

# Man with a voice



Merlin Smallbone

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At school Clive latches-on to the detached style of school reports. *Clive is a shy boy* and so on. From this beginning he finds it easy to detach the view inside his head from his body so as to look at himself going about his business from the outside. His imagination and unusual view lead him to a very successful career in marketing. However, while he 's good at shaking-up executives from Tokyo and New York, although he's dedicated to his wife, he doesn't realise she's got talent and ambitions of her own.

This is a story of success over the latter part of the 20th century. How one man can connect with millions yet still be that disconnected school boy inside.

Merlin Smallbone is a prolific multi-genre author, covering crime, mediaeval history, science fiction, poems, short stories and non-fiction. Visit [vulpeculox.net/books](http://vulpeculox.net/books) for details.



# Preview

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The two-foot gauge Ffestiniog Railway still exists and there was a long volunteer effort to reconnect the railway with its original *raison d'etre*, the slate mining town of Blaenau Ffestiniog. This was called *the deviation* because a powerstation project had flooded part of the route and another route including a spiral was needed. I was 10 when I saw the start of work at Ddualt so details are all invented, although the general story can be found in books. I'm sure there were lots of shenanigans.

## Clive gets a voice

I'm going to tell you about Clive Swift. He developed the skill to look at himself from the third person point of view. What started as a curious habit became a social millstone for a while but broke open a world where he had a second opinion to stimulate his creativity.

At school Clive noticed how the end of term reports were phrased. *Clive has developed...* and so on. All in the detached third person and to be examined after the event. *Clive doesn't make friends easily.* Being an only child he played with books, words, meccano contraptions, drawing and adventure in his head. *Clive is creative but inclined to introversion. He works hard but sometimes daydreams.* As year followed year a pattern emerged. Clive shows an commendable interest in all subjects but won't put himself out to be better than average. He has the ability if he tried. One year he was praised for his contribution to the set of *Journey's End* 'which showed imagination, ingenuity and application.' Clive liked praise but knew in this case it was mostly a matter of doing something dealing with the trailer-load of wood, corrugated asbestos sheets, sacking and plaster his father had collected from his mates. *Clive had risen to the occasion, but being a stooge for his dad irked him.*

Clive invented a parasol to stick into a ketchup bottle so that when pulled out a bit it forced a steady flow of gunk out instead of the unpredictable hitting it on the bottom method. His father said it wouldn't work for square HP sauce bottles. *Clive was disgusted and disappointed with his father.* His school friend stole a cocktail umbrella from his parents and with the aid of a drinking straw *Clive proved his father wrong.* Clearly there was more work to do, but as father wasn't interested and mother was interested only at the superficial level of *was Clive behaving*, he sat in his room asking Ronaldo the orange Persian cat what he should do. Clive's extra voice could put words into the cat's head. *He had another five minutes before he must go outside to meet the gang, so he'd let little one with the tickly hands stroke him some more.* Clive played with the cat every day. *Clive knew the*

*cat was letting him play. During this moment of frustration Clive tested Ronaldo with stroking of one of his foot pads. He enjoyed this gentle attention. Suddenly the little one made a loud noise! Time to go! Ronaldo collected himself, back legs first, eyes to escape route second, claws into automatic... to the floor then run.*

*Clive had an idea. That night he wrote to the makers of HP sauce. (This was in the early 1970s.) In English lessons he'd learned how to write a business letter, and in physics the essentials of an experimental report. What better use for a boring Friday evening. As an afterthought, he added that he was hoping to get a job in advertising. Until that moment Clive never really thought what he might do after school. The next day, Saturday, Clive took the bus into Manchester, supposedly to go to the cinema with his school friend, but actually he went to the Central Library and asked at the desk about books on advertising. Clive sat at the bare wooden desk blasting his way through books with the same sorts of things which seemed obvious after the first reading. It turned out that advertising was not the same as marketing. He'd learn both then at an interview pick one and keep the other secret. Even before surreptitiously eating a Kit-Kat for elevenses, Clive had decided what he wanted to do. That Saturday in the library Clive took charge of his life. This would not be controlled by his parents. He found a newspaper called **Marketing Week** in the newspapers and periodicals section. In the back it said there was a special student rate. He didn't have a cheque book, so a Postal Order would have to do. As he rode on the top of the bus home through Stockport Clive imagined the impression it would make on his parents when the first copy arrived in the post. He would take it to school like a senior executive. Perhaps he should get half-moon specs instead of the round ones. Perhaps an optician could saw the tops off. It couldn't cost more than a couple of quid!*

The next day, a quarter of a mile from where Clive had been on the bus on Saturday afternoon, an aeroplane crashed on the only bit of open ground in Stockport! *Clive was shocked at the proximity to disaster. Clive wondered about how the experts in Marketing Week would be able to continue selling air travel.*

The makers of HP sauce thanked him for his letter, wished him well with his career after school, and invited him to visit their Birmingham factory.

Clive's father insisted in accompanying Clive on the train to Birmingham even though Clive was practically seventeen and hardly likely to get lost on a day trip. There was no way Clive could tell his dad that he didn't want him to come except by telling him. Clive told his father at Sunday Tea he didn't want him to come. Clive's father was angry at this rebellion. Clive's mother was upset at this argument. Clive said "If you come then I'll leave home".

His mother said "Where will you go?"

"To my girlfriend." *Clive enjoyed the silent sound of a house of cards collapsing.* They didn't know he had a girlfriend. He didn't, but they didn't know that. "You can't treat me like a child any more. I think I'll finish my tea then read Marketing Weekly." *Clive saw an involuntary thought-vomit for the first time.* His mother searched the empty cupboard of her brains for something to say.

She asked "What is she like?"

"OK but not a keeper." Clive forced a whole cup of too-hot tea down and went to his room. *Clive was shocked at his unnecessary violence.* He'd upset his parents and while they may need educating it wasn't a nice thing to do.

Ten minutes later mother knocked on his bedroom door and asked to come in. She sat beside him and tried to be bright but practical as if someone had died. She said how George (*Clive knew his dad was called George but this was a first in the family!*) was proud of his son and wanted to share his day-out man-to-man.

"I have to do some things on my own. I'll tell you about it. It's not a secret. I'm seventeen and a half."

"What about your girlfriend? What's her name?"

"Anabel. She's the captain of the Hockey Team at the Girls Grammar." Clive learned that if you lie then escape and plan your story as soon as possible. He did know Anna from the bus and fancied her but didn't have the courage to say so. *Clive couldn't be sure of himself yet. Perhaps when he'd been pampered by the people at HP sauce he'd have a something to say to her that didn't sound stupid.*

Over the next week Clive's father didn't say a word. His mother pestered him about his girlfriend. He should have foreseen this, but at an all boy's school, and as loner and somewhat introverted, he had borrowed on a



worthless asset. Not too late! *Clive could rise to a crisis.* First thing on Monday he asked his friend how to get a girlfriend. According to Andrew it was easy. "Anyone will do – so long as she doesn't smoke and lives local." *Clive was quickly educated in two things. Firstly that schools are very public places populated with 100% idiots. The second that he had to 'make an effort'.* Eh? Smoke, wear a chain belt, not the regulation trousers and hang around with the 'right' people so he'd get invited to parties. Clive said "Bugger that. I'm not smoking! I'm buggered if I can be arsed to get my trousers altered. Andrew suggested Clive should join in with the actors in the Drama Club instead of the techies with the lights and radios.

"You'd be good! When you have something to say you say it clearly."

"No. I tried it and I was too boring."

"Alright – if you're so boring then don't they have roles for boring people?"

"I'll ask."

"See! That's the wrong attitude. Be the director! Get them to jump through hoops."

"They'll never let me be the director. They want a man who waves his arms about and kisses everyone."

"OK Clive. I see what you mean. But you can get the publicity photographs from the girls can't you eh? That'll be a nice cosy moment won't it."

A boys school that wants to put on plays needs girls. In the sixth form this is allowed. Theatre happens at night and there are lots of off-stage and after-rehearsal opportunities for liaisons. Alcohol and terribly liberal teachers are in abundance. How 'grown up'. Clive was a latecomer to this raunchy drama. *Clive noted that all drama is raunchy. There's always a frisson between the dishonesty of the actors and their pure selves.* Clive was initially cast as a leading character but the producer took him aside and asked him to take the role of the chorus. Apparently Clive's wit, repartee and identification with the audience were just what was needed. The world wasn't ready for a character who didn't feel his lines. Hamlet has to be seriously considering suicide rather than listing abstract possibilities. As a reward for accepting the sacking Clive was given Dorothy Parker's *Résumé*. He might use something from that on the night. *Clive wasn't interested in suicide, but the explosive and erratic wit of Dorothy Parker captured him.* He kept his inspiration secret. There were four performances. His job was to be the compere of an updated version of Aristophane's comedy *The Clouds*.

It was full of jokes and political satire by an ape of a classics master. The cast revelled at being allowed to be flippant, rude and nearly swear. Clive started the first night by walking on without a script. *The chorus, a boy in silly khaki shorts and an Australian Bush hat with the obligatory corks*, (the whole a surprise to the rest of the cast ten minutes ago), welcomes imaginary people in the audience. On the first night he says "*...And the headmaster's wife...*" *He peers into the audience. "Have you brought the old boy with you?" The game girl answers, as he knew she would. "Yes."*

*"Hasn't he got anything better to do than watch this rubbish."* