

Model Murder

Merlin Smallbone

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Reminiscing about wartime at the model railway club leads to romance and reopening the strange case of the murdered vicar and his wife. Our pensioner couple uncover suspicions of spying, smuggling and cold-war treachery on their own doorstep. Follow Terry and Rachel as they fight the spooks for answers and have other triumphs in Maldon, Essex.

Merlin Smallbone is a prolific multi-genre author, covering crime, mediaeval history, science fiction poetry and short stories. Visit vulpeculox.net/books for details.



Preview

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In 2015 I was shown the schoolboy diaries of **Dennis Fenn** who would walk home from Maldon during the Blitz. Also he skated on frozen ditches, studied for exams, got knocked-out playing football, cycled ridiculous distances trying to find apples to stave-off the hunger of rationing. After the period of the diaries he became an energetic school teacher, football player and life-long supporter of the Heybridge football club. As well as having a family he was the youngest Mayor of Maldon. I started wondering what really exciting episode could happen in the blackout, but soon realised it was an opportunity to show how 'old people' can keep their energy and contribute to the community with old-school participation and local connections. This book is complete fiction but the character of Terry in 2010 is a tribute to those people, epitomised by Dennis Fenn, who put their heart into every local interest.

This book is fiction based on a real place in Essex. **Tim Hunkin** is a real East Anglian cartoonist, engineer and artist who creates wonderfully eccentric machines and automata. I'm sure if he ever met Rachel there would have been a weird tornado of creativity.

If the proposed 1850s Tilbury, Maldon and Colchester Railway had been built it would have probably changed the look of Maldon riverside considerably, and who knows the other changes this uneconomic route would have had? It would be a ring-road today.

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In 2008, Terry Williams, aged 80, was a well known and active member of the community of Maldon. He'd grown up in the small town on the edge of the Es

sex marshes, worked in hush-hush radar factory during the war, then became a school teacher. He was always keen on football and local organisations eventually becoming Mayor and Chairman of Heybridge FC. His long-forgotten interest in trains was rekindled when his wife died. Now he often went to the local model railway club. The secretary had been one of his pupils at the Grammar. Now Terry drew circuit diagrams, soldered circuits and helped build tableaux. He breathed life into the scenes with a lifetime of stories.

"Let's have some excitement. Something unusual and mysterious. A body being put in an ambulance from the Rectory and the poster on the cinema advertising *Murder at church*. You see the boy getting off the bus. That's me. Just behind the hedge was a barrage balloon unit to stop raiders coming up the river. I used to watch them winching. The engines and gears of those winches made a noise like a dozen buses going up Market Hill. You might think it boring but they had to work hard and everyone seemed to go to their place ready. Lots of women in battledress. I was just 16. Now that night the Bioscope was showing the comedy *Bell-Bottom George* where George Formby, mistaken for a sailor, stumbles across Nazi spies. Perhaps we could change the posters on our model? There was an air raid warning but we didn't leave. Then Charlie Rudge and me had an ice at the Violetta Café. It was dark, but we knew the way from Maldon to Heybridge like the back of our hands. Down the hill then along the canal path to the Dolphin then behind the Church where we'd go our separate ways. We daren't cycle along the tow path in the blackout but it was a good thing I left my back light switched on, as a call came from behind. It was Peter Hillman, originally Piotr

Hauptman, he was a market gardener behind Leg-of-Mutton corner. I remember he was in his Home Guard kit with his rifle. We struggled out of his way and exchanged greetings then we watched his rear light go round the corner. He made it look so easy but he had a much better front light than us even if it was against the blackout rules. We plodded on discussing the film and watching the skies over London. It would have been about 7:30. Remember with the clocks going forwards it got dark early."

By now the kettle was on, and although some were concentrating on close-up work ten pairs of ears were following Terry. The railway modelling club was working on a what Heybridge might have been during World War Two if the proposed railway from Tilbury to Colchester had been built in the 1850s.

"Perhaps now I should jump ahead and introduce Detective Inspector Ormond. He's probably arriving on the next train. He's from Scotland Yard come to investigate a double murder last night. Let's imagine him being met on the platform by a local police sergeant with a car. How would that look? He was like George Formby with a turkey neck but didn't smile. He interviewed me and Charlie next day. We told him about Mister Hillman passing us – then about three minutes later the two shots we heard. Of course we couldn't be precise about the time but we both agreed that the shots didn't seem to be the normal rifle shots that we were used to. Definitely two. After a while we couldn't think of anything else to do but keep walking with our lights switched off. We had our pen knives but they wouldn't be much use. Charlie said 'A poacher. Nothing to worry about.' I wasn't so sure. Charlie said he was going through the field path behind the church and I could go with him or take the long way. I went with him with my teeth chattering. Then we then came across Mister Hillman's bike with lights off laying on the ground. 'They've shot him!' I whispered then stupidly dropped my bike out of fear."

'GET DOWN DUMMKOFF' came a hissed order in unmistakable German accent. I recognised it.

