear, provided only that in doing so I will not be breaking the law of the land or cause avoidable suffering to anyone."

"Ah, yes, spoken with a lawyer's tongue. So, Archie, I suppose that's the best I can hope for. Am I right?"

"Yes, Mr Paulsen."

"And while we are on the subject of promotions, I believe congratulations are in order, that you are to be made a **full** Partner when you turn twenty-five, next March, to bring you upsides with Edgar. Am I right?"

"Yes. Because of his increasing, eh, frailty, Dad is already stepping back, working only three mornings a week, hoping to fully retire soon. He told me recently he has been planning this change for years and that now I am to be married, he wants it all to happen soon. Edgar has been encouraged to take over the conveyancing side from him, but he said he finds it a bit boring. My brother has always wanted to do criminal law, which is way out of our league as a Practice. Did you hear Edgar has been offered a job in London? A friend from his days as a student at Oxford. Edgar has always been a high-flyer. My father is livid about it of course but if Edgar leaves, it will mean I will have a free-er hand, perhaps start a proper estate agency and move our offices to the High Street. But that's all in the future though, step by careful step, building slowly by sticking to the bread-and-butter work, maintaining our reputation as a family law firm trusted by the local community."

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"Yes, your brother Edgar Baxter is a most impressive chap, a complete gentleman and an absolute charmer. Look, Archie, I hope you won't mind me saying this but I had hoped that he would make a husband for one of our girls. At first, I thought Melinda would have been his choice, no offence, but we were delighted when he had a pitch for our Abigail, a move spoiled when that MacSween rogue came back on the scene and Gladys's plan went pear-shaped. Who but Our God in Heaven can possibly figure the mind of any woman. Am I right?"

"Mother says Edgar seems to have found a new girl, someone in the drama club, she thinks. Edgar is most secretive when it comes to his romances, as he is about most things."

"Right then Archibald Baxter, so be it. Another lost opportunity. But, as Gladys insists, it is only fair that you know a bit about our Melinda and we must trust that, like us, you will look on the positive side of all this. And before I say another word, may I add that Gladys and I truly thank our Good Lord that you and Melinda are to be wedded. We're sure when she settles to it, you will make a fine couple. Now, just a minute while I gather my thoughts, so that I get my words exactly right."

He fiddled with his pipe, his bushy eyebrows twitching, a trait I had not seen before. With his chin on his chest, he took an extra-long breath, raise his head, looked over to Ben, looked back to me, almost spoke then remembered to re-light his pipe. When it was puffing, he leaned forward and stared intently at me with a pleading look in his eyes, his brow deeply furrowed.

"Now, what I must tell you is that Melinda has been engaged before. It was a mistake. She was only eighteen. The man was a Captain in the Signals Regiment. We were in York, back then. Edwin was one of their golden boys. His father is a Brigadier and Edwin was heading for great things, a high-flyer, a bit like Edgar but more so, if that's possible. Anyway, it was all going along very nicely but, well, unfortunately, unbeknown to us, Melinda was also seeing someone else at the same time. Indeed, when it all came out in the wash, so to speak, she was having **two** other affairs. No names, no pack drill just to say one was quite a bit older, a townie, her boss, married with teenage children, tragic, split the couple, led to a messy divorce, man took his own life, tragic. The other boulder was a fellow officer, my second-in-command. Terrance Bradley was a well-known philanderer. But he gave me his word and I foolishly trusted him. When it leaked out, there was a sort of minor scandal. Even got a write up in the local newspapers. That's when I moved us to Benbecula. No, Archie, let me be utterly truthful, I was **banished** to the Outer Hebrides. I had hoped it would all settle but in the Armed Forces the stink of scandal is hard to throw off. We kept very close tabs on our Melinda after that. Then, when we discovered that our Abigail had taken up with PC Malcolm MacSween we feared the worst. Clearly my career in the Army was going nowhere and so I resigned and decided to start afresh, moving to Glasgow for basic training as it were, and then, when the

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position here came up, I thought we were home and dry. When MacSween turned up, I feared the rumours about Melinda and Abigail would begin to circulate but no, it seems he either did not know about the York scandal or has been holding this over Abigail, planning to threaten me with it if I try to block their marriage. Since I learned Abigail is expecting, I have been praying Malcolm has not said anything to you. Am I right?"

I looked away, across at the sleeping Ben, trying to sort out the implications of these further revelations.

"Yes. Yes. Of course. Of course. Yes, take your time Archie. It's a lot to take in. Gladys said not to tell you everything but, well, that sort of subterfuge is not in my make-up. Tell the truth and shame the Devil. Am I right?"

Realising the room was a fug of smoke, John Poulsen rose from his seat, turned, reached across to lower the top window sash, edging the bottom before closing the curtains. Re-seated, he cleaned and re-filled his pipe. Puffing again, he closed his eyes, waiting for my response.

Watching, I saw his lips moving slightly and thought he might be praying.

"No, Mr Poulsen, Malcolm has not said anything of this to me. In fact, truth be told, I hardly know him. Like Abigail, he seems to be a nice, quite a quiet sort of chap. At least with me. As I said earlier, I was surprised, very surprised when you told me that Abigail is expecting a baby."

