

Seamouth Saxophone

Civilised Dying
comes to Devon

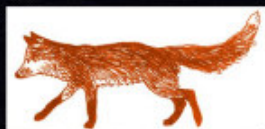
Merlin Smallbone

Seamouth Saxophone

How would you go about making the world a more civilised place? Probably not by designing a neck-breaking roller coaster inside a saxophone. Two creative residents of a small South Devon town realise they've got the wrong solution to an important problem. They take the challenge to address assisted dying for the terminally in pain and also desperate jumpers. In doing so they make their town a civilised place to live despite the inevitable stresses of helping people with no other option kill themselves humanely. This is about the enormous effort required if the issues are to be properly dealt with, and the sort of strong and determined people needed, and how they in turn support and hope.

In mainland Britain 17 people kill themselves each day, often very painfully. Quite possibly that number could be reduced. While writing this book many people have given harrowing details of relatives in agony during the last months of their lives. Read the book, it's full of success that's within reach. The characters may be imaginary but the issues are real.

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



Preview

The full version of [Seamouth Saxophone](#) by Merlin Smallbone is available in the following formats.

- Paperback A5 298 pages
- PDF A5
- PDF A5 2-column (for limited width readers)

Go to merlinsmallbone.shop for purchasing options or search for [Seamouth Saxophone](#) at lulu.com

This book may contain **subversive** ideas, such as religion can be a corrupting cult, conventions can be broken, and it's really good to belong to a caring and conversational community.

Seamouth Saxophone

How Britain
became civilised
in the 21st century

by

Merlin Smallbone

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This second edition

The subject for this book is deep and controversial. I've approached it in two ways:

Civilised society is possible

Individuals can make a difference

Of course, the sharp edges are the two very distinct aspects of

Assisting terminally ill

'Mending' potential suicides if possible

Preface

Nearly forty years ago in the autumn of 2010 one of the strangest and long-overdue changes to our society began in a small seaside town on the South East Devon coast. In 2014 the world was stunned by a handful of people, changing the way we look after the most troubled, tortured and desperate people in our society. They took on the establishment and self-appointed moral guardians and won in an extraordinary way. As everyone now knows, the Amethyst figure on the cliffs was originally designed as a disguised suicide machine, but realisation that a better guillotine is still a guillotine prevailed. Sense, intelligence and inspiration turned dealing with taboo subjects into a humane approach that is now accepted in many parts of the world. They also showed how a willing public could take a wire brush to the rust of self-interested government and de-coke their own clogged minds.

This is the story of those people. You've heard of Peter, Hester, Jamie and Laura of course, but they were just the big stars in a galaxy of hard working and dedicated people. Some are still at work. Others have followed in their pioneering footsteps. Many have left their mark on our society. In this book I'll introduce you to those stars and the people who formed them. I'll tell you about chance events that made the world a more civilised place, and how the country relearned the decencies of humanity and the practicalities of being a society fit for people to live in.

This book tells of the struggle against a thousand years of entrenched dogma. Many tough and resourceful people kept working for others despite the misery-law, death threats and personal pressures who faced every imaginable setback. This is their story.

As Laura says :

I'm against people ending their own lives without reason.

I'm for people having the right to end their own lives for their reasons.

Introducing Seamouth

It is a dawn at the end of September in Seamouth. The southwest wind brings a few big drops of rain from the low scudding clouds, beneath which are mirrored the hurrying foam on the wave crests coming in from Lyme Bay, throwing up seagulls like discarded sheets of newspaper. Even at this battleship grey hour there are humans making the most of their lives. Walking dogs, jogging with dogs, jogging in yellow and purple pairs, or watching the hardy exercisers from their bedroom windows wishing they were younger. Yet if we look at these dogged exercise maniacs they must be at least retirement age. They could jog at normal times but they're determined to make the most use of the day. Bless the oldies. In a warmer climate they would be showing-off wood-brown bodies in their bikinis. This morning the tide is out so the seafront isn't sloshed by waves bursting in synchronised geysers against the sea wall. Nevertheless this is 'Skegness' weather, 'bracing' as the waves crump on the beach to fill the air with gritty salt mist. The tide of winter sweeps away memories of a lovely warm, moist summer of amazed toddlers, the squeals of games with beach toys, encampments with beach furniture and of course refreshing waves stroking the sand.

Now Gerry heaves his breath with a wry smile, and with his hands on his knees says good-bye to Mark. Mark has noticed Gerry has been suffering a bit on their last couple of runs and invites Gerry into his basement flat for a cup of tea. At last Mark realises Gerry isn't really listening and offers him use of the shower to warm him up, but Gerry is warmed by the tea and telling a story about one of Mark's nicknacks, actually one of Mark's wife's nicknacks he'd kept when she died. Suddenly Gerry admits he doesn't feel very well.