'Are you hurt Mister Hillman?'

'No. Did you hear the shots?'

'Yes. Two. What's happening?'

'Not poaching I'll bet. I think they came from the rectory. Can you two go on to the main road then dial 999. Flash once when you're at the gate. I'll stay here for ten minutes then join you. Zak Simmons lives at number 40. Tell him what's happened and cover the front of the Vicarage.'

'Yes Mister Hillman.'

"And that's how the alarm was raised. The Scotland Yard detective asked us if we'd ever seen Mister Hillman with a pistol. Neither of us had. Did he have his rifle ready when we found him? Yes. I think he was waiting for us. Later we showed him where we thought we heard the shots and where we met Mister Hillman."

"By now of course we knew the vicar and his wife had been shot in their front room. The vicar was half deaf and wholly strict. His wife took it upon herself to tell the women in the village how to behave. She was ignored as an interfering old bitch. That's what my mum called her. They both had Scottish accents which I lampooned by making them German and told everyone that he had a tommy-gun disguised as bagpipes. When they arrived we soon skipped Sunday school with the connivance of our parents so long as we were keeping out of mischief. According to rumour from their previous parish they had been keen supporters of Hitler and the so called Jewish menace. So! Terry Williams was proved right once again! Mister Hillman was Jewish and a much nicer person than them. Many times when there was nobody else about and we met one or the other we'd raise one arm, stick a finger under our nose and blow a raspberry." Terry challenged his audience to imagine him in short trousers while he went through the actions and sound effects. Rachel the artist, one of the three women who joined the boys, knew what she would be painting tomorrow. She knew exactly where it would be set in 1940s Heybridge but needed a photo of Terry as a teenager. She'd done a lot of local history research so a photo of the vicar should be easy. She also knew of the muddy murder mystery. "They never found the murderer but poor Mister Hillman was arrested on suspicion then released."

Two days later an optimistic Rachel Steel met Terry for a date at the Lindens Café in Maldon. He was about five years older than her but when they'd been on Club trips to preserved railways, pumping stations and a paddle steamer he'd been sociable and cheerful with a wide range of interests. Her secret was that she was Mister Hillman's daughter with 'Steel' being name her mother used. She'd never married or been beyond the boyfriend stage, then never seemed to meet nice men.

Some people entering a café are noticed by their ineptitude with buggy, children or shopping bags. Most are ignored. It was unlikely that Terry would ever walk up Maldon High Street without being engaged multiple times in conversation. He was late and now accompanied by the lady who used to run the Town Twinning association. She was followed by her husband, plainly unhappy at having his life put on hold while his wife diverted herself. Rachel wasn't about to let Terry become a toy for the bored and boring! Rachel was eyed-up by her rival before Terry introduced them.

Rachel said "I'm afraid our business is private. Perhaps you'd like to join us another time." Rachel was glared-at. Terry was simpered-at. Husband turned to leave. Making enemies ran in the family. As her father had said 'Friends come and go but enemies are for life.'

When Terry and Rachel were alone he said "That was a bit rude."

"She's a nosy bore. A bit like the vicar's wife you were talking about the other day. Perhaps the Club should change the wedding to a double funeral and have a newspaper poster outside the village shop saying 'Murdered couple buried'. That's mystery for the sharp eyed. And as well as your London detective have someone pointing up to the church tower where a spy with a headphones and funny briefcase is threading a wireless aerial."

"We were warned about spies all the time but apart from the Manor – and they were ours – I only remember the silliest cases. In hindsight it was like witchcraft. Mister Hillman was a suspect more than once. He didn't help by being the keenest to help the defence. He was a good photographer. I've brought one of me that you asked for. He took it. In

the end they had to take his camera away for safe-keeping 'for the duration' because just taking a photo of Heybridge High street was enough to make people worried. Looking back I think his good looks made some husbands worried when their wives went to his farm to help with picking or planting. One story said he murdered his real wife and took another without bothering with formalities. I didn't mind the chap. He worked hard at everything he did, but now when I think of it, he was always an outsider."

Rachel arranged the plate of cakes so Terry couldn't miss them. "Why not add a smallholding with a carrot shed roofed with galvanizing, some scales, some sacks and signs of something saucy going on in the gloom behind a cultivator? That would make people smile. A short man with curly hair and a missing tooth, in a flapping storekeeper's coat, ticking-off things in an exercise book."

Terry was looking into a long-ago distance and smiling. "It's like you were there Rachel. I never saw anything of the sort but now you mention it that was Mister Hillman to a T."

"I was there Terry. I was his daughter. I was 12 when that murder happened. I don't remember the murder except dad had to go away for a few days to sort it out."

