

Who killed John Crowe?

A photograph of a rural landscape. In the foreground, there is a wooden fence and tall, dry grass. A road or path leads into the distance, flanked by green fields. The sky is overcast with grey clouds. The text "Death on the Dengie marshes" is overlaid in yellow on the lower part of the image.

**Death on the
Dengie marshes**

Merlin Smallbone

Who killed John Crowe?



National crime correspondent Keeble Shilling has to look again at an unsolved murder on the Essex marshes. He was present at the crime scene twenty seven years ago and now current events are getting too close to home. Being at the right place at the wrong time makes him a celebrity which despite his knowledge of the workings of the media is very difficult for him to deal with. While dealing with local crime the tight Dengie community becomes involved in its own media story as Keeble struggles to cope with urgent issues that really matter.



Preview

The full version of [Who Killed John Crowe](#) by Merlin Smallbone is available in the following formats.

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Who killed John Crowe?

by

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The Dengie is a real place on the Essex coast.

All the people in this story are fictitious.

All the beers mentioned are real and delicious.

Cub reporter

For twenty seven years I thought I was the last but one person to see John Crowe alive. A murder in my first week at the Dengie Courier was every boy-reporter's dream come true. I met national press reporters, local police and murder squad detectives all of whom became useful contacts. Now an eight by ten police picture lay on my desk which showed the body of John Crowe in glossy black and white. Except that wasn't the man I'd met in John Crowe's cottage on the marshes in 1982.

I found my way down a lane which became a track lined by tipsy telegraph poles. The hedges petered out to leave ditches full of wind-tousled rushes and straw grass separating track from rough marshland pasture. Being June it was pelting with rain. I might have only been in the job three days but I knew everywhere on the Dengie oozed mud. My ancient Citroen 2CV lurched and squeaked its way through the puddles. I was going to interview John Crowe as he was publishing a book about his life and living on the marshes. A photographer would come another day to get an atmospheric marshland shot.

'Shot' was what somebody else had in mind. Now I wanted to find out who I spoke to that day. And who had sent me this photograph? And why?

After checking the envelope for any clue to the sender I went through to the living

room where Jill was doing two things at once as usual while watching University Challenge. This evening's juggling was ironing and talking to her mother on the phone. A pile of school books on the dining table waited to be examined for traces of intelligent life. My economical mime of inserting a corkscrew and pulling the cork received a nod so a bottle of Rosé was popped into the fridge to lurk in our consciences.

Our rule at home was to ignore or help each other but not to distract. When I'm in my study rattling the keyboard or silently recovering research notes I sometimes wish Jill would disturb me but deadlines wait for no journo. Trying to find the last two of a promised series of ten articles when all inspiration or sources have dried is nerve-racking. After too much drink I'll quip that John Crowe's murderer launched me straight into a life of crime. Without him I'd never have met all the important police at a time when I didn't know cub-reporters had to leave the big stuff to the dinosaurs who went with Stanley to find Livingstone. Ha! Now *Keeble Shilling* was an established crime correspondent for a national newspaper, 'acknowledged expert' on unsolved crimes and our mortgage was paid-off.

In the background I heard silence from the telly. I offered obedience to the head of my harem by folding up the ironing board and tidying it away amongst the mops and boxes of washing powder. Being an unreliable male I was only allowed to carry the cotton 'smalls' while the high-priestess of the laundry safely carried everything on hangers. After the Ritual Of The Creasing had been safely

completed to the satisfaction of the Gods Persil, Hotpoint and Creda we enjoyed a minute of fully clothed love. It may have been longer, our memories now we've passed forty-five are unreliable. Jill had filled-out into a 'rosy mum' even though we didn't have children. She'd always had dirty-blonde hair you'd call silver grey if that wasn't used for pensioners. 'Mousy' was what my mum and the hairdresser who lived at the end of the street called it. Anyway, it was a rare sign of diffident intelligence and quiet hope. Jill called it 'grey-before-its-time-and-can-you-wonder!' I loved it and her.