The papers are dumped in bundles on the pavement outside the newsagents. The *East Devon Chronicle* has a photograph of a tree being hugged by a crumpled silver car. 'DEATH TREE CLAIMS ANOTHER'. According to the Chronicle, the police can find no reason why the Fiat Toga left the road killing the young driver. This is the fourth death on this stretch of road in eighteen months. A small column inside with a young boy's photograph is headlined 'TRIBUTES FOR TALENTED BOY'. Fourteen year-old Matt Horsley hung himself last Saturday morning while his mother was at work.

As the buses begin their rounds and bakery vans start their deliveries, so newspaper boys and girls start posting the news from their bicycles to still-sleeping households. Each folded bundle is full of advertisements for mobile phones, cars, houses, holidays and almost-fat-free butter at a new low price. Squeezed between the urgent adverts and syndicated tosh is the local news knocking at the back-door. The *Playhouse* has apparently outraged residents by applying for permission to sell alcohol when there aren't shows on. Shopkeepers and school children are apparently outraged that Lower Road will be closed while gas mains are replaced. Mums, and of course children (with photo) are apparently outraged that this year's nativity play will be replaced by carols in a real sheep shed. According to Tania Bishop, housewife, 38, of Richmond Road, sheep carry diseases which the school should have known about.

You have probably guessed that the inhabitants of Seamount were like those of everywhere thirty years ago. Death and outrage were their mainstay, with only a few stalwarts bothering with the tribal warfare of the sports pages. Many read the sport for the practise, but few were genuinely outraged when the referee awarded a penalty in the sixty-fifth minute against *Seamount Seagulls*. The sea hardly ever entered the pages of the *Chronicle*, but it was there every day for people to hear, smell and see whether they jogged, ran a bed and breakfast, cooked meals for school children, were head of the tourist information, or watched and wrote in notebooks.

You shouldn't stand anywhere near the edge of any of the cliffs near Seamount or you might find yourself a rag-doll on a five hundred foot descent. About once a decade there was a suicide, but although just as deadly as Beachy Head, people came to stand-up to the wind and marvel at the shaggy sea rather than to cast themselves into a final body-breaking tumble.

I was one of those watchers with a notebook. I like to see people filling their lives. I like to see the waves clawing at the land. There was to be more death at second hand which would change Seamount from a typical small town into a united, proud and pioneering community. Let me introduce you to the catalyst who started this transformation of a town and millions of people's lives.

Ar and Peter liven things up

Roderick Barton, known as 'Ar-barmy' or just Ar, local eccentric inventor, champion of tourism ideas, scourge of the Town Council's torpor, sousaphone player, bearded monocle wearer, and an entertaining distraction wherever he popped-up in his tweeds, had a new project. He might be eighty but nobody doubted his acute mind. Years ago he'd called the mayor an old fossil and challenged him to describe the geology he was encased in. When the mayor blustered, Ar-barmy rattled-off the layers to be seen in the West Cliffs with succinct ages, environments and typical animals then offered to do the same for the East Cliffs. The mayor fell into Ar's trap by claiming Ar was the fossil fixated by history, while he, the mayor, was coping with the issues of today. Ar was able to quote the last four years budget figures, and council meetings at which various projects that had never come to anything were discussed. "You've known about these issues for years Tom Milsom but still haven't actually done anything. You might as well be a million years dead for all you've achieved." The Town was proud of its 'mad inventor'. His bicycle shop was now run by his daughter and son-in-law but he wasn't far away for when the spry old boys came to be admit their joints were not up to climbing hills any more. Ar knew very well how age broke a man's spirit, taking no notice of past pride. Most of his generation had been great cyclists but now had metal knees or bits of plastic in their hearts. For some the will to breathe hard and do more miles vanished like surf into the shingle. Others drank from the bitter cup and after an hour of tea and battered photos with Ar, bought an electric buggy from his daughter.

Peter, stage name '*The Prof*' made his mark and some of his money in the early 1970s music business as a pop then rock musician. He considered himself a lucky, hard-working, creative artist, not an eccentric. An investigator and exploiter of chance. Soon after moving to a cliff-top farm with stables converted into a recording studio. He met Ar and started sharing music. When Ar had a mad idea for a carnival float, charity concert, performing a bizarre opera complete with buxom Valkyries from an open-top bus, Peter would make a better version happen with creative ideas, hired skills to weld, paint, sing, set off pyrotechnics or whatever scenery or money would make the event work. They arranged brass band concerts where the audience had song sheets, a choir master who warmed them up and dozens of (tuned) percussive instruments for audience volunteers to hit. They'd play silly jokes like a singer belting out 'my tiny hand is frozen' in the main square, then the lid of a chest