"Did you have an arm in plaster? Always in yellow and grey?. Spoke with a funny London accent. "

"Wow! You remember that? I was watching men in the Waffield Road pulling down a gutted building and got too close when a lump of burnt wood cartwheeled out of the dust and smashed my left arm in three places. I think mum sent me to the country to stay out of trouble. It was a summer holiday. I really never had seen vegetables in the ground or realised that eggs came out of chicken's bottoms and were baby chickens. I've never touched an egg since even though I can remember the glorious taste of poached-egg – on toast even better!" Her eyes gleamed with honest memory shared between soul-mates. Terry liked intimacies, who doesn't, except the creepy ones of course, but this wasn't creepy. Rachel was nice but when would she get to the reason for a private meeting?

At that moment when the first round of coffee might lead to a second, more cake or an invitation, their attention was taken by the glass door of the café opening with unhappy husband carrying a large pot plant followed by the Gorgon herself. She had a small arrangement of flowers, hardly bigger than a hand grenade, such as you might have in the third rank of tables at a wedding reception. Straight away she brought them over to retaliate in a two-woman nuclear war. Of course, as this was to be her victory against the snotty cow who had dared to snub her, she paraded the measly arrangement at head level straight to Rachel's table.

"I know you like beautiful flowers so I've brought you this." The poisoned gift was placed onto the table with a sweep of body language and a 360 degree sneer.

Rachel really had inherited instant retaliation from her father. "How lovely. There's only one thing that would make it more lovely..." Only half the café seats were taken but it was completely filled with more curiosity and a feeling that somebody was going to meet rotating knives. Both women had appeared a number of times in the local paper. They were obviously after blood. "... Just one thing to make it perfect. Being watered by your piss." There weren't many men in the café but Terry led them in growing laughter and shouts of 'bravo'. (The strange thing was that as the scene passed into legend it was Terry who got the credit for being the ringmaster while Rachel, while admired for wit, 'especially at her age', was in some way a subsidiary part.) Terry was remaking friendships while Rachel was alone as the ratcatcher who pulled the skirting back to reveal the rats nest.

Terry eased-off his triumphal persona to try to get back to that shared innocence and shared appreciation of mischief they'd had five minutes ago. Rachel glared at the stupid arrangement. "Come on Gal. We'll be late for that Garden Party if you don't hitch up your skirts." How could an eighty-year-old suggest 'sex first business later'!? It was wrong but RIGHT. After Terry paid the bill they walked down the High Street. Terry offered her his arm and she took it. (The silly flower posy was left behind but stayed in the window for a week and had many fingers pointing at it from the pavement.) While Terry and Rachel were gently heading down towards the park there were constant meetings and greetings. How *could* the innocent act of being a gentleman be taken to

mean something more! Terry let himself be delayed by Rachel's random shopping and repeating the flower-war story without any boredom. In fact he positively indulged her. Physically he stood back a bit behind, although as a quiet and strong personality he was the one winding the clockwork when it came to Rachel's triumph. When asked, they said they were going to the park to share wartime reminiscences of Heybridge. Terry added "And have our photos taken." Everyone replied to this with a comment on the weather! It was one of Terry's quirks to angle for 'weather' responses.

They went past the boat yard to the Promenade Park. As always, Rachel had her camera. Terry carried her bag while she prowled looking for vignettes to be turned into oils and then money. A barge's mast laid out on trestles in the yard might be a backdrop for a child on a log in the sandpit play area. The scene could never happen, but like a model could be constructed. Hey! Have the child astride the log and a man in overalls and cap smoking a roll-up astride the mast doing something with tools. Now she'd have to get close-ups of the men at work with tools. She'd already got lots of children at play photos. That was the sort of thing that would sell. She might try for one of those old railway posters with bold pictures of people and places. They always had definite shadows but never the actual sun. A man boring a mast or shaving a strake. (You need to know the anatomy of boats if you're going to paint them.) What a morning for her! Terry was as silent as a tiny plastic model of a Boy Scout waving a flag at a Jamboree. She made a note of the boat yard's phone number painted high up above the office door. Unnecessarily as it happened, because Vaughan came out and recognised Terry from the Tapsters Arms. Terry explained what he thought Rachel wanted to Vaughan. Her family genes made her invent "I'm trying to get a set of Royal Mail stamps of East Coast workers and heritage. In oils."

Vaughan showed her his dirty hands. "I'm in oils already." That brought a shy smile which Rachel caught with a flash. She'd never met Vaughan before. He was one of the taciturn ones in overalls who hardly ever smiled. The way he stood was ready for running away. The way he hunched his shoulders said 'leave me alone'. Now he was laughing again at his perfect quip. Rachel managed another flash.

Terry said "Can I buy the Wit of the Waterfront a pint in the Kings Head while Rachel... Oh this is Rae Steel the famous artist from Heybridge."

Vaughan said "I've got a book of yours." He transferred his roll-up to his left hand then wiped his right on his dark blue overalls then offered to shake her hand. Then realised it wasn't clean so gave a little salute. Vaughan was not yet sixty but had the wrinkles round the eyes of a four hundred year old elf with twinkly blue eyes to match. He had eyebrows but not the everyday sort. They *looked* everyday until you looked at them when their khaki symmetry and pleasure at being signposts to a character brought them to life. His chin *looked* like it had a neat dark beard but when you looked again it didn't. His short hair and prominent ears made him an obvious choice of outsider. Most of his art is wasted on ordinary people because it's so simple. He'd 'fitted-out' a number of pubs in the area with everything including panels, shelves and dado rails all in perfect proportion. Terry didn't know if Vaughan had ever had any artistic training.