During the working week we rationed ourselves to a single bottle to be taken on a mad impulse and never shared with guests. I'd learned on my first day on the Nationals that alcohol was an essential tool in undermining the defences of your sources, contacts and colleagues. In London I wouldn't drink a drop. After a while I was openly introduced as the Teetotal-Essex fella. I learned a lot very quickly, including how to look like you're enjoying yourself stupidly. After a few years I put it about that on the first day of each month I wouldn't be offended if I was brought a drink. This was to see which chancers would rise to the bait. An unexpected thing happened. The big names of crime reporting invited me to their sessions. They were all drunks. I later realised they could get away with anything, one even drove home blind drunk and killed a man on a zebra crossing without even being breathalysed. At the time I knew a few nasty types who would have beaten him up or worse but didn't want to owe them a favour. So some innocent pensioner went unavenged... Except I suspect an unexplained disappearance six months later may be related. That is one of *Keeble*

Shilling's unsolved mysteries that I won't be investigating.

'Work hard. Play hard' How I hate that trite phrase complete with its self-centred overtones. But that's what we do. Jill drives English into the kids like ten-inch nails and I fill my day with old-fashioned journalism. When one of us breaks we'll retire and take up cross-stitch or scrimshaw. Whatever, we'll be happy together through a long retirement.

"I'll be Kirsten with your school books in a minute but look at this Jill." I'd often relax with lengthy comments on school work. Sometimes it irked me that three hundred words wasn't getting paid for. In time I took my payment another way by demanding to meet the names on the front of the essays or stories. After her analysis she would pass odd ones to me. I had the good sense to tune my remarks to my audience but after a while that changed. To begin with I wrote in the same green ink that Jill used. Green ink is good if you can get it. Then I started adding the sign-off 'KS' to the bottom of my helpful comment. Without my knowledge Jill collected and edited them into a text book called *Describe me a tortoise* which had good sales. We had more than one holiday on the royalties. That 'KS' soon became 'Kirsten Shilling' which broke open a secret in a nice way but none of the pupils knew if KS was Jill or me... For two minutes. I gave up trying to fool enthusiastic children a long time ago. "Look at this dear. My big break and I got it all wrong. Cheers!" Jill looked at the gruesome body with its unmistakable corona of black blood-stains.

"That's horrible! He's... What are you on about?"

"That man is not the John Crowe I interviewed in 1982. I interviewed somebody else. See the caption laid over the original photo says that's the Body of John Crowe. Well then who did I speak to?"

"I don't know." Jill was still examining the photograph. "He's wearing a wedding ring. Does that help?"

"Oh. Somehow I never thought of John Crowe being married." Mind you, as I now knew I'd only met an imposter. Twenty seven years of knowing then your personal absolute knowledge is thrown back in your face. "Show me." Sure enough there it was. "I never thought to look dear. You are the Holmes to my Watson."

"Hey. Why don't we change the number of our house from 16 to 22B."

"Can we do that? Isn't there the Municipal goat-fondling and street-works act of eighteen eighty five that makes us liable to be transported to Botany Bay?"

"I could do with a holiday far away."

"Shall we really do it?"

"Yes. Why not. There isn't another 22B in Gate street as far as I know."

"Blow the expense! Have some more Chateau Sainsbury."

"I've got to mark class 4B!"

"Pick out the skanks and I'll tickle them for you."

"Stop it! It's the Mayor of Casterbridge again."

"Beginning, middle or end?"

"End."

"Give me the ones that hated the whole thing. The end makes me cry."

"Why?"

"It just does. We had to do it at school and I remember I cried."

"You're a sucker for Victorian melodrama Matt."

"Anyway I cried."

"Go and look the last few pages on Project Gutenberg. Then I'll decide if you should have the fors or the againts."

"Can't you try to break my blank about this photo first. I'm supposed to be an expert but speak to me in English about what it means."

"Who sent it?"

"Anonymous."

"Why?"

"I don't know."

"Well think! Come on Matt you're not senile yet. Are you sure there's not some psychological reason why you're smozzled by this photo?"

"I'm sorry dear I've got blindness of shock."