freezer beside them would burst open and a twenty-foot hand would start inflating. The best bit was to come, as the hand became turgid like a giant rubber glove. Then those in the know stepped back with hands over their ears. It's a wonder to watch faces in a crowd as they gradually realise 'ooh-err!' and wait for the bang. The two of them schemed and publicised the appearance of 'The oldest Morris side in England'. A whole winter of weekly practices in Exeter had gone in to this half hour of nonsense. The Morris side, half men half women, did three Morris dances. This side didn't wave sticks, didn't smash sticks but showed the power of the handkerchief and high-jump to the audience. There was something wrong! The dancers were in their twenties and none of them had beards. They all made eye contact with the audience when possible. The rattling of bells wasn't a haphazard kitten's toy but a smacking declaration of war. Psychadelic handkerchiefs were delicate petals then declarations of war in their opponent's faces. The music had been an ubiquitous heartbeat and so ignored... Now there was something disturbingly wrong with it. In the middle of *Lads of Buncham* the side disintegrated! Although it was musically very clever, the whole thing capsized as it became Lindy Hop! This dance had elements of each but the next was girls in white skirts meeting blokes who threw them in cooperation rather than man-to-man confrontation. For people who understood the two dance genres they shivered. For ordinary spectators it was obviously a square peg fitting perfectly into a round hole that they'd have to catch-up with later. Ar and Peter had shared the wine to create the idea. Peter had polished it and persuaded the *Exeter Lindy-hoppers* to spend their Thursday evenings being daft. He bribed them by paying for a nationally recognised Lindy-hop coach to visit for one weekend a month. Peter and Christine joined the beginners class and had a good time except Christine was always last to catch-on, last to remember the basic progressions, completely hopeless at judging where the partner was and would be.

The following year Seamount had a guitar festival with a month of workshops for locals, a week of concerts, themed jam sessions, and master classes finishing with a Sunday 'Guitar party' day with mass events in the town for anyone who wanted to turn up, a miniature 'pop' concert in a huge marquee with every sort of guitar style being showcased. Peter had written the 'Seamount Squiggle' which was just a riff and encouraged the performers to try to incorporate it in their demonstrations. Many famous names from the pop, jazz and classical world attended, performed, signed programmes and CDs and mixed. Tickets to join-in with events were free or very cheap, but had to be restricted as you can only get so many people into a limited space. There was no question of making a profit, but of course it meant good business for

the town. By now Ar and Peter had a full-time Seamount Musical Manager, a local singer-songwriter and folk musician. Maggie wasn't afraid to pick up the phone and get a good deal or chase vague answers. She created a team of helpers, persuaded local businesses there was something good going on, and all they had to do was look at the possibilities, set up a free mini-bus service from inland car-parking and camping to the town, ensured guest performers were met and accommodated and the other few thousand necessary details. It didn't happen without Peter's money and reputation, but it would have been a sticky mess without Maggie's persistence and organisation. After the Guitar Week when Peter had day after day of musical minds to experiment with, he told Maggie to go to the travel agents and book a fortnight for two anywhere at his expense. Her husband was a mechanic at a coach company in Honiton who had the job of driving Maggie and playing the Tuba. There wasn't much call for Tuba playing but Dennis didn't really seem to mind.

What next? Seamount Music Week was now accepted locally as inclusive fun rather than something for other people. Just as Ar and Peter enjoyed it, so they made sure whatever their mad idea was, the locals could access it also. What after the guitar festival? Should they have another? No, they'd done that. Other instruments were discussed. What about 'festival of a hundred cellos'? Saxophones appealed for their brash novelty. A second-thought instrument which always seemed to be accompanying. Instead they decided to go with a three year plan. A song-writer's week of workshops followed next year by a singer's week and finally a singer-songwriter's week. Peter made the announcement of the three-year plan in a press release when he collected a special award from the English Tourist Board in London. His speech shocked:

"We had one full-time employee, sold a ticket to 90% of the locals, cost the town eighty pence per resident, brought in business worth an estimated £7 per resident, cost me about £5 per resident, everyone learned a lot and was bloody good fun and I'll tell you our secret to success... We refused to tick a single box. Not one single box. Anyone who wanted a box ticking had a talking-to about what arse did they think they were covering. When we were asked for risk assessments we answered 'of course' or 'of course not' depending on the reality. Some wanker wanted to see our gender equality policy. Our reply began 'Dear cunt slash prick...' What you have to remember is that most of these people can't actually stop you from doing things. You're perfectly entitled to use the road for a carnival, you don't actually need the permission of the police or the council. We did open a bottle of very nice red and write a risk assessment. You can find it on the web site. The risks we identified were things like slipping on un-cleaned dog shit, tripping on badly maintained

pavements, struck by police cars going the wrong way down one way streets, mass hysteria when a famous person has a heart attack and the nearest ambulance is half an hour away. So tell the authorities they're there to serve you! Give them the information and make them take responsibility."

There was silence. This wasn't the message anybody in the industry wanted to hear. Two days later the papers had a story and headlines. 'Prof puts box-tickers back in their box', 'Maverick Prof breaks mould again' and 'Time for a rethink?' 'Festival of Red Tape' was one strange headline that had Ar and Peter thinking with whispers going around Seamount. The tabloids went for quotes but the more serious papers went for more lengthy interviews. This worked well because Peter was portrayed to the readers as a bit of a gentle guru amongst the older rock-star generation. Reclusive and reticent about his private life and business dealings.