Terry continued. "Rachel – why not skip up to Hodges and see if he can do anything with your snaps. Vaughan works with his hands and needs to hold something. They must be able to print off one of those digital photos in a few minutes. I'll pay. They're classic. Hey Vaughan – what's it like to be on a fifty pence stamp? We'll be in the King's Head love. I'll look after your shopping. Here's a tenner."

Rachel took photographs to help her paint. The idea of a photograph as a finished work was new for her. Vaughan captured was a fantastic portrait. All it needed was what they called post-processing. After a call from his father, prompted by Terry, young (53) Toby Hodge shared expertise and labour with Rachel to create a gallery-quality portrait photograph. On the off-chance Toby sent a copy to a friend in the fashion business with a washed-out and high-lighted version that might look good in print. Bingo! Toby asked his dad what to do next. He asked Terry. Terry knew when he was likely to find Vaughan in the Tapsters. After ten minutes mostly communal silence at the bar with the odd bit of trivia, Terry 'remembered'. "If someone offered you a hundred pounds to wear a 'Val Doonican' sweater would you take it?

"It depends."

"What about a thousand pounds to wear Rovay-top overalls and work gear in front of the cameras? That's a deal you could have tomorrow. Really – I'm not kidding you – Rachel's photograph went to the agencies who do this sort of thing and the phone is melting."

"Bollocks Terry."

"I'm told that you get a gig for Europe and another for America if you play your cards right. Really Vaughan. You're the shyest man on the planet but why not have five grand for half a week's work."

"You're winding me up." Vaughan smiled and wetted the edge of his roll-up as he finished rolling it."

"You go out the back and have that ciggy then come back and tell me if I've ever lied to you. I told them there's no hope of you advertising crap. All up-market for Vaughan from now. Gold Lamé high-viz for him I said. Anything less than six inch heels on the safety boots and they could forget it!"

Vaughan reached out to the old man. "You're kidding me now."

"I am now." Terry reached back and they had a fractional man-hug before Vaughan went out the back for a smoke and a think.

In the usual realm of modelling, the clothes horses are either celebrities or anonymous. There was no chance of keeping a boatyard anonymous so Vaughan was awarded the status of very very minor celebrity. Before he'd appeared on any screen or in any catalogue, the media-types had agreed Vaughan had the 'Fred Dibnah' quality. Toby Hodge became his agent and anyone turning up at the yard was asked 'to depart'. Practically twice a week for a month he was pestered by 'better deals'. Toby and Vaughan shared some Indian curries. Vaughan was long-divorced and Toby a confirmed bachelor. Toby was one of the raisins in the pudding that was the establishment while Vaughan was a vivid magenta Rosebay Willowherb on a bomb site. They were both very skilled and clever men. Eventually, after tests there were some real photo-shoots. Fuckin' hell! They had three blokes just doing the lighting. A producer. Makeup! Hair had to be trimmed then set into

position with aerosol. Per-bloody-perfection. After a day of being told how to hold tools he'd been using for forty years Vaughan said "Come back in a month and see which bit of your gear is any good!"

"Oh no you can't keep it." Said some wonk.

A five thousand pounds richer Vaughan said "In thirty days time I'm going to do a photo-shoot with the bits and pieces and give my first-month opinion. If you don't let me have the gear it will get a big zero."

When the media company had packed up their paraphernalia and left, Terry said "Good riddance."

Toby said "A good day's work Vaughan. The best bit at the end. You're a genius."

"Am I? I was just cross."

Toby said "You're setting the agenda. I should charge you more than ten percent."

Terry said "I'm not getting paid anything but tomorrow is a normal day. I wish you luck Vaughan but it's just a windfall. Great idea about the gear real men really wear. Can you make it happen Toby?"

"I'll have to now." The three of them shared high-fives.

Rachel didn't move in with Terry, except that she was always welcome and never asked to go home as it was getting late. What the town had seen as they walked as a couple down the High Street was now a reality. He fixed the filters on her vacuum cleaner. She cooked him poached egg on toast and shared a finger-tip taste. They saved model-making for the Club and Terry refused to have oil paints in his house. At the Club they sculpted girls posing in bikinis being photographed and a boat yard with a tiny Vaughan lounging in bright shirt and shorts leering at the girls.