"Leave it for now. It's probably one of those things that will sort themselves out with a day or two of being left on the shelf."

"But don't you see? Somebody had gone to the trouble of sending me a clue but I can't see what the clue is."

"Some nutter with old police photos who want's to see you make a fool of yourself in public."

"Police photos are only available to policemen."

"And favoured journalists Matt. Someone in Wapping is pulling your leg."

"Even if it's true the man in the photo still isn't the John Crowe I interviewed." I'd often revisited that cottage in my mind and knew exactly where my shorthand notes from that day were. "John Crowe's cottage was a white weatherboard bungalow placed on a little carpet of green lawn. A well-worn series II Land-Rover and white three-door Vauxhall Chevette lodged in the pull-in opposite. I knocked at the door."

"Hold on! You have the details of the cars but what about the cottage. Chimneys? Outbuildings. Describe me a tortoise!"

"Um. Bungalow. It had a exactly the same tiny porch build-out with finial and rosy trellis as every other weatherboard cottage. I know there was a barn or shed or hen house."

"One or two. Which?"

"I can't remember."

"So was it well kept?"

"Yes."

"Very well looked after. Flowerbeds and that sort of thing?"

"I don't know Your Honour. I was in a hurry to get out of the rain."

"It was your first week. Did you knock and wait or had John Crowe seen you arrive?"

"It was opened without me knocking. And It wasn't John Crowe."

"But it might have been. The photograph might be faked. You weren't Keeble Shilling then either!"

"I must have said something like 'Hello Mister Crowe I'm from the Courier come to interview you about your book.' and he called me in."

"What was he like?"

"He had thick square glasses like Michael Caine, sticky-out ears, white flat cloth cap. Now you mention it he appeared to be forty rather than fifty... In the cuttings it says he was fifty. He was quite tall but the man in the photo is like a pug. My dad used to say 'too short for a drayman' meaning otherwise well built."

"Your dad had a lot to answer for Matt. You for a start. Teaching you to be clever with words. Also I'll never forgive him for deciding I was too feeble as a teacher to shop for my own vegetables and bringing us half his allotment twice a week."

"You never told me that! I thought he was proud of you."

"I fed most of the staff on what he gave us. Anyway! Carry on. Smell?"

"I'm sure he meant well."

"Stay on the subject!"

"I don't remember."

"You must remember how big it was. How it was furnished."

"I'd say four rooms. Living room straight from the door with cheap sofa and telly. Smaller than this room. One light bulb in the middle."

"Lace and trinkets?"

"I can't remember any but I wasn't looking."

"Who said what?"

"He said sorry to be suspicious of visitors but there had been a recent burglary down the lane. I nearly started a new page of my notebook but remembered why I was there. All I have in my notebook is details of the book and his biography."

"Did you see the book?"

"He went out somewhere to fetch a copy."

"That was strange."

"Why?"

"If he was expecting you then he'd have a copy ready to show you."

"Brilliant! You're a genius Jill. So it really was an imposter! Have some more wine."

"Of course it was."

"It could have been himself and the body mis-identified. It's happened you know. You said the photo could be a fake."

"All right I'll take half a glass for my genius. Keep describing this tortoise."

"He showed me the book. It was about observing wildlife in Scotland as a boy, Africa while on military service and then the marshes on the East coast. Full of traveller's anecdotes. I asked for an example and he said how in East Africa tribes were often fighting amongst themselves and a dozen bodies would be dragged away and stripped to bare bones in hours by jackals, vultures and ants. Even I realised that he wouldn't sell many books like that so what about something more local. After a while he read a bit about the Decoy Ponds. I wrote lots of it down – look! Real shorthand written at speed – but I got lost. Eventually I asked about himself. He was a fellow of the Audubon society etcetera and made his living advising

institutions on unusual bird specimens. Did I know a dead bird was turned into a skeleton for display or reference with fossils by putting it in a colony of special beetles who strip the flesh off in a week without damaging the bones?"

"Did you?"

"No of course not. When you're taking shorthand your normal brains don't work. It was only when I got back to the office that Dick pointed out this might be a fascinating fact but Mrs. Smith didn't want flesh-eating beetles with her morning coffee. Dick was very nice about it."

"How is he now?"

"The last I heard he was out of hospital."

"When was that?"

"Christmas I suppose."

"Eight weeks ago. Perhaps you should visit him tomorrow on your way to the barbers"

"Do I really need another hair-cut?"

"I like my men trim. Now you haven't told me about the book itself."

"Er—"

"Did you hold it?"

"No. I was too busy taking notes."

"What was it called?"

"Ah... Here it is. 'Birds in my life.' I remember when he said that I thought of the bird in my life – you. Later I thought how you had soared at university and swooped past me."

"That's very poetical. Next week you can have some filth-year poetry to mark."

"Oh no miss. I promise to have my hair cut if you don't do that!"

"Grr. You're living on borrowed time Mister Anson. More tea vicar! Seriously – Dick did a lot for you. Take him something to cheer him up. There's some jam tarts from cookery classes in the larder. Why not take him your photo and a secret bottle of brown ale?"

"You should do my job and I'll do yours."

"Come on then. Let's find out what they think about the Victorian view of Michael Henchard's decline."

"Why don't you ask them who he would phone if he had a mobile?"

"Perhaps you really should do my job. That's a good idea. I'll use it on Monday."

"I really like playing with the stuff you let me have darling. Do you ever tease them to tease me?"

"Once I set an open story over Easter of 'The sailor's mistake' so you could sweep into the classroom as a special guest with tales of our times on *Tortoise* but they mostly did so well – even one who cast you as the sailor and me as his mistake – that I thought it was best to let fiction triumph over reality."

"Do it again!"

"Oh I do. But not to tease you."

"You could publish the best ones for the RNLI."

"No I couldn't. Schools don't work like that. We grade on more than the story. I try to grade with a bit of a carrot."

"Well tried you mean?."

"Yes. It's especially effective when you give your comments and they feel someone's listening to them. They're teenagers."

"But well tried and wrecked on the rocks is worth an F. Eff-all."

"That's why I didn't let you see their work. It was the best exercise I've ever set but real sailors would stamp on their objections."

"Oh. I still want to see what they wrote."

"Why Matt? All these are supposed to be private. Just because you're famous doesn't mean you have the right to sneak into a child's bedroom while they're composing their half-thought thoughts."

"I'm a journalist! I want to pry to find out what's hidden. It's in my blood. And I've remembered that there was no dog and no cat. What sort of person doesn't have a cat or dog?"

"We don't."

"I mean out on the marshes. Anyway I like a cat curled up ignoring me while you have all those Shakespeares to keep. Hey! You know how they do the Tour de France with prizes for sprinting and climbing the mountains. Why not have sprints for poetry and climbing might be Tortoisng. You see what I'm saying?"

"I may have had a pleasant sufficiency but you're dafter than a bag of thistledown."

"That's good! Bag of thistledown. If I ever get a cat I shall call it thistledown."

"Oh bugger-it Matt. Shall we have an early night?"

"You seem to have drained the bottle! I shall file a complaint under the Ordinances governing the wayward women of North-

minster 1652. Herewith be Ye appraised of the noxious rumblings of that part of the populace calling themselves honest women that be no more than mouthpieces for division and dissent. Also their breasts may be as flat as the face of a church tower, faces as flinty and bellow like clangorous bells."

"You really know how to charm the birds in your life!"

Who knows?

Dick Darcy had been my boss at the Dengie Courier in those halcyon days when the paper was run locally and read locally by everyone. A nice man who took time to teach me a lot, he was always dashing out or dashing in or checking my copy in a hurry. Now he was a lifetime tenant of a well-cushioned armchair which I guessed was his home most of the day. Thank God he had a sprightly wife to look after him. Despite his physical troubles he hadn't lost his interest in other people and interviewing skills. We were on the second cups of tea before I could show him the photograph. I had to remind him a bit about the case.

"Ah yes. The Dengie Revenge Murder. You always were a lucky sod Matt."

"But you let me deal with it when any other boss would have taken over."