"Archie, knowing how close these two are, it is inconceivable Melinda did not know about Abigail and, given your personal situation, given that you have admitted your intimacy with Melinda, I had assumed you must surely know Abigail was also pregnant. According to Gladys they are both three months gone, so no obvious swelling yet and that is why we are desperate to get this double wedding behind us, before eyebrows are raised. Later, as married women, we will all just have to make the best of our new situation. At least the twins will be beyond reproach at that stage, at least that's what we are hoping for. Am I right?"

"Yes. Yes. Should I tell my parents about any of this, about York and Benbecula?"

"No Archie, please, NO! For God's Sake NO! Don't you see that's why I asked you to swear on the Bible. No, no, no. It's been hard enough keeping Gladys under control since she became so pally with Ellen. Please, Archie, please just let us get this wedding business done and dusted and we can go forward from there. Once the babies arrive, everything else will be forgotten. Am I right?"

"Right then, Mr Poulsen, so be it."

"So, Archie, you *do* agree to stay silent and confirm to me now that you will still marry Melinda?"

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"Yes, Mr Poulsen. I love Melinda with all my heart. And really, let's face it, none of us are perfect, are we?"

He stood, sobbed, offered me his hand, which was trembling slightly. We shook vigorously then he fumbled open the drawer, handed me the key, pointing to the door, tears filling his eyes. I walked across with him behind me. He shoed out Ben and as I turned to leave, I heard him re-locking the door.

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Limbo

The concourse was thronged with arriving and departing passengers as busy trains arrived and departed. I scanned the station concourse and checked again to be sure Melinda was not there. From the Arrivals display, the next train from Motherwell would not be for another hour, slightly more.

I checked my watch; nine o'clock. Melinda was an hour-and-a-half late. We had missed the film now. When she eventually arrived, we would probably head straight back to Motherwell, unless she had other ideas. Maybe we would go dancing?

Still at my vantage point under the Meeting Clock, I heard a train whistle sound long and loudly followed immediately by the Stationmaster announcing on the Tannoy the imminent departure of an overnight train to London.

Seconds later, the same train whistled again. From the corner of my eye, I saw three tall people lumbering towards the London platform, hefting large suitcases. All three were wearing identical mackintoshes, dark grey, ankle length. The women were sporting shiny canary yellow Sou'westers, the man under a shiny, red and white polka dot Bowler. He ran ahead, waving something which might have been a five-pound note. Snatching the money, the ticket inspector opened the gate and stood aside, letting them through without checking their tickets. With shrieks of glee, the happy group bundled onto the train just as it began to move away from the platform.

Something about the incident rankled. The trio seemed somehow familiar.

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At six minutes after ten o'clock, I gave up waiting and raced for the return train for Motherwell.

It was crowded and when I found a seat, I realised too late that I was directly opposite my ex-girlfriend, Beryl Thornton-Young. Our eyes met briefly before she re-focussed on her book. Looking in the window at her reflection, I saw her sneaking glances at me from time to time. She was wearing gloves but after a few minutes, she removed the glove from her left hand to reveal a huge engagement ring. It looked very expensive, more than twice the size of the one I had recently bought for Melinda, from Laing's the Jewellers, the most prestigious establishment in the Argyle Arcade, a ring which had cost me five hundred guineas, using up more than half my savings.

I was astounded to discover my girlfriend of nearly three years standing was now engaged. There had been no word of a new boyfriend since our break-up months earlier,

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after the Billy Graham Rally, the day after I started going out with Melinda. When I broke the news to her that I had at last found a girl I loved, Beryl had sobbed, turned and walked away, throwing a little wave over her shoulder. For days afterwards I was racked by guilt. However, the feeling soon passed as all thought of Beryl was wiped from my memory by Melinda and her passionate kisses.

Throughout the slow, stop-start journey, I watched Beryl's reflection as she looked from her book to her ring, a tiny smile playing on her lips, her lovely brown eyes twinkling. After a while I noticed she did not turn any pages, no doubt thinking of her new fiancé. I wondered; were had she met him? What was he like? Did he also work at the Scottish Legal Life Association in Bothwell Street? Was he a Chartered Accountant or, like Beryl, an Actuary, one of the senior management team?

At Motherwell, Beryl rose first. I waited until she was well ahead before following her at a distance. As she walked jauntily to the barrier, wearing a fitted coat and swinging her small shapely bottom, it was evident there was something different about her manner. There was a new sort of 'swagger' about her, a new confidence, more self-assurance. This must be due to the new man in her life, I thought, feeling a tinge of regret. Or was it jealousy?

To delay myself further, I went to the Lavatory, used the toilet, washed my hands, combed my hair and adjusted my bow tie. Smiling at my reflection, I set my new hat at a jaunty angle. I seldom wore hats but this one, a beige Trilby with a peacock-eye feather, was an engagement present from Melinda. I was pleased with my new suit, bought for our short honeymoon to Gleneagles Hotel. This grand resort was Melinda's choice and she had insisted we must have a Bridal Suite. She had also insisted she must be allowed to take charge, making all the arrangements, including First Class train travel and a hotel limousine pre-booked to be sure we would arrive in style. I had paid the money into her account to enable her to settle the amounts due to the various parties using her chequebook.

Although this further substantial outlay had made another dent in my savings, I still had enough for a down payment on a cottage bungalow when a suitable one came up in a nice area. I had been promised a good mortgage rate from the Airdrie Savings Bank, where my cousin Albert was the assistant manager. While we waited, we would make do in Granny's old ground floor tenement flat in Stonehouse, which meant changing buses twice to get to Motherwell, unless I could prise Dad's car away from Edgar, who seemed to think it was for his use alone.

As I was about to head for the bus terminus, I stopped at the exit to stare out at the downpour. Earlier, when I had left home, there had been no hint of rain. I looked across but there were no taxis at the rank. A waiting car honked its horn. I peered towards it. The window wound down and Beryl called across:

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'Archie, can I give you a lift home? Come on. I won't bite you.'

The car was a Vauxhall Wyvern. When I checked the registration plate, I thought:

Why is Beryl driving my Dad's car. Has she borrowed it from Edgar? And when did she learn to drive?

I waved and raced across through the teeming rain to slide into the passenger seat.

'Thank you, Beryl, this is most gracious of you. I had no idea you could drive.'

'I passed my test two weeks ago, first time! As you know, Daddy is now in a care home, beyond complaining about women drivers so I decided it was time to break the mould, splash out. I thought if Gladys Poulsen and your mother can drive, so can I. And it's not as if I don't know this old jalopy, is it? After all the hours you and I spent in the back, parked in dark country lanes. So, when Edgar offered it to me, I decided to use part of my nest egg to go ahead and buy it.'

'**Edgar** sold you Dad's car. Did he legally own it?'

'Yes, he had all the paperwork. And you know me, I insisted on seeing it before I agreed.'

'But why you? He knew I always wanted this car. So, has he bought a new one?'

'No, it seems in London everyone gets around on the Tube or uses taxis.'

'**London?** Has he said he is *definitely* moving to London?'

'He didn't *actually* say he had accepted the post, although it was strongly implied. You know what he's like. *Evasive* might be the best word or maybe even *shifty*? Apparently, it is the sort of work he has always wanted. He said if he accepts, they will start him off as a 'Partner Designate' for the first six months. From the way he went on and on about it, I doubt he will ever come back to boring old Motherwell, will he? I certainly hope not anyway.'

'Why do you say that?'

'Oh, various reasons but mainly because he is a lecher. In the car, when we took it for a test drive, he tried to grope me. Well, he won't do that again in a hurry, not to me anyway. I think I broke his pinkie; I certainly hope so. But that's the least of it, as you will probably discover for yourself, in due course.'

'What do you mean?'

'Look, Archie Baxter, surely you know me better than that, don't you? You don't expect me to go around telling tales out of school, do you? I suggest you wait and see what tomorrow brings.'

Beryl drew up beside the driveway to our house.

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'Well, here we are. *'Door to door service and no charge'*, as you used to say to me, back in the day. Shall I see you tomorrow then, first thing, at the eight o'clock prayer meeting?'

'Yes, I'll see you there. I'm on Door Duty afterwards.'

'Yes, I know because I'm the rota secretary, remember. And you've missed the last three months of duty, did you not realise?'

'No, sorry.'

'And remember, Archie, be there in good time. After all, *'Punctuality is next to Godliness'*, as I heard our new minister say to old Miss Fraser a few weeks ago, when she came hirpling in twenty minutes late because her bus broke down.'

'Yes, well, anyway, Beryl, thanks, that was very kind of you. *Night-night.*'

'Archie?'

'Yes?'

'You forgot to add, *'Sleep tight and don't let the bugs bite''*

'Ha-Ha. Beryl, can I just say something, please. Look, I'm really, really sorry about, well, you know. And I want to also say, if it's okay with you, now that your, eh, well, you know, now you are going out with someone else, that you seem quite different, somehow. Perhaps it's your new hairdo? Which I think really, really suits you. And your new outfit too, and your new coat. The whole new look, the style. Well, it is all just perfect for you, actually.'

'Thank you, Archie. And if I might say in return, I like your new suit. Not sure about the hat or the pink bow tie, though. But yes, your suit, it's very smart.'

'And Beryl, congratulations to you and your fiancé. I hope you will both be very happy. Is the wedding to be soon?'

'Ah, that's a tough one. Sorry, hard to say. How can I put it? Yes, I think of it as being like a jigsaw puzzle with some bits hidden, but not missing, if that makes sense. Anyway, with a bit of luck, you never know, here's hoping, eh?'

'Sorry Beryl, you've completely lost me there.'

'Well, never mind. Here, take my collapsing umbrella, I'll get it back in the morning. They said on the wireless this is just the start and that this heavy rain is set to last for the next week, on and off.'

What tomorrow brings

Distraught

I ran through the teeming rain to our front door and pulled on the bell. I tugged twice more before Mum answered. She was wearing her oldest dressing gown with her rollers in and giving off a stench of ammonia hair colouring even I could smell.

'There you are at last, Archie. Thank goodness you made it through that downpour without getting your new suit soaked. Did you take a taxi? Where did you get the brolly? Did Melinda like the film? *East of Eden*, was it? Did her dress fitting go well? Did Abigail make it into Glasgow on time before the shop closed. I heard she missed her train. Evelyn Waugh saw her getting into a taxi at Motherwell station. She had to share with someone, Evelyn said, but she didn't see who it was. I do hope this dreadful weather clears away for the wedding. Because of the rain, there was only six of us at the Tea Dance this evening at the British Legion. And no Gladys even though she said she would come. And no men to dance with. And we were lumbered with Marie McGoldrick playing the piano because your Dad is poorly again and stayed home to listen to the radio play. That woman would do better wearing boxing gloves. NO ARCHIE! Give me that brolly. CAREFUL! Don't drip it all over my hall. Do you want a cuppa before you turn in?'