Terry hadn't forgotten Rachel's instant invention of a set of Royal Mail stamps. What a great idea. Carving wood was ancient and good. What about North Sea Gas? A rig (is that what they had? They didn't know.) would be different. Perhaps just the tip of a drilling pylon or whatever

it was called above a scooping, sweeping wave. Fisherman or fishing boat at say Aldeburgh or Leigh was another. Leigh would be better because of the Thames connection. What about a wind-farm? Was there a £50 stamp? Horrible subject for an artist. A bottle of Tesco's white suggested, 'what about a farmer on drained fens with the drains carried on embankments above'. Perhaps a Latvian woman pulling carrots or whatever happened? They called Toby to get on with getting the gig. Terry told Rachel not to come back until she'd got some samples. (Obviously the banishment wouldn't start until some time tomorrow.) Once Rachel had got into the minds of the stamp characters Terry would drive them around so she could catch her subjects. Perhaps they might stay at a hotel or two.

"What about the gas rig?"

"Will five thousand be enough? I mean we've got to get them to pay us."

"Us?"

"You don't trust me do you Rae?"

"I do but I know you're looking for mischief. At my age! I ask you? Do you really think I could get a series of stamps?"

"Yes. Even if they say no you've still got an exhibition ready to go. You can go on the radio and say listeners can go and judge for themselves. What would it be like on Twitter and Facebook?"

"I don't do Twitter Terry."

"Me neither but we've got boy Toby to make it all up for us."

Rachel was the internet expert and soon had them booked into hotels each with a conservatory where it was agreed Rachel could paint. Her laptop was full of exciting news on social media. With patience Rachel had shown Terry the basics of taking photographs with a smart-phone and sending them to her. Terry left her to paint while he visited the back street pubs with his brand new toy. Indifferent May weather was fine for two energised people on a mission. They found the usual landmarks of lighthouses, windmills, deserted graveyards overlooking a seemingly deserted landscape but that wasn't their mission. Terry managed to find a man who worked in the cab of a tower crane. The only option was to show him some of the 'noble East Anglian workers'

Rachel had already done, including Vaughan, and ask him to take some selfies with plenty of background and close-up shots so they could be used for a painting. The lure of being on a set of Royal Mail stamps was an extra.

Rachel found her style which turned out to be a large print from a photograph pinned to a board then covered with pastel acrylics in solid colours then over-painted with oils to give many dimensions of texture and detail while retaining the blocky feel. By a natural process Terry found out about a local football match and took Rachel to a new experience. It was her turn to indulge his passion. He had a comment about everything from the moment the players walked onto the pitch. The atmosphere of hopeful supporters before the game then tribal passion, all about a ball being kicked about was strange enough for Rachel to try to tune-in to what was happening. Who knitted their hats and scarves? Were they here for the sport of shouting together, or for what she had been told was 'the beautiful game'? She said to one of Terry's new mates. "If he's got so much good advice why doesn't he charge? He'd make a fortune."

Terry found a moment to reply. "They couldn't afford it." Then there was some crisis averted or another cause for shouts and groans and she was her own spectator again. Even though she had her camera there was nothing to photograph. The men on the pitch were not interesting. The faces of spectators needed a few 'for the record' photographs but in her mind's-eye they were like inside-out rubber masks staring into a desert of hope. BANG! She knew the man who made those sculptures, Tim Hunkin the man who made the *Under the Pier Show* at Southwold Pier. She knew his drawings and now the creepiness of those inside-out figures made her blush with inspiration. Only twenty minutes left before the end of the match! She must must must share her vision. Terry wouldn't understand and probably take charge. No no no. She retreated inside to start stretching the entrails of the internet on her tablet. Weird rubber faces with outlines and button eyes kept reaching out into nothingness. After only ten minutes she managed to speak to the man himself in the middle of shopping at Sainsbury's at Halesworth. After explaining what she'd imagined she asked him out to dinner that night and gave the reason for her tour of East Anglia as if the Royal Mail deal had been done. She asked him to buy some rubber gloves they could play with.

That night Terry had an opportunity to be an outsider like Rachel had been at the football match. Rachel had plenty to show Tim. Terry couldn't see anything more than puppet-style cartoons in Rachel's and Tim's felt pen on rubber sketches. For him this was the first time he'd been an outsider. When his wife had done womanly things he'd leave her to it, and she'd had the sense to get on with it without him. When he'd been rushed through army training, to get him to where they needed junior boffins the real boffins could use for their experiments, he was not in the group but only because he was out in front. Now he had no connection with two passionate enthusiasts who knew a little about each other's work. His solace was that even though she said she'd pay for the bill it was his card behind the bar with strict instructions not to let the lady pay. Tim and Rachel were obvious lovers. That's how it appeared. There was some conversation and Terry made some progress with the tableaux in the Club model. His tales of wartime electronics were obviously nothing new to Tim, in fact Terry learned about things he'd been indoctrinated not to be curious about. Why the sudden change to a higher frequency. Why the Establishment got split. He'd never heard of the politics behind Airborne Interception and countermeasures. Curious electronic engineers in this part of the world were bound to be historians.

By the end of the beautifully served and tasty meal Rachel was the one with the clear breath that could legally drive them back to their hotel. Rubber-glove faces had been used in the 60s by the Beatles in *Yellow Submarine* but the image was too powerful to forget. Rachel was twenty years older than Tim. They shared the recognition of a mind behind a seal trying to reach a something. Inflated like a jelly. Determined like all the other jellies. Focussed with unblinking eyes. Ridiculous. Like the other thousands.