"Never solved was it?"

"No. Now there's another mystery." I passed the envelope across to him. The man in this photo isn't the man I saw. I must have met the murderer face to face."

"Stick to the facts Matt. Why was it called the Revenge Murder?"

"I don't know. I expect the Nationals needed a name so they made one up."

"Well you know all about that now. Suppose this man was John Crowe's wife's lover? That wouldn't be revenge. See he's wearing a wedding ring."

"I never thought until Jill pointed it out last night that he had a wife. He just didn't seem the type or the cottage gave that

impression and I don't recall a wife at the inquest."

"You had a lot to learn. At least you learned who your friends in the force were."

"I'm not observant Dick. I just list the facts and connect a few dates and things."

"That's true but you're good at keeping the reader panting to know the next bit."

"You know my boat is called Tortoise? Well that was paid for in part by a book called 'Describe me a Tortoise'. I wrote that as comment on one of Jill's pupil's bits of work which didn't describe anything very much. Jill gets the credit. I was only helping her out and finding my own rules I suppose."

"You saw the problem and wrote a headline to fix it."

"You taught me well. 'After three lines max of shorthand I must know the headline'. I still think of that."

"Good lad. Now what's this Tortoise thing?"

"If you were an alien and I said a Tortoise has a shell you might think of a snail shell. If I said it had four limbs you might think of a cat or monkey. Without a picture a tortoise is very difficult to describe. After all the answers came in I asked what did it taste like? There's always something important you've left out."

"A tortoise is a Cornish pasty made of two crumpled plates spilling handbag out of the corners."

"So that's what it tastes like!"

"I've read your Keeble Shilling's unsolved crimes series and wondered why you didn't have this one?"

"Said Matt Anson, 46, wharfinger of Northminster with three children, the case is empty. There were no clues. The police couldn't find a motive, weapon, trace any suspects, find any incriminating fingerprints. A man is shot and as they say the police have nothing to go on."

"Professional job then?"

"Oh I see. I am the tortoise. I can't see what I look like."

"How do you mean Matt?"

"I was there. I must have seen something important but not seen them if you see what I mean. Last night Jill pointed out if I'd really met John Crowe he would have had his book ready to show me. She asked and I remembered but still didn't see the importance until she told me."

"She's a very clever girl. What are the names of your three children Mr Anson?"

"What?" Oh Dick was having a joke. "Ammonia, Brillo and eighteen month old Cadwallader with the incurable disease that only a trip to Disneyland can cure." I should have come to cheer up Dick before. His pile of things within easy reach slid to the floor as he laughed.

"Back to the photograph Matt. Who sent it?"

"I don't know."

"How will you find out?"

"Phone the police first. Ask them if a photo has gone missing from their files... ..and would they like it back?"

"Good boy Matt. Now you told them a lie in your statement so could you see it and make an amendment."

"Yes. Anything to force them to get the case out of the basement."

"Why should they bother with failures of thirty years ago? It will turn into today's failure without more fuel to light the fire."

"I suppose you're right Dick. I'll have to find out something more myself first."

My dad had gone to the barbers in Quay Street and as father teaches son the ways of men so earlier versions of me used to go there. For a while I deserted this temple of male vanity with its scented oils, carefully observed rituals and attentive priests in their Terylene vestments for an excuse to get out of the office or away from the pub in London. On the Denge we say 'he got shaved' to mean 'he got married' as it was tradition that customers would be shaved by the barber on his wedding day. Buffer, Ken's dad, had shaved me with the old cut-throat. The palaver with making the soap into a foam then showing the victim the weapon, stropping it and tilting the head for the first slash were scary. I'd seen it happen to others and knew what to expect but not ready for it all to happen to me at once with no chance of escape. 'Nice pair of tits Matt. Shame about the glasses but you can't have everything eh? Her dad still comes in first and third Thursdays about ten. He's heard all about reporters and worried you're going to drink, smoke and womanise. After that shave my cheeks were smoother than glass. Whatever a baby's bottom was like this was better. As the Best Man pointed out, a completely different smell for a start. Now, thanks to modern communications, I spent more of my time at home and could return to the barbers of my fathers.