'Mum, listen to me, just for once, will you? Please.'

'Archie, no need to use that tone of voice, it's, well, ungentlemanly.'

'Mum, Melinda didn't turn up tonight. I'm really worried about her. I tried to telephone the Manse from a call box at Central Station but there was no reply. I'll just ring now, to check if the twins are home safe and sound?'

'Ah! No, Archie, don't do that! I was round there earlier. Gladys is feeling poorly, some sort of bad news. It has knocked John for six and he has locked himself in his Study. She wouldn't say what it was, which is not like her. All I could get from her was that it is something to do with the girls. She returned to the Manse shortly after the girls had left, about three o'clock, she said. It seems that he was in tears, Then he locked himself in his study, then re-opened the door and shooed out Ben and locked himself in again, which is always a bad sign, she said. She thinks he's back on the whisky. He was due at an AA meeting this afternoon but he didn't go. He tells everyone he's a Counsellor, but it seems he still has lapses.

'So, you're saying the John Paulsen is an alcoholic? How long have you known?'

'But Archie, *surely* he must have told you, that night after we all agreed to the details for the wedding. You know, afterwards, when he took you into his Study. He told Gladys he was happy to get it off his chest, man to man. You do realise that Gladys and I are

What tomorrow brings

hoping this wedding to Melinda will bring some greater stability to John and his girls. Gladys is at the end of her tether with it all. As you know, they are both very worried about the twins, with them **both** being pregnant and unmarried. This whole kerfuffle is their worst nightmare come true. She's *distraught*, she said.'

'Well, he did say a few things of a confidential nature but nothing about being an alcoholic. I can't really follow what's going on here. Where is Melinda?'

'Archie, Archie, surely you must have known everyone looks to **you** for support, guidance. Don't you?'

'Oh, do they? I had no idea I was so popular when everyone just loves Edgar to pieces, don't they?'

This was the first time in my life I had ever spoken sharply to my mother. Her face fell and tears welled up. She stepped forward and threw herself on me. Another first.

'Oh Archie, forgive me. But I do love you too, honestly. It's just that Edgar is, well, so sort of 'huggable', even when you're sure he is fibbing or being naughty. But we all know who has the steel and the steadiness and that's you, Archie. Surely you must know how everyone looks up to you? Even your father, especially recently. He said a few days ago he's going to make you a full partner, did he tell you?'

'Well Mum, given they all **respect me so much**, should I go round to the Manse right now, see if I can help John and Gladys, check if Melinda and Abigail are home yet. Look at it out there, it is blowing a gale and sheeting hail. They could die of pneumonia if they get caught in this. I'll just go up and change into walking gear. Would you look out my golfing waterproofs and my wellies, please? After all, it's only twenty minutes away.'

'**No Archie!** Will you **please** listen to me? I'm just this minute off the telephone to Gladys. Melinda isn't there. Neither is Abigail. But Gladys is not really worried about them. She thinks they must be staying in Glasgow somewhere, maybe at that girl Marion's flat, the one from Abigail's office. She lives near Central Station, we think. Gladys said she thinks the trains might be off now because of this weather. Flooding, she said.'

'Is Edgar upstairs? He might know something?'

'No. Edgar told me just after lunchtime he was moving out, moving away to London, something about a new start. Your Dad has the details but he told me he is 'sworn to silence' on the subject. And *please* don't try to wake him, Archie. I gave him two of his pills with his hot toddy nightcap but when I got back off the telephone from Gladys just then, he was still weeping like a baby, so I gave him another two and a top-up toddy and that finally put him over.'

'**Four** of those sleeping pills. And with whisky? How long has this being going on?'

What tomorrow brings

'Oh *Archie*, you're such a worrier. Your father will be fine in the morning, you'll see. And don't fret yourself about the girls. All this nonsense will sort itself out, you'll see. Now, ***up you go to bed***, and I'll bring you up a cuppa. Would you like a couple of slices of cheese on toast slathered with brown sauce? You know, like we used to have at *Granny's* over in *Stonehouse*?'

At the mention of food, I realised my tummy was rumbling. I hadn't had anything to eat since a sandwich at lunchtime. My head was thumping, and my throat was parched, tickly. I wondered if I was about to catch another winter cold. Mum was right, I should give the *Poulsens* time. By tomorrow, the situation would have sorted itself out. There would be a simple explanation for everything.

'Yes thanks, Mum, I'm starving.'

What tomorrow brings

The Day After

I woke just after six. I was exhausted, I had hardly slept a wink.

I could hear agitated voices rising from the hallway below, Mum and Gladys Paulsen.

I heard Mum's heavy tread as she thumped up the stairs, stopping every few steps, wheezing and sobbing, muttering to herself. She cleared her throat then tapped on my door.

'Archie, would you please get up and join us in the kitchen, Gladys is here. Bad news, I'm afraid. And your Dad is acting oddly, very confused, calling me 'Sadie', as if I was his mother. I think he must have had another wee turn. He's wearing an old gardening jacket and dirty corduroys and wellies but he's insisting he's ready for you to run him to church to get his organ sorted out. Did you know the organ pipes need 'a good blow-out'? Archie, what does 'a blow-out' mean?'