On the thirty mile drive back to their hotel through squalls of driving rain Terry asked Rachel "Why were you so insistent to come all this way to meet Mister Hunkin?"

"For the same reason you were so insistent on paying when I'd said I would."

"What that?"

"Because it's important. I know you don't understand. Thanks for taking me to my first football match. Once was enough. Thanks again. You see the gold that's resulted. Thanks Terry."

"No. What gold? We lost 3-1."

"I model inside people's heads. You model funerals and jamborees. I wait for something to fly into my web. You join in and when the others are a bit feeble get a grip. You've told me that – shit! The road's flooded. It's OK just a big puddle. I'll go more gentle. The satnav doesn't warn you about floods does it."

Terry didn't reply. He'd dropped off to sleep. Rachel wanted eight arms and eight brains to sketch and paint and bring the never-to-be-seen-but-essential surface of rubber gloves and the insides of human faces to account.

Rachel had four of her ten portraits of East Anglian workers turned into a set of stamps and, of course as a result, a London exhibition promoted on the radio and television. Toby took his ten percent but Rachel gave him a few hugs, kisses and a two extra framed £50 notes. The letter with the notes said 'I want £30 back in expenses. Love Rachel. This provocation helped sort out some serious money issues. Terry was excluded. Rachel and Terry were a 'couple' and riding-high. One day the penny-dropped and Terry put on a pinny. It was soon a 'man's' pinny but it was his job to Hoover, polish and cook while the missus wafted amongst the media angels. Although the financial reasons against were clear perhaps, in case one of them died, IN CASE! they would want the widows or widower's pension. It all made sense to Terry. He'd never thought of remarrying after Dulcie had died but now over a year on perhaps it made sense. He enjoyed the gentle domestic discipline and took pride in being Rachel's helper. After all he'd started it off and she mixed with his children and grandchildren as if they were her own. Together they created the background. Grandson Josh, 29, now a prematurely balding anaesthetist in Canada, had a snapshot of him as a proud teenager with a model aeroplane turned into a five foot high oil painting quartered into four. The top left was pretty much the original.

The top right was a radio controlled robot, with a semi-skull head, juggling bloody knives, while Josh was distracted from the radio control console by a young lady. The bottom left quarter was a corpse in the style of a coloured anatomical drawing with Josh poking around with a soldering iron and bits taken from the carcass of a radio controlled aeroplane seen in the background. The fourth portrait was an up to date full face portrait with a surgical mask and cap that didn't quite hide his, ahem, 'receding' hairline. But there was no doubt that the person in the portrait was grinning with intent. Aha! Now it was clear... Two latex-gloved hands were about to play a symphony on a gas valve and pressure gauge. Rachel's life was that painting for three days. It had been pestering her for a week before. When she showed it to Terry he needed it explaining. Then he asked. "Why did you paint it as one and not four?"

"They belong together." She showed him the forty-odd sketches she'd done, many were just details.

"You could get four times... Oh I understand. This is a family thing." He hugged her. "They'll all want one now!" They laughed.

As it was only two thirty they jumped on the 2:50 bus to Maldon and discovered the formalities of getting officially married. They needed witnesses and proof of identity and birth certificates. The registrar's clerk opined that a marriage was something to celebrate not just a bit of paper.

Terry said "OK. When can we have the official paper. Then we can have the celebration after." The clerk offered an information pack and mentioned the web site. Terry was on a mission "What paperwork do you need and when are you open till?" The difficulty was that after giving notice and paying the fee you had to wait twenty eight days before the Government could bring itself to approve. "OK we'll have the wedding first week and sort out the paperwork when you can find time in your busy schedule."

Two weeks later Maldon experienced one of the many similar events where locals gathered and shared and swapped and re-met and

remembered and congratulated, quaffed and were warmed by being part of the hidden fabric, the warp and weft, that made a community. Toby knew to spread the word. The *Standard's* headline was **Terry scores again** while the *Gazette* went with **Portrait of love**. There were dozens of Terry's family and friends present and by now they were Rachel's friends too. (The people of Maldon are friendly. Not bright, but friendly. 'Oh hello Vikings. We'd like to beat you fair and square so we'll just retreat a bit to let you all get ashore then when you're quite ready we'll begin'. A thousand years later the people of Maldon were still very friendly but as bright as a frightened firefly on a first date.) The national press made notes on databases but otherwise wasn't interested. Of course Terry's two daughters had arranged a reception at where else but Heybridge football club. There was a lovely party. The best and only speech was by Pat who asked everyone to take the left-over food home with them. She added "What a wonderful surprise... Rachel making an honest man of Dad!" She got her laugh... But then nobody wanted to drift-off at five o'clock. It was ten past eight before Pat could hand the keys back to the caretaker with a promise to pay the balance tomorrow.