"I was just thinking of the day I got married Ken."

"You married Jill Westcott from Cuppers Close. She would babysit me and my brother. Strict but fun."

"Just three words! I'm supposed to be the wizard with pen but in thirty years I've never heard her summed up so accurately. She baby-sits me very nicely."

"Just part of the job. It's nice to have blokes like you always being happy. You wouldn't believe the gossip that I'm supposed to do something about. Either their lives are capsizing or 'something must be done'. I remember you at school Matt – Or should I call you Keeble – You got me to play the part of a cherub in a play about heaven – Some foreign one act play."

"I wanted you because you and Buffer were good at dealing with customers so I thought who better to welcome customers to Heaven."

"Do you remember Porker Harris the chap who wrote risqué jokes for me to use? He vanished but two years ago he walked into the shop, demanded a shave and introduced himself. He was having a shave because his dad had died two days before and he'd just got off the plane at Stansted from LA. He's a professional fund-raiser flying round the States and the world raising millions of dollars. He gave me a hundred pounds for me and five hundred pounds for something useful in the town."

"What did he look like? I can't picture him."

"Telly Savalas. Sunglasses. Bald with slab jowls. When he wanted shaving"/

/"No I meant what did he look like back then?"

"Curly dark brown hair. Tall. Glasses. Flat nose. Deliberately scruffy when he came from a good family. Started a craze for drawing chalk outlines round everything."

"Hey! I remember now. Yes! I was part of that. It started with drawing a line round buttonholes in blazers."

"Having a stick of chalk soon became a hanging offence."

"Jill leaves that to the others. If she gets a troublemaker she simply drags them out to the front and asks 'what's their trouble' and they say 'none miss' and she says to the rest of the class 'we all know that's not quite the truth don't we adults' and that's the end of that."

"I don't remember Jill at school really."

"She was two years above me so three above you. Hey! There's nobody waiting. I'm fit for her majesty when she comes back from school. I don't have the same money as Porker – Rich bastard – how about a shave?"

"What all over?"

"Eh? I've had a shave today but do your magic with your cut-throat Ken."

"Oh. Face-shave. I thought you meant skinhead!"

When you're covered in a sheet you can't shake hands. "You daft cherub!"

"That was the bit I remember most fondly from school Matt."

"You should have put that five hundred pounds/ /No sorry Ken. Sorry about that."

"It's alright Matt. I asked Pauline and she said I should give a hundred to five

charities and get them to write to Porker to thank him."

"Thank God we have wives to help us."

"Anyway as I have this very sharp razor in my hand – what were you going to suggest Matt?"

"The amdrums at Pelingdon and you should join." The careful concentration of avoiding ears hidden in soapy froth continued.

"I often wonder that Matt. Hmm. Pauline and me could join together. At least come with me. You know about these things. I'm common."

"We're members so of course I'll drag the two of you along to the next production and introduce you."

"I can't act."

"You could act at school just nicely and if they won't have you I'll write a play specially for you! The Barber of Northminster who casts spells on his customers so they marry well and flash-off to far places but never let the town out of their hearts. Hey! I'll make sure there's a cherub in there."

"Do you write plays as well as unsolved crimes Matt?"

"No. But why not? I'd be useless on a stage but you can whisper. Maybe a radio play. Let me think about it." By now the hair cutting and shaving was over.

I was about to give Ken another tenner when he said. "Any news of Dick Darcy?"

"I saw him an hour ago. Bad news. The hospital messed him about with operations and buggerations. One buggeration after another. It's difficult to find out what caused

what but in general nobody wants to know about anything."

"Would that make a good play?"

"What role would you play?"

"The audience."

"No don't be stupid/ /Bloody good idea! The chorus!"

"A musical of Dick's buggeration as you put it?"