'OK Mum, with you right away.'

'Archie, just to let you know, I've left a message with Alice Mackie, the Doctor's wife but Dougal's gone off to do salmon fishing, near Berwick-on-Tweed. He's not expected home until late afternoon, she said. Should I try to call a taxi for you, so you can take your Dad to hospital? And can you hurry up and come down and help us sort out the muddle?'

'Mum, I **told you** I'm coming but let me have a quick wash and brush up first. Oh, and Mum, are the girls back home, at the Manse?'

'No, Archie. No. But I'd better leave that to Gladys to explain. I'll make a pot of porridge, will I?'

'Thanks.'

I heard her sigh, sob and turn away, muttering to herself:

*'Oh My Dear Lord, what **will** become of us all? Why did he not stick with Beryl. If only she was more **amenable**. Far too many fixed ideas in her head, that one. Still, she would have been better than we've ended up with now. Oh Gladys, Gladys, what **have** we done?'*

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Downstairs, entering the kitchen, I saw Mum had defaulted to her opt out in times of crisis, her flour-covered hands kneading a large ball of dough. Mum had once been a Domestic Science teacher.

What tomorrow brings

Gladys was sitting at a corner of the kitchen table, her back to the door, with a pot of tea and a half-filled ashtray, chain smoking. She was still wearing her overcoat, dripping wet puddles on the linoleum. Beside the ashtray there was an empty bottle of *Sanatogen* tonic wine and a half-filled tumbler with two sets of lipstick on the rim. I checked; the brighter red lipstick was Mum's.

Dad stood on the far side of the kitchen, in the corner, looking out of the window, rocking backwards and forwards, his eyes vacant. He seemed hunched, diminished, saliva drooling from his chin onto his cardigan. It was evident he had suffered another minor stroke, another step on his journey to oblivion. Seeing him like this, I was once again glad I had been adopted. This fact had never been revealed by my 'parents', a secret I had discovered by accident as a summer office boy aged fourteen, sorting files in the basement document vault.

The pre-dawn sky was pitch black. Incessant salvos of hail battered the steamed-up glass like the ominous rattle of a snare drum awaiting the crescendo crash of cymbals.

I took a seat across the table from our Minister's wife. She looked me in the eye then altered her gaze to stare evasively over my shoulder as she stubbed out a half-smoked cigarette then immediately lit another, flicking her petrol lighter expertly. She took a huge drag, coughed, spluttered, then wiped a gob of dark red phlegm into a handkerchief. I had heard a rumour that, like my mother, Gladys was a secret smoker but I had never seen her actually smoking before.

Mum swooped in with a fresh bottle of *Sanatogen* and topped up the tumbler.

Gladys took a large slug, then began to speak:

'Archie, I really don't know where to start, what to say.'

'Perhaps we should start with a word of prayer?'

She nodded, stubbed out her cigarette and bowed her head.

Behind me, my father muttered, '*Mummy, I need a pee-pee*' and shuffled out of the room.

Mum washed her hands and sat beside me while we waited and listened until father flushed the downstairs toilet before climbing the stairs to his bedroom.

I waited until we heard him slam his door shut then launched into my prayer, hoping I would not get too carried away, as I have been known to do.

'Dear Father God, we your children come before you in prayer, asking your forgiveness as we approach your Throne of Mercy. Please help each of us to speak the whole truth to each other and unburden our hearts, no matter how painful and embarrassing that might be for us.'

What tomorrow brings

I counted to sixty, then continued.

'Our Father God, please hear my confession with a kindly ear. I am no longer worthy to be an Elder in your Church or Captain of the Boys' Brigade. I have been weak and sinful and I have not been faithful to the promises I made before Your Band of Angels at the Kelvin Hall. I confess that, like the apostle Peter, within hours of making my commitment, I willingly and deliberately yielded to temptation, allowing my mind to be overwhelmed by lusting of the flesh. I also confess that during the months since that first sinful night, I have repeatedly resisted the Holy Spirit, wilfully supressing His Voice. Please forgive me and wash me clean with the Blood of the Lamb, shed freely for us all by your Beloved Son, Our Lord Jesus Christ.'

I waited a few seconds for dramatic effect before continuing.

'Dear Father, as we three bow our heads before you, please hear the words we send up to You now in silence. This we ask in Jesus Precious Name. Amen.'

'Amen,' said my Mum in a tiny whisper.

'Amen,' added Gladys Paulsen, reaching for her cigarettes. 'Yes, and well said Archie. You're good at praying, you always have been.'

Keeping my head down in silence, I focussed on the face of my watch and waited as three long minutes ticked by then said:

'Thank you, Father God.'

Gladys coughed, stubbed out her cigarette, re-lit another, coughed, cleared her throat of phlegm into her handkerchief then sipped some tea. Almost as an afterthought, she gulped down the last of the *Sanatogen*. Mum reached forward and topped up the tumbler.

Only then did Gladys begin her story.

'Archie, while I am sure that God will forgive me, I am not sure if **you** will ever be able to do so.'

'Mrs Paulsen, is Melinda safe and well? And Abigail?'

'Yes. They made a call to the Manse when they arrived in London. I told them about their father but they are determined to go ahead with their plan. As we speak they will be boarding a ship, heading for Canada.'