Terry and Rachel had been expecting a busy day but this was more food and booze than they'd bargained for. It was also a storm surge of goodwill at short notice. Before they kissed goodnight Rachel said "Remind me to tell you about my mother."

Terry said "I knew there was a catch!"

The next morning Terry was first into the kitchen for his new wife. He'd got Pineapple, Mango and Orange or Redcurrant and Apple juice in the fridge for Rachel. He couldn't decide for her. Then there was the... Blimey!... They were married! For a few hours like he and Dulcie had been for years... Decades! "Sorry Dulcie." He bowed his head in shame. Deserting her for a floozie with a wicked paint brush! A warm arm came around him followed by a kiss. "What's for breakfast Terry?"

"I don't know."

"Let's find out shall we?"

"Er. Yes." Terry knew he was just the ball being kicked between centre-forward-wives. Ow! It hurt. Rachel in her orange towelling dressing gown and tied-down-at-the-back hair took charge. In seconds switches were on as if by automatic arms. For Terry, breakfast was a maze of options. For Rachel it was a way to wake up. They'd done this before but now Terry knew, even though he knew it a bit before, that Rachel was fully in charge. She seemed to know his family better than he did!

After bacon done crisp like he liked it, she said "Shall we go and visit my mother today?"

She'd never mentioned 'mother' before. Almost six months together and not a murmur. "Erm where?"

"Near Ipswich."

"Really? You've got a mother?"

"Everyone has a mother!"

"I mean"/

/"I know what you mean. She's ninety-five in a home near Ipswich. She's practically blind but please come and say hello."

The sadness of voids fell upon Terry. Rachel was beside him. She tried to excuse her crime of hiding her lonely mum but he was a do it now person not a fix it up later person. This wasn't a first married argument, but it was a 'why is there a void between us and how do we close it' catastrophe. They only had themselves to hug. Food came and they pushed the demons of the past away. Good breakfast. Book of maps in the car. Telephone ahead to the home, then Geronimo! They decided Terry would drive there and Rachel on the way back. His reactions weren't perfect but he did listen to Rachel's advice and they weren't going to get involved with town centre traffic. Rachel checked he was wearing his new glasses, so Geronimo!

The home had well kept gardens and a smart receptionist. They'd both visited care-homes before and this was seemed open and modern. They found her in a lounge with half a dozen silent white-haired ladies in various cardigans. Rachel's mum only recognised Rachel as 'something familiar' with details to follow. With the physical assistance and coaxing

of an assistant they went to the adjacent eating area laid for lunch. Mum was small with a face aged brown and silver like the weathered oak frames of long-since abandoned boats sticking up from the saltings. They could hear the clatter of cups which meant tea or coffee in a few minutes. Rachel sat beside Mum and told her she got married yesterday and here was the ring to feel to prove it. There were hugs but 'married' was obviously on a very tattered part of Mum's mental map. After five minutes they'd exhausted all social options. Terry looked for cheerful old boys to talk to but couldn't see any. Rachel's mum said "Rachel got married yesterday." The look on her face was half indifference, a quarter puzzlement and a quarter happiness."

Mum was beginning to connect with her visitors and the context. Terry said "We got married. You must be happy." He nearly added 'after all these years' but realised it was too complicated for mum and then, far too late, too stressful for Rachel. For no reason except to be physical he said "I come from Heybridge. I knew your husband."

"Husband? Was he Piotr?"

"Yes. Peter Hillman. Market gardener. He was a man we respected."

"Did you? I didn't."

"We were only kids."

"I did a thing... the Germans in the church... Piotr made me."

"I was there that night Mrs Hillman. I was with him as he guarded the place."

"They lay on the floor. I did a thing."

"Well done to you Mrs Hillman."

"Piotr was very clever. Very clever man. We were married. Poor Rachel got married today. Did you dear?"

Rachel looked up from her notepad. "Yes mum. To Terry here."

"Name?"

"Terry."

Mum choked and struggled a bit. "New name?"

"Oh Williams Mum. I'm now Rachel Williams. Famous painter." FLASH!

"Ow! Stop that!"

"Sorry Mum."

Terry said "I married Rachel yesterday. I'm Terry Williams. From Heybridge. I'm her husband."

"You?"

Rachel held up her hand to show the ring again. Terry showed two wedding rings. "She'd my second. You see I know where everything goes now." His humourous expression dislodged a brick in the wall between mum and the past."

"Oh so you want to marry my daughter do you? One wife not enough?"

Still smiling and now holding her hand Terry replied "One is plenty I can assure you Mrs Hillman. My first died."

"Died. I died them Germans. Rats. He made me."

When you come out of a warm care home into the chilly and squally outside for a one-minute walk to the car it can be a bit of a shock. Rachel said "I guess she did it. How would anyone make it up?"

"Why. You and her were supposed to be fifty miles away. He was alone with a prick that needed daily attention. What the hell was going on?"

"It was wartime."

"I know it was wartime but that didn't mean everybody shagged everyone else at every opportunity."