"No! Somebody to encourage the audience then show them how they may be heading at highspeed for a junction so look out! It's what we do as journalists. Part one is the foot-on-the-floor teaser. Then the hump-back bridge taken too fast to make them forget how flimsy the story is. Then the s-bends of the mystery that don't quite add-up. Then the pub of what we want them to believe followed by the knowledge that we've got to go home of 'but is it really?' " My play about the rot in the NHS died as the door p'tinged. I handed over an extra tenner – Ken hadn't charged me for the shave. "I'll let you know or you can come to rehearsals."

Bugger! I 'd meant to broach the subject of the Revenge Murder. Now I had hours to wait before Jill could feel my silky cheeks.

Plays

Weekends in the Anson household are set aside to be different from the other days of the week. At home Jill will indulge in cooking or stealing the computer to write whatever she wrote. If she wanted my opinion she'd ask for it and I make a point of leaving her the widest sea-room. On the boat we decide who will be skipper for the day and I normally cook. In the galley I could scheme with the limitations but at home there are too many choices. On the boat we eat from single plates with basic cutlery not the palaver of fluted glasses and would I like orange or cranberry and apple juice, or fizzy water or still water or tap water. Kitchens are for fitting-out not cooking in!

This weekend was a bitterly cold Siberian easterly – Only madmen would be on the water. Sure enough there were wind-surfers and dinghy-racers leaping the chop and flipping their sails in the Stukey Reach and Town Lanes. At eight o'clock on a Saturday morning you know everyone on the quay. Half are walking their dogs and the others going about their business. My business was nothing more than the constant swapping of gossip and enjoying the town. When my dad died I thought how I would at least enjoy living. The tidal heartbeat, the weathery emotions, the hidden humour of the inhabitants and being part of it were my joys.

Before Jill left for a day's 'shopping' expedition to Chelmsford she reminded me we were going to a production of *Any of us could have*

done it at Pelingdon so, as promised, I went to see Ken and then Dick to invite them to come with us. Ken tried to refuse out of fear of being with the toffs. Although I didn't put his mind at rest I managed to persuade him. Dick leapt at the opportunity and said he'd write a review to keep in practice.

Thinking of plays reminded me I'd agreed to write a sketch for the Sailing Club's cabaret so an hour at that task would be time well spent. Strangely it turned very dark and unsuitable. A lone sailor in the Pacific is visited by ghosts of his home on the Dengie. Gradually the sailor himself is turning into a ghost. Perhaps better as a film. Oh magic! The shock for the audience as they begin to see slight hints of background behind him and then more. I know! Love interest – er – As he's searching for land so he's searching for his long lost love. Symbolic gold! And as he's left solid land to hunt for something that possibly can't be found so he will never make landfall with his heartthrob again. Where on earth do these ideas come from? Would Ken make a good wandering sailor? Making all the ghosts at home even if home was a drifting derelict. A tiny speck in a vast blue hemisphere of sky over a few miles of ocean. I printed the jumbled notes for reference when we were moored in Walton Backwaters enjoying Boeuf a la Tortoise with a dose of Bosun's ruin. Jill would pick the bones out of my ramblings and we'd mould something you can't get on the telly. Now where was I with this cabaret sketch? I wanted it to be boaty. This was too stressful. Too many options. Stressful – That was it! The most stressful bit of sailing is selling a boat. In twenty minutes I'd got my first draft of not a ghost but an imaginary friend buying a boat. In an hour it had taken a

decent shape and would soon have the edges smoothed. Ten minutes long depending on the actors. Problem. The punch-line fixed but the best presenters would never keep a straight face. They'd have had a few drinks and be happy so bugger bugger bugger. Kids? No too unreliable. Does it have to be men. Jill could sell a boat – better buy one so that leaves a seller... Perhaps one of the keen racers we hardly ever saw at the bar. I'd leave the Hon. Social Sec. of the Anson household to deal with that.

I enjoyed the evening at the theatre. It might be just a tractor shed turned into a place where drama happened. It may be bitter February but we knew to wear long socks and put up with the noise of the propane heaters. At the end I fooled my way onto the stage and put a fiver into the stage manager's hand for keeping us from freezing and others followed. We love our theatre.