He'd got nothing to be ashamed of, but as vulnerable people were involved, his PA emailed the media to remind them of section 4 of the Press Code. When journalists pestered him anyway, his standard answer was "One there's no public interest in law. Two there are vulnerable people who you will cause damage to by publicity in law. Cash damages. In Law. Three, If I tell you who or what this is about then you'll think I'm doing it to make myself look like Mother Theresa of Seamount. Just put me down as a really nice person with a backbone and a direct line to vindictive lawyers. Robertsons of Exeter for your reference should you want to check anything before publication." Some journalists were expert weasellers and weren't going to be put off by this. Peter stared through them in silence, and as they had more questions they pressed on in another direction. As they left he'd say "I've got a state of the art recording studio and state of the art microphones. Don't make up any quotes unless you want a hundred thousand pound legal bill. What's the need? Some of you guys have to make things up! Why for God's sake? Are you all congenital liars?"

Peter wrote a High Street Ballet and Requiem for vehicles and chorus. It was performed on a summer Saturday evening in the middle of Exeter 2006. There were microphones on tuned bus and motorcycle exhausts, instead of swans and princes were mums with folding buggies and a motley of men with mismatched umbrellas. From time to time the big green man in sparkly emerald on the front of M&S would be replaced by a red circle on the Town Hall opposite and everything would stop as the internal combustion engines

played waves of carefully practised sound effects. Each time started the same but by the magic of a sound mixer, assistant at a desk, and a score written on a computer so it could be translated into terms everyone could understand, the modulation, reverb, echo and other effects could be made into a performance the average person standing on the pavement could follow. The second such interlude was a 'conversation' between a moped and a battered transit van. The vehicles arrived then the female moped passenger got off to perform classical ballet moves with the van driver. She was in tee-shirt and jeans, he wore a donkey jacket. Just when the scene appeared to have ended with her sitting on his knee in a classical embrace of heavy breathing there was silence and applause... then the unmistakable tune of *the stripper* came over the loudspeakers! The by now familiar engine sounds (pre-recorded and polished complete with gear changes, backfires and horn beeps for the cymbal splashes) seemed to take over but the action needed no music! Two lovers stripping for each other with every arabesque and joke from the genre... Except they became classical ballet dancers rather than nudes. The difference is marginal, especially if you've just had the two ideas squashed together. Now there's basically a repeat of the first dance but this time with more strength, slower enjoyment, using the whole width of the street up to and touching the crowd with the two-times factor that the audience had already seen a three quarters version and so were thrilling a second time as confidants of the two lovers.

The 'symphony' supposedly (according to the freely distributed programmes) continued with the 'Seamouth Serenaders'. An announcement came over the loudspeakers that there had been a last minute problem and now they would have the 'Zebra Crossing Chorale'. This was a spoof of the *Black And White Minstrels* who started for a minute singing fluffy up-beat songs from the shows. They arranged themselves across the street in stripes, each with a microphone (fake). Then over the space of a minute the words turned from the sunny south to brutal exploitation. The 'blacks' knelt down on all fours to have the 'whites' stand on their backs and sing jollity. Then whites reeled in disgust as the 'blacks' begged for basic rights. Whites promenaded over blacks on the zebra crossing. Nobody could mistake the pounding of a bus exhaust as casual disappointment. Some in the audience may have heard the words. "We don't expect equality but we won't accept slavery."

Then came a requiem in three parts. Past, present and future. Each part lasted more than ten minutes. The clip-clopping of horses mixed with 'classical music' from a fifteen piece orchestra with help from a well rehearsed sound

desk. Then over the wailing of the strings and the martial calls of the brass came whispers of the word 'Gas!' and the conductor struggling to put on a tin hat and gasmask then collapsing. Present continued without a break as a rock-and-roll band with show stopping numbers took over in the west end with the lights moving to them. '*Gas. Gas. Foot on the Gas*' became a Broadway hit with stamps and sequins in an awful parody. Awful in that it smashed every cliché-softened spot. After a bit of trivial 'hack yankee' dialogue to set the scene the petrol-heads came to blast the greens. The pre-recorded tuned exhausts played their part to swamp the feeble tree-huggers. The finale was 'we love you white van man'. The third part, Future, started with a classical dirge, quoting Liszt's funeral march, Mozart's requiem and *Brown-boots*. After three minutes of excellent music there was a zzzzttttt of a needle being scratched across a record. Laser beams zeroed-in onto Peter standing at a keyboard. He waited a few seconds for the change of scene to register then began playing the jaunty *Seamouth Squiggle*. The beams expanded to show Ar puffing on his Sousaphone and then dozens of people with white gloves clapping a slow beat then splitting to meet the audience and get them to do the same. The first piece was a general 'let's join together and be good' song. The second was a sway together, not clap, song about how in the past they let so many opportunities go by. Then came Peter asking everyone listen to some fantastic words by a well known English poet called William Blake. The words of Jerusalem were annotated by echoing voices to explain what it meant and how we all had the choice to make a better world here on Earth. Then, half brass band, half rock and roll, there was a brand new musical setting of Jerusalem! The clapper and swayer leaders lead the audience to join in with body, spirit and sometimes voice. The finale was a minute of loud and spectacular fireworks.