'**Canada?**'

'Yes, Archie, I'm sorry to be the one to have to tell you but the twins are emigrating with your brother Edgar. And just to set both your minds at rest, it turns out that neither of the girls are expecting. Before I got home, they told John everything. They were quite blasé about it, he said, saying it was all a sham, a ruse dreamt up to dupe you and Malcolm.'

What tomorrow brings

The ring you bought Melinda has been returned to the shop. The eighty-five percent refund she received is paying for their passage to Canada. From what the girls said to John, Edgar is starting in the Toronto office of a firm whose HQ is in London. In the new office he will be number two alongside Tom MacMenemy, his roommate from Oxford, the boy from Fettes' College, the one whose father is a London Stockbroker.'

My mind was racing. The image of the two tall girls and the man in the polka-dot Bowler running across the concourse for the London train flashed across my mind and I was certain now who I had seen.

The pieces began to fall into place:

The kissing incident a Chatelherault.

Melinda's insistence it would be bad luck to get her engagement ring engraved before she had had a chance to show it to Abigail, in the off chance she might want to change it.

And the Gleneagles Hotel booking.

Everything.

Probably even the incident on the bus on the way home after the Billy Graham Rally with Melinda sitting on my lap, squirming her bottom down onto me, causing my embarrassing erection and her whispers:

"Oh, very nice, Archie. And 'big' too!"

I saw now I had been played for a fool.

So be it. There was no point in making a scene.

Then it hit me full force. I had been lucky.

A marriage to Melinda Poulsen would have been disastrous.

With Edgar gone for good and Dad now no longer a factor, I could put my expansion plans for the office in place, at long last.

I took a deep breath and hoped to find suitable words.

'Ah, I suppose we must be thankful at least that all three are safe and well. From what you've told me, I hope Melinda and Abigail find happiness. Edgar too.'

'Oh, Archie, how nice of you to take it so well. We thought you would be incandescent, didn't we Ellen?'

I glanced at Mum. Her head was down, tears in her eyes.

'No, Mrs Poulsen. I always thought Melinda was far, far too, eh, how shall I put it, far too, eh, 'special' to settle for me. I think I realise now that Edgar is much more suitable

What tomorrow brings

for her. Now, moving on, is Mr Paulsen feeling better this morning? Mum said he took it very badly, yesterday.'

'You didn't tell him, Ellen?'

'No, Gladys, it was not my place to break the bad news, was it?'

'Archie, my John passed on during the night and is now with The Lord.'

'Oh, please accept my condolences. What happened, if you can bare to share?'

'It was tragic, really. After he locked himself in his study, I called to him through the door but he wouldn't answer, just moving on from one Hymn or Psalm to the next. He loved to sing, as you know.'

'Was it a heart attack? Or a seizure, like my father?'

'No, not really. He was locked in his study. As I said, I did call many times but he just kept singing. Then, at around midnight, he stopped. I called and called but there was no answer. Ben was howling, so I knew something was badly wrong. I went round outside, getting soaked in the process and looked in through the gap in the curtains. He was lying face down, clutching an empty bottle of whisky. I called the Police and Ambulance. It was too late. My John was already dead. The nice Police sergeant worked out what had happened. He said my John had tripped on a rug and smacked his head on a corner of the desk. You could see the blood. He agreed to write it up as a domestic accident and omit the part about the three empty bottles lying beside him. We checked using John's keys and found others, two empty and four full, in a cupboard he always kept locked. The sergeant also agreed to say nothing about the letter from Edgar. All he said, very quietly was "*Ah, dearie, dearie me. Well then Mrs Poulsen, families will be families.*" I thought that was very kind of him.'

She reached down into her handbag, scrabbled, then passed an envelope across the table to me.

'What Edgar describes here in this short note is a variant of what my twins did in Benbecula. They also did something like it before that, in York. Oh, Archie, Ellen, it is a truly dreadful thing to have to admit that my own daughters are deranged, sex mad and without a shred of moral conscience.'

Mum rose and moved to take a seat beside Mrs Poulsen, wrapping her arm around her shoulder, pulling her friend's head onto her ample bosom.

'Oh Gladys, why did you not tell me what they were really like. I thought we agreed to share everything.'

Gladys shrugged her shoulders and added, 'Archie, when you read that, I suggest you burn it in the grate over there. I hope you agree it is far too horrible to keep or share.'

What tomorrow brings

I slid out the short note., immediately recognising the typeface.

To Archie Baxter and anyone else who wants to know what happened.

When you read this, I expect we shall be well on our way to Canada.

Poor Archie, my pious, sanctimonious little brother, you thought you had found true love with Melinda!

Archie, that was LUST, not love. And let me tell you, little brother, LUST is all there really is! Some advice: when the LUST runs out, move on.

Oh, yes, and thanks for the engagement ring, it was that money which finally swung it for us.

And poor old Malcom too, policeman plod, thick as a brick. Suckered in by a simple love letter, he came trotting down to Glasgow. All it took was a few rounds of 'you know what'. After that he was happy to open a joint account with Abigail, working his socks off and building up a nest egg which she cashed up a few days ago. Abigail even got his mother's engagement ring, a family heirloom and a real beauty too which fetched £123 at an auction.