"That's what it seemed like to me."

"That was the 1940s!"

"That was my mum!"

"Ok Ok. What do you want to do for lunch. It's our honeymoon. I might have enough in my wallet for a sandwich in a lay-by."

"You've got sixty five quid in your wallet."

"How the..." Then Terry realised he was married again. "I'm not cross love. It's just a shock."

"Let's go to Woodbridge and see what happens. It's like Maldon but different. Up a river, not on the way to anywhere. We'll find a pub and you can have a pint and we'll have a snack. I had enough to eat for a week yesterday. It has art galleries so I can put the cost of petrol down

to business." Terry had started the car at 'Woodbridge' and was heading North East by 'snack'. 'Pint' and 'snack' and 'art gallery' fitted into place as he found forth gear on Rachel's new car. Their new car. His trusty diesel Ford went away yesterday behind a truck with a car that looked like crushed cardboard on its ramp. They should ask son-in-law Rolf to help swap over Rachel's washing machine that was apparently much better than his. He registered 'sorry about mum' and 'you're a gent' and 'should we move her to Maldon'. He had to be in the right lane... what's this white van trying to do?... Sod you mate! I was here first... I don't care if you are upset and flashing your lights I'm staying in this lane!

After ordeal by pay and display machine, Terry asked a random local for a 'decent back street boozer' and found an enthusiast at the first try. The Cannon was a couple of hundred yards away and they were both fit and not in a hurry. Terry took them to what he judged was 'old bors corner', took Rachel's gin and tonic order to the bar then had to wave to her to show her the selection of pasties and pies in the cabinet at the far end. When they eventually sat down Terry hugged her and apologised. "I'm sorry for not listening as we drove over. There's too much to talk about while I'm driving."

"I'm sorry Terry. I should have helped rather than carried on. My mum says she shot the vicar and his wife. I've got all the official records I can find and there isn't a hint. Is she making it up?"

"It's a strange thing to make up. Is she prone to invention? I'm going to indulge in Spinach and Stilton with smoked mackerel pie then wonder over a pint. It's history. An hour or two won't make a difference."

She said "I wish I'd married you years ago. This Three Pigs pie smells delicious." Terry held up his glass as a toast, Rachel followed and leaned over to give him a kiss.

It's really nice if you're newly married to swap forkfulls of mystery pie filling. They were satisfied in their cheeks and tongues and then arms around the other contemplating their empty plates. Terry didn't want to gossip with the bors in old bors corner. Rachel wanted to gossip about unreal things to keep reality away but she strayed straight into this

morning's conundrum. Terry said "Let's get your mum back to Heybridge if it won't upset her. She must have other local friends."

"You're not blaming me for hiding her?"

"No. I blame you for not trusting me before – but I understand there was the Titanic and an iceberg and you were worried. I hope I made friends."

"I should have trusted you. Mum was alternatively black and white about my father. It wasn't love I don't think. More compulsion and then rejection. She trained me never to trust men. Look at me. Grey and seventy five. What age is that to get married?"

"Sixty years too late in your case. Then I wasn't old enough either. Eugh! Oh shit. You were the girl I wanted most when I saw you with your broken arm. I almost want to break your arm now to make you perfect. It's horrible and I'll never do it – honest – never – it's just there as a thought. A one handed handmaiden for a warrior. Just one kiss from you would have turned the earth on its axis. How strange."

"How strange?"

"I mean. How strange we should meet again. Fate and all that."

"You get your second pint bladder-brain. Then find one of your 'old bors' to talk to for ten minutes while I find out about pies. I want to paint a pie from field to plate."

"Yes wife." Terry tugged his forelock and smiled.

In the following days they received many late-notice congratulations and were taken out to dinner or went to see frail old friends. Toby went beyond the pubco that owned the Cannon to seek a commercial sponsor for Rachel's field-to-plate idea to be turned into 'craft cooks' she'd already sketched the Cannon's fare and some of their customers by guesswork. Toby ended up talking to the farm-shop sized producer of the pies and came to a complex deal based on percentage of increased turnover. As their main outlet was the Cannon he showed how, if Rachel's sketches were turned into paintings the novelty would give the pub and its kitchen something special. Fish pie, what a black hole that was! That could show it for what? Fifteen seconds? On TV. But with a painting driving the story it became a labour of love to get the right fish

Then...

While Rachel's career as an artists develops, and they continue to be closely involved in the local community, the pair investigate what appears to be wartime and then Cold War spying. They're not going to be bullied by anybody with secrets to hide!

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Merlin lives in Witham, Essex and writes when he's not programming computers. He is what they call a character, but whether it's a ! or ? remains a mystery. Most of his leading characters are strong and positive, although of course the interesting bits are their weaknesses and doubts. A glance at the catalogue shows a wide range of settings. Typically he writes interesting characters in interesting situations so that 'stuff happens' but there will be ideas and issues that hover in full view yet in the background until spotlighted, when for many readers that's the moment they realise they've been reading a proper book not just a story.