Peter and Ar didn't let the audience go away perplexed. They had twenty cellists and ten tuba players all sat in a long line along the street run through the themes again. Ar led the mechanics and bus drivers first. They snaked in and out of the line of musicians. Ar clapped and looked at the audience to show they should clap too. The secondary dancers followed to their applause. Then came the star dancers. After the final music chords and an anonymous announcer saying over the Tannoy 'That's all folks. A big round of applause for/'

/"Peter here. We've made sure the pubs are still open and we've bribed Devon and Cornwall Constabulary to ignore closing time. I know what you want to do with a Donkey Jacket but you can do that later. There will never be another performance like this. You don't have to be religious to build a New Jerusalem. If tonight has been worth a tenner then give to the homeless or children or

Oxfam or the hospice. I don't believe in god but I believe humans can do better."

That cost Peter over seventy-five thousand pounds, it was only performed once in full in Fore Street Exeter, but what a brilliant escapade! How many couples stripped-off for each other that night like his dancers. The dancers were fairly well known and the notoriety didn't do them any harm even if the party afterwards was one of those never-again weekends. The electronic technicians had an interesting entry in their CV. The members of the vintage bus society, mechanics and general enthusiasts were proud and happy to tell everyone of their fifteen minutes of fame. Unfortunately the crew hired to film the event were not half as good as Peter had been led to believe and only snatchets remain of that Saturday evening. Peter had a secretary to harass idiots like that but the effect was that drugs and pressure caused total disintegration. When hired cameras are seized back any exposed film is not worth anything except as a bargaining chip, but these guys had walked off the end of the pier long ago.

Exeter City council, who one would have supposed would have wanted to promote this as an example of their cultural credentials, was hobbled by screechers who claimed their high street had been hijacked for political purposes not to mention striptease! (Footnote: This was the era when *Monty Python's Life of Brian* was banned by many councils. FACT: Bournemouth only relented in October 2015.) So they anti-publicised the event. None of that affected the after-party at a bus-nutters garage ten miles from the city centre. Peter and Ar, and their many musical friends invited for the weekend, were late-night people so there was no shortage of live music until dawn. Nobody counted, but in the buses parked outside, to give the revellers space inside the garage, there were quite a few couples who had enjoyed the event and now wanted to enjoy the darkness together. Secret couples sneaking onboard what they thought would be their own private bus would be greeted by whispers of welcome! Summertime in Devon is a lovely time. Sharing a seat designed for two can be a bit uncomfortable for two but you're only young once! Most of those aboard the four double-deckers had passing romantic bus memories from their school days but this wasn't romance it was sex. Sex wrapped with romance and a once-off magic. If someone had told Peter, or Busman-Jim they would marry a dozen for life and leave half a dozen with regrets later for not marrying, they wouldn't have changed anything... ..except each would. If they could. But they knew such matters were like leaving the house without an umbrella. One day you were bound to get wet. Ar didn't care. Jim loved the

idea of his buses being the workshop in which lovers were welded together. Jim had the 'energy of hot metal'. He loved his buses for their heritage and perhaps some other romance which others might sneer at. So! Some people liked modern art, architecture, paintings and the Turner Prize! Just because those precious bastards in their Chelsea flats sipping champagne thought a unwearable shoe was a shoe didn't make them great. In fact it made them arseholes. Arseholes who played the Pied Piper's pipes. Peter and Ar were deep cynics. They had long since welcomed un-musical Jim into their ranks.

The frisson of experimental street art faded after a day, and if it made the national news it was probably only as an antidote to the Edinburgh Festival.

Peter

Christened as Peter Tracey White, he became known as Professor T Black then *The Prof* in the music magazines. His heyday had been in the 1970's before punk. The new wave of British heavy metal wiped out his sort of studio rock music. He, and many like him, found their musical talent, standards and investment in a finished piece weren't needed anymore. Why be intelligently angry when you could rant? Why show the horror when you could shout? Why create a filigree tattoo in a guitar solo echoed by subtly post-processed keyboards when you could scream in spray paint?

He left the mainstream and escaped to the peace of the country and new responsibilities. Now he lived in a converted farmhouse two miles (and 450 feet up) from Seamouth with its own music studio and yard buildings turned into chalets, servants quarters and artist's playrooms. He wasn't called *The Prof* because he was absent minded, but because he could study and make intelligent decisions. He didn't get too ripped-off by contracts with recording companies. He invested and married into money. His wife Christine had too much wealth and too little guidance until she met Peter and by then her habits were fixed. He tried to stop her being over-energetic and taking cocaine to drive her frenetic lifestyle that seemed to centre on worshipping him. The drug of occasional use for Peter was sharing a little weed. He tried it in small doses at parties but couldn't see the point beyond being able to take out a felt pen and scribble stuff on music-ruled paper. He was happy to paddle in the shallow end and leave the high dives and marathon parties to others. Give him an open fire, a tumbler of port and, even if Christine's mother and father were sometimes tedious, he could find a way to make the conversation interesting without being rude. Christine stood to inherit a lot of money one day from a family business that started making machines for cotton mills two hundred years ago. Peter had the secret of talking to an audience – Talk about what they know. He discussed the future for the engineering group, would demand facts then scribble on an ever-ready notepad to show he was listening, interested and not taking anything for granted. After that there was no doubt Peter would have a job with the firm and a wife.