And lucky me, now I have two girls who cannot get enough of me! Like three little rabbits under the covers. Two on one, delicious. Do try this if you can get it!

And Archie, check the petty cash and the client monies account. I've only taken my fair compensation, as you will discover. My share of the business is yours now, you are welcome to it.

Well, I hope you have fun sorting out the mess in sunny old Motherwell, what a godforsaken place to live!

If you are ever in Toronto, do not bother to look us up!

Edgar.

I decided it was best not to share it with Mum although I was almost certain she would wheedle it all out of Gladys in due course. I tore off the bottom section as proof I was due Edgar's share and shredded the upper part. As I threw the confetti onto the coals I thought:

Good riddance!

I made my decision.

It was time to try for humble pie if it was on offer.

What tomorrow brings

Resolution

At the telephone table by the front door, I rang Beryl. My call was answered at the second ring.

'**Archie!** Good morning, did you sleep well?'

'Beryl, how did you know it was me?'

'Who else would ring me at this unearthly hour on a Sunday morning?'

'Your fiancé, perhaps?'

'Do I have a fiancé?'

'Well, you were flashing a fancy engagement ring last night, on the train, were you not?'

'Ah, well, actually that was my dear departed mother's ring. I decided to give it an outing, since it was a special occasion. But it's quite awful, isn't it. *Ostentatious*, is the word, I think. I did put it in for auction the other day, one of those lunchtime ones at McTear's' then something happened to make me change my mind and I withdrew it at the last minute.'

From the kitchen, the wireless began to play dance music. A big band sound, loud, raucous, trumpets, saxophones and trombones blaring. Was Mum trying to distract Gladys, cheer her up? Through the frosted glass panel in the door, I saw the outline of the two women dancing, heard them singing along.

Freeing the extension I stepped into the Front Parlour, eased the cord under the door and closed it behind me.

'Beryl, how much do you know about the goings on with the Poulsens?'

'Well, do you remember my cousin, the police sergeant?'

'"Big Ears", from Airdrie?'

'Yes, that's the one. As he was going off duty, Victor rang me to break the news about John Paulsen's sad demise. A trip, perhaps but the man was a drunk. You could always smell it on him, even though he was trying to mask it with his smoking. Gladys too. And your sainted mother smoking and drinking with her behind everyone's back, but I suppose you were oblivious, with your poor sense of smell.'

'Yes, I did hear about John Poulsen. But Mum isn't much of a drinker, not really. Only the very occasional glass of Sanatogen, for her nerves.'

What tomorrow brings

'OK Archie, have it your own way, but I've actually seen your mother coming out of that off-license delicatessen in Glasgow with her shopping bag clinking, full of bottles. Not once or twice, dozens of times.'

'Really?'

'Yes. And those Paulsen twins, they are smokers and drinkers too, didn't you know? And they are so, so **forward**. 'Brazen Tarts' are the words which leap to my lips every time I see them. Just *not* what anyone might expect of daughters of the Manse. But I don't suppose you agree, do you?'

'Yes, Beryl. Yes, actually I **do** agree with you. I've only just learned the truth about them, just a few minutes ago, from Gladys. From what she said, I can see how they went about it, setting me up, right from the start. What a fool I've been.'

'Listen, Archie, I know it was a bit underhand but well, all's fair in love and war, so, after Melinda stole you away from me, I asked Victor to try to find out what happened while they were on Benbecula by using the Police grapevine. **Well**, from what he told me, I could see this moment coming. Not John Paulson's death, that was accidental, but most of the other things, the fake pregnancies and so on. All I had to do was hold my tongue and wait.' Do you agree, Archie, dear?'

'Actually Beryl, I was calling to tell you what I've just learned. Gladys has just confessed to me, giving a credible version which fits the facts as I know them. It seems the three of them, the twins and Edgar, are in transit for Canada, eloping as a *threesome*. Can you credit it?'

'Yes, I know some of this Archie. I was in *Rogano's* yesterday evening, on my own. Remember we went there last year, for my birthday? I was already seated when in they came as bold as brass, talking noisily. They had already been drinking, all three of them tipsy. They were given a booth near me, across the aisle, to the side. From the start they were talking quite openly about you and Malcolm, joking about their deception, guzzling Champagne, three bottles. And they were smoking cigars, the girls too. At every opportunity they were kissing and touching each other. It was embarrassing. No, it was disgusting, actually. I'm sorry to admit but the word which came to mind last night, was not 'tarts' but 'harlots.'

'Beryl, when Gladys told me they had gone for good, all three together, well, I can honestly say it was a massive relief.'

'Archie, would you like to start over, you and me? Is that why you telephoned? I certainly hope so.'

'Yes. Yes, please Beryl, if you will have me. That's exactly why I called, to test the waters, so to speak.'

What tomorrow brings

'**Me too Archie!** I have been longing for this call and I'm more than willing to give our relationship another chance to blossom, my dearest, dearest one. But I do have one condition. I'm not sure if you will agree but, I'll tell you straight, for me its non-negotiable.'

'Yes?'

'Let's move somewhere new, away from the gossips who would make our lives a misery. Let's go somewhere nice and dry and sunny. *Scottish Legal* are opening an office in Perth, the Perth in Western Australia and they want me to head it up. They are very keen I accept. I'm sure I could swing it if you want to come with me, as my office manager cum legal adviser. To fit with their criteria, we must go as a married couple, as you might expect. Look, Archie, I've checked it all out. I sent for the papers and honestly, you would scoosh those local exams. I mean, after all, you have a First-Class Honours degree from Glasgow University. What do you say?'

'Beryl, I think we should meet to discuss this face to face, *please*. It is a very big step. And Australia is a very long way to go. And what would happen to my parents?'

'Archie, I'm happy to come over and collect you but only if you pack your bags and come to live here with me from now on. But I repeat, come what may, I **am** most definitely going to Australia, with or without you. Listen, Archie, you know what would happen if you stayed there with her. Ellen Baxter would work on you. She would never let you go, you know that. We've talked about this so many times in the past. It was why I could never give you my full commitment. Your mother is a devious, controlling woman. To be blunt, she is not a nice person, and you know that's true, don't you? And with Edgar gone, she will sink her fangs into you, suck you dry.'

'But Beryl, how will she cope alone, with Dad the way he is. I mean, **you** stuck with your father to the end, didn't you.'

'Archie, as you well know, my father was a kind and gentle man, not a bit like your parents. And sadly, Daddy is soon to leave us. Cancer has taken hold. His stomach, bowels, bladder, the works. They've put him on morphine. A few weeks at most they said and after that I'll be a free agent.'

'Beryl, we should meet and pray about this.'

'No Archie. No more of that praying stuff. This religious guff, it's all bunkum, as you well know.'

'But what should I do about my Mum and Dad?'

'Archie, my advice is to leave Ellen and Gladys to sort out their own mess. After all, they set you up with Melinda, *both of them*, working as a team. Excluding me and making sure you and Melinda had the opportunity to be together, unhindered."

What tomorrow brings

'Do you think Mum was in on it?'

'Archie, I know for certain. I heard all about it before it happened, last April. Or rather, I should say I 'overheard' most of it, enough to get the gist of their scheme of things. They didn't realise I was there, trying to fix a broken pedal in the narrow space behind the organ and they were talking about it, standing there a few feet away, and smoking in the Church too. Your father was there as well, just listening, not speaking, staring into space. It was as if he was doped up. At one point I thought he might have been drinking, but maybe not. Trust me, I can read the signs and I'm sure he was already pretty far down the road to his dotage by that stage. What amazed me about him was he could still play the organ and the piano without missing a note yet he could hardly remember where he was and why. It was a bit like my father, once he got into his stride with a sermon, if it was one of his favourites, you would never know he was gaga. Anyway, the point is, from behind the organ, I heard them plotting about how they would get rid of me and snare you and Edgar for the twins. If I had been at the Billy Graham Rally that night, it would never have happened but Daddy had had a bad fall and I had to get him to hospital.'

'Beryl, I am really sorry about what happened with Melinda. Really sorry. It was all wrong, sinful. I'm ashamed of myself. I have been praying about it all, asking God to forgive . . .'

'Archie, come on, we both know you are a hypocrite, just like me. If there is a God up there, above the clouds, I would like to send him a message. Are you listening up there?

Get off your backside and start helping us by stopping all the illnesses we are beset with. Come on, God, I'm waiting? Let me remind you up there that it's nearly five years now since Daddy began to fail, through no fault of his own, or mine.'

'So, there you have it, Archie: **Nothing**. And yes, I know that as the daughter of a retired Minister, you would think I might expect some sort of reply but no, nothing ever comes back. Illnesses go on and on. So, let's keep God entirely out of this. Let's just say we are both delighted that your 'amorous adventure' with you-know-who is well and truly over. So, Archie Baxter, what about a new adventure? With me, this time, someone you know you can trust. '**Australia**', are you up for it?'

'Beryl, yes, I would like to accept your kind offer. Could you come to collect me, please? I'll need a few minutes to pack my cases.'

'Brilliant! We'll have a long breakfast while the immerser is heating up the hot water cylinder. Fancy sharing a nice big bubbly bath with me? Do you know, I dreamt of that so many times! Then we can cuddle under the blankets. I mean, we do have a bit of catching up to do. And Archie, look, being practical for a quick wee minute, from what I heard Edgar spouting at the Rogano, I do realise there may be some financial issues to sort out at your office before you can sell up. I can help with money, if you need any. Maybe get

What tomorrow brings

your father a place in a care home. Remember, there will be a vacancy soon where Daddy is. We should sell up your house and mine and make sure your Mum is provided for. Perhaps do up that place of your Gran's in Stonehouse, near her sisters and cousins. If she wants to start driving again, we can buy her a car, something manageable. Get her settled. I reckon we could have it all done and dusted by the end of May at the latest. We can take our time travelling to Australia, have a spectacular honeymoon. Trust me, Archie, it will all work out and by this time next year, who knows, maybe we'll have a baby on the way. What do you say?

'Beryl, is this all a big joke? You're not just saying all this to get you own back on me, are you?'

'No, Archie, as you know, I seldom joke about money and I promise you I would never joke about my heart or yours. Let's just look at this as a lucky escape for you and a new start for both of us? Are you up for it?'

'Yes. And Beryl, thank you.'

'Right, Archie, off we go into the future. Brush your teeth and put on some of the nice after shave I bought you for Christmas last year. With you in fifteen minutes, OK?'

'Beryl, you are *amazing*.'

'Yes, Archie, I agree. I am amazing, *and so are you*.'