Just because I'm a newspaper reporter and have books published I'm expected to be a graduate in literature. Jill is expected to know everything as 'English is drama isn't it?' We go to plays for dozens of reasons but mostly because it beats all the alternatives. A good play is a brewing storm, a race for a haven and a dash over the bar for an exhausted anchorage. A confused or badly produced play is a smug learning experience. I'm in the business of writing and Jill is in the business of performing. I'm sure the word goes round that the dragon is in the house when Jill turns up. I try my best to make her appear harmless. She must have taught a few of the players. I keep out of that bit. I learned something once from a person I forget. When I'm having a serious

chat to sit on the floor or at least lower than your pupil-victim who needs a few words of your wisdom and leave them with a positive comment and smile. I wish I knew which ghost told me those things because I'd like to thank them.

Dick said he enjoyed the play, especially the costumes which would make a good story with pictures. I introduced him to the wardrobe mistress straight away. Dick's wife, known as Doll, was very quiet and had that look only seen on pre-first world war soap adverts and angels. She whispered her answers to the obvious questions hospital questions.

"What did you think of the play Doll?"

"I didn't understand it."

"What didn't you understand?"

"Why was James Whitethigh dressed as a stupid vicar?"

"Because he was acting."

"It's all wrong."

"You've been to the cinema and seen – er – James Stuart and John Wayne. This is the same."

"It's wrong."

"What's the difference?"

"They're actors. Jim's a milkman. He can't be an actor! What would his wife say if he rolled up at home as a forgetful vicar!"

I didn't know so I escaped with "Ask Dick. He'll explain it better than I can."

Both Ken and Pauline had been entranced by the play. I'd been their chaperone while Jill ministered to the Darcys. I couldn't

understand why they were so naive. Surely they'd seen plays before. On the telly yes, but Ken knew at least half the actors and Pauline half the actresses. Dressing up to fool your friends wasn't something they'd seen done so seriously before. Ken's brief acting career at school gave him a secret insider's pride. Pauline was amazed that everyone could remember all those words. Ken was amazed that nobody made eye contact with the audience.

"Gerry looked straight at me but never nodded or winked."

"You see Ken they train so there's an invisible wall between the audience and the stage. That way they get on with their lives as if nobody is watching."

"Bloody clever. I liked that girl with the machine gun. She loves that weapon like the boyfriend she doesn't have."

"Exactly! Do you see they all had something odd like that. The vicar who secretly gloats at funerals and steals half the collection."

"A couple of weeks ago Pete Maslow said he was doing a play here but I didn't like to get involved with intellectuals – They can be touchy."

"He'll be out in a minute. Think of something nice to say and forget all that posh toffs nonsense."

That evening in bed Jill wanted to talk about the play. I was now cross. An unsolved murder on stage and I couldn't solve it before the Kens and Dolls! This was my speciality so it should have been easy for me.

"Don't forget the author spent months disguising it."

"It's modern and ancient. Dick's generation of vicars and Margaret Rutherford little old ladies with an anvil in their handbag mixed with mummy's little terrorist moonlighting as an animal rights activist."

"I liked the bit about her and the huntin' shootin' fishin' young farmer."

"They both annoyed me."

"That was the point. Taking sides. Earlier we get some respect for each one standing up for what they believe in – at least they're not hypocrites like some of the others but then they turn out to be as gormless as each other. That was the point! You've taken sides only to find out neither was much cop."

"Oh I see. It was meant to annoy me."

"Yes – If you were sucked-in to the trap."

"I can't see the details and I can't see the wider picture. I'm even more angry."

"So that's a good play then. You never get angry."

"Do I need anger to pass my annual MOT? Like the horn on the car? I can't remember the last time I used it but woe betide mister Anson if the horn doesn't work on KS07 MVF."

"Not between the hours of seven to seven in built-up areas."

"How do you remember those things! You're making me un-angry love."

"Un-angry isn't a word dear."

"It is now – as is hmm... Fundaluminous!" There was more un-angrying as Jill brushed my detachment aside with her everywhere sweet eyes.

"Err... Sun shines out of your arse? Does it really?" It's nice to be teased with a smile.

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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.