There was a fraught lead-up to the marriage. Every day with Christine could be fraught. She was skinny and took a tenth of a second too long to register who was talking to her. Their honeymoon wasn't the Carribean island paradise

she'd been anticipating. She could hardly have organised a day out to Blackpool by that stage. Instead, after the registry office in Stockport and the reception at a stone pile on the moors near Saddleworth, a helicopter took them to Blackpool Airport from where they flew in a private plane to a Scottish island. Money can buy wonderful views of the West coast of Britain. They were met by a chatty couple of escapees from the home counties in a well used landrover. They could hardly understand the mix of accents as their new suitcases were being thrown around in the back along with a coil of fencing wire and fence posts.

Peter had a week to tame Christine or at least to save her. They were staying at a hostel for people trying to protect native wildlife on this island. The weather was occasionally sunny, not often dark, mostly varying amounts of fresh and damp. They were invited to help with fencing. Peter had of course schemed all these healthy distractions but Christine was the hand and he was the glove that had to guide, protect and lead. He had spoken to ex-school mates who had been to university and then their mates to make a plan of replacing cold-turkey with hot-loving. He spoke to some of their girl-mates. Sadly it made no difference. *Chemical Child Christine* became a minor classic amongst those that remembered pre-punk, and later a source of royalties and 'where is he now' publicity. His *Test tube baby* album was typically reviewed as good in parts, but if you looked at the reviews they found different parts good which said more about the narrowness of the reviewers than the breadth of the treatments and subjects. On a single 12 track album he dealt with birth-defects, the magic invention of antibiotics, the abuse of antibiotics, sugar and kids being hyperactive, teenagers experimenting because they could, teenagers making wrong choices, parents dosing their squealing babies with Night Nurse, night-club culture encouraging excitement by any means, po-faced coaches handing out drugs to athletes, anti-depressants being prescribed by the bucket-load and then addicts who genuinely wanted to quit. Alcohol and other actual drugs had their tracks. Other 'drugs' were played with in an extended finale based around a Punch and Judy show. Laughter, gaudy extremes, violence, being a victim, being with others, distorted voices, laughing at others makes you feel good and more.

While stuck for a week on a damp and dismal island that was nowhere in the middle of artistically inhospitable nowhere, Peter was happy and on duty twenty-four hours a day. Christine was confused, angry and frustrated. When Peter said 'don't you love me' part of her said yes while another part said no. She could see light at the end of the tunnel but preferred the tunnel. The tunnel was safe, consistent, silent. It never crept up on her and asked a question that was cutting knives. 'If you love me then smile and be useful.'

That wasn't sensical. Peter persevered and forced a reluctant Christine to come on expeditions in the Land Rover and enjoy the scenery while he did his best to hammer-in fence posts and attach fencing. He'd got no idea if it was a good thing but it was something to be proud of when you could look back across the moor to see the hundreds of yards progress. Christine wasn't a cook. Peter hadn't expected to marry a housewife. On their first day they had to shop in the only store for basics. Peter's culinary skills weren't up to much but an unlimited credit card meant they could add five sorts of tinned soup, a frozen lobster (origin Spain) and Danish-sounding bread-biscuits. In theory they should both have been learning but Peter was learning for both of them and a bit extra. He tried to get Christine involved in cooking their first home-cooked meal together but failed. When she was bored she was happy to sit cross-legged on the nearest cushion or sofa with her own thoughts. When she smelled Lobster she took an interest for a few seconds then retreated into her cave. Peter knew the challenge he'd taken on and wasn't going to give up. In fact she loved the cock-eyed meal of lobster, sweetcorn, bacon and stuffed vine leaves. Peter was nice. She could feel him. She could be a lover for him. Complicated words like 'wonderful', 'delicious' and 'lover' formed in her brain but then evaporated. She couldn't formulate the words 'arsehole', 'bastard', 'I'll never forgive you' either. The truth was she hadn't got any rational framework. Peter wrote at least four of his *Chemical child* songs on this honeymoon with Christine curled up next to him or laid on his lap. In one way his all-or-nothing honeymoon was a success. Back in Lancashire he told his failure first to father Brian and then to mother Pauline. He went over it in general then detail. "Tell me what else I can do?"

Brian said "You tried bloody 'ard Peter. Her mum would have sloshed me. Wouldn't you dear?"

"No I wouldn't. I'd just think you were a bit of a thick northern idiot. You are thick sometimes dear."

"Aye. Bloody patient also."

"Like 'ell!"

Peter intervened "Whoa! Let's deal with Christine. I love her but I can't make her better."

Brian said "You tried son."

Pauline said "Will you try again."

Peter said "She's a wreck. We've got to get serious medical opinion and then I'll do my best. You couldn't be expected to do anything more. We're amateurs. She needs professional help."

Brian said "What good is professional help going to be?"

"Better than nothing dad. If they give up then I won't – but what do I know?"

As an outsider Peter, could see the rocks ahead for the textile engineering business. He saw the captain of the ship was 'crossing his fingers and hoping'. After six months he dragged father-in-law, his business partner George and the only other shareholder, Harriet, to a private meeting. After the excuses and overt 'let's humour him' introduction by Brian, Peter stripped their optimistic 'things go in cycles' from them in ten minutes. Why would a bank invest in a dying industry? Their diversifications had been feeble and were being wiped-out by much better funded international competition. They needed key ideas that could be patented. Everything cost money so why not sell out to Americans, Germans or Japanese on the basis of the new microprocessor technology that would revolutionise the world. Peter admitted he only knew a fraction but the current fashion was for microelectronics so if they could bullshit their way to a sale for say an investment of twenty or thirty thousand in microprocessors and boffins or something then they would have a going concern. A concern going somewhere, but without the financial fuel for a world voyage. Peter had been born in Dorset and brought up in West London. Neither of those places suggested the tough mind needed for 'northern' business, but as far as his father-in-law and partner were concerned he was one of the visionaries they needed. A year later Peter followed-up with the part he'd assumed they'd seen. Sell! Why worry over a risky business with no future when you can retire and leave all that hassle to somebody in an office in St Louis or Tokyo.

What Peter didn't know was that George had five children, of which one was a nineteen year-old boy who couldn't feed himself. Brian knew but never mentioned it to Peter. One day after Peter had been hosting a press demonstration for the 'X32 thread controller' (They could have called it 'model 1 – let's hope it works.') George asked if Peter would like to learn something. Peter's natural reaction to this was 'yes'. A car took them to a care home in the Pennines. They had a parody of afternoon tea with George's son. Peter treated George and his son like he'd treated Christine on his honeymoon: Without giving-in. Except there were the basics that came naturally. Trying to make sense of part formed sentences with the crucial bits missing, offering a teacake, miming buttering a teacake while explaining 'buttering' and was it wanted? Dealing with half grasps and grabs. Peter was on home territory

trying to talk to a person who responded erratically. Everything was done ultra-slow with movements exaggerated and expressions choreographed.

Later Brian drove Peter to the train at Manchester Piccadilly. Peter said "I'm wiser in one respect but I don't have a magic wand."

"I'm sorry to have wasted your time Peter. It was a long-shot. I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry. It must have been good for George too. Think what it must be like for his wife and other children. It was nice tea and I'll go and see Gavin again."

"Really? I wanted to see him smile like you make Christine smile. It would make George smile."

"I wish I could! When you see Christine smile then tell me exactly where and when. She smiles for the cameras and looks through me."

"When she's staying with us she often smiles when your name is mentioned son."

"Take a photo. I only see ripples of deep emotion. It's like she's trying to solve a formula. She's my child really. I can't let her wander on her own." They embraced on the platform until the train was about to leave. Peter waved out of the lowered window as the train drew away and Brian waved back.

Peter kept his promise to visit George's son again. He really enjoyed it. On his frequent visits to wean Brian, George and Harriet off their business suicide club, he often arranged to give an afternoon keyboard recital at the home. Harriet was a trustee of a Quaker trust founded over a hundred and fifty years ago. An accountant heading for retirement being paid for her time looking after the trust's interests. She didn't wear a wedding ring. Peter had nothing to lose by being brutal where Brian and George were deferential. It turned out that she controlled a majority of the shares but the men supposedly held more 'moral shares' because of their entrepreneurial spirit. Peter didn't hold a single share. He asked her out for a meal! He made it clear that he didn't have a business or any proposition just that as he would be attending a morning publicity event so had to stay overnight.

He waited in a smart suit in the plush foyer of the Palatine Hotel. She arrived in an oriental Kimono. He reached-out to greet her. "You've had your hair done. That's very posh. Very posh. It suits you, black against that dress. What a

gorgeous dress." After so much practice looking for details to talk about with Christine, and latterly Gavin, Peter was a natural toucher and confidence giver. "Show me all around." She twirled then gave him her smile. "You need some sparkly earrings Harriet. Watch out for the postman next week!" He held her arm out, she took it and they walked arm-in-arm, prince and princess, to the bar for a cocktail. They shared their guesses about each other they'd made during the year they'd been in meetings without asking much. They laughed. They laughed because of how silly they'd been not to share confidences, silly questions and be themselves before. They had lobster so Peter could tell Harriet about his honeymoon debacle. Peter wasn't called *The Prof* for nothing. When she mumbled 'was she too old for him?' he was ready. He held her hands and said "No but I'm happily married. I won't budge on that. I'll stay faithful to Christine."

"You're a bit... Old fashioned Peter."

"I'm an artist. It's my job to see the world and its people. I'm not old fashioned. The people in today's world are mutants. You're a bit old fashioned and *J&M Engineering group* are old fashioned to the point of being a dinosaur."

"How do you mean mutants Peter?"

"Hide their children like George. Wouldn't know how to be nice to Gavin. Scream inside when asked to touch a brain-damaged kid like it's a poisonous spider. Where did their humanity go?"

By the time they'd finished their bottle of wine, experimented with the cheeseboard instead of sweet puddings, experimented with sharing smells then taking it in turns to nibble the same biscuit then outright offering the other with a bit of biscuit with a bit of cheese Peter decided he might have to lie to himself. Harriet's dark eyes were alive with glittering electricity even if there were wrinkles and she was old enough to be his mother. He'd already got what he'd wanted about the trust's background and how Harriet became the only trustee so... He could make her happy and nobody else need ever know. Or he could make her sad and nobody else would ever know. But the two of them would know. Sadness or happiness? No contest.

Harriet was up most mornings running beside the canal. Later she might ride over the moors or jog through the mind-shredding, knee hammering, brutality of the urban streets. Tonight physical fitness was an asset even if she used long-forgotten muscles. Peter poured out tears of love he'd never found for pliant but enthusiastic in a hired-help sort of way, Christine. Harriet had to tell

him not to worry about a condom as... He realised about the menopause at that moment and blushed, but then held her tighter.

What had started as a 'tell me about your trust fund' turned into a permanent relationship. Amongst other things he pestered her for 'northern' characters to create a new album and she plotted to kill Christine. Only in her mind. But in the scheme of things Peter was hers! Suddenly the atmosphere at J&M changed to secretly sell-out. Far better at 75% of today's market value than 100% of the market value in a couple of years! Within five months the deal had been done. Within nine months the formalities were completed. Within Ten months George had a fatal heart attack on a Carribean cruise. The next day Peter took Christine to Manchester. George's wife was still umpteen thousand miles away. Peter, Brian and Harriet went to see Gavin. He would have to know sooner or later. Actually Brian and Harriet went to see George's oldest son and his wife. Their offer of sending the superb Peter, you know, *The Prof*, to break the news to Gavin was accepted. It took nearly ten minutes of arguing behind closed doors to make eldest son and wife to follow and try to catch-up.

Gavin recognised Peter. They hugged. Peter ignored the dribble and having his toes stood on as they clasped each other like arctic explorers trying to keep warm. Gavin managed a couplet from *My creepy California babe*. While they were close Peter whispered "I've got some sad news Gavin. Shall we find umbrellas and go for a walk." This was three disconnected things! Two too many. "You see the rain outside Gavin?"

"Yes. Raining. Raining mats and rugs."

"You know what an umbrella is Gavin. It keeps the rain off?"

"Yes. It keeps the rain off. You hold it up!"

"Do you know anyone here who might have two umbrellas?"

"No. Why would anyone need two umbrellas? It keeps the rain off."

The staff had reacted a minute ago. "Hey look Gavin. This nice lady has got an umbrella. Do you know how to open it?" Gavin's sadness when he said 'no' was heart-rending. "Shall I show you?"

"Yes!"

"Come on then. Let's go out." Peter physically dragged the little carer to be beside a focussed Gavin and asked her to teach him. For a first attempt it

wasn't bad but Peter could see Gavin was totally confused by being shown how to open an umbrella then use it. "Good start. Now let's have a go together with the other one." Peter gave the umbrella's handle to Gavin's palm then closed his hand around the handle. "Shall we hold it up like we're keeping the rain off Gavin?"

"Yes Prof."

When somebody with such a command of patient practical optimism is at work, some watch to see the magic, while others cower at their own inadequacies. Peter and Gavin marched out, arm in arm, into the gentle rain with "left-right-left-right..." Peter said "I've brought some of those jam tarts you like." When this delight had been remembered then celebrated, Peter came to the point. "I've got some bad news Gavin. Do you like bad news?"

"No. Don't like bad news."

"You know your dad? He's my best friend."

"Yes. He's like you Prof. He's nice."

"He's dead. He asked me to be nice to you as he can't be anymore. He won't be coming any more to see you."

"He's dead so he can't."

"I can come though."

"Not dad but you Prof."

"Yes. He's dead and can't come anymore. I'll come instead."

"Can we still have jam tarts?"

Later when Peter gathered his shadowy entourage to leave, Gavin was happy. Peter had led him to mimic wiping around his jammy mouth with a paper napkin. Peter wasn't called The Prof for nothing. After the mimicking of the jammy mouth came the satisfied smile and relaxed inching of the chair back to relax in a perfect world. Gavin followed Peter so they shared a satisfaction. Gavin's brother and sister-in-law had seen the performance from the next table. On the other side Brian and Christine had seen the same thing. None of them had jam tarts or bothered with paper napkins. None of them had perfect control over the weird ways of the world. They were lesser beings. Everyone in the room could admire, even if through a gauze of jealousy, or bars of inadequacy, Peter's command of the fragile moment.

Then...

How strong and confident do you have to be to build and lead assisted dying? What sort of ordinary people staff the facility and how is the community of the town essential? How does the confidence and cooperation of the community inspire others?

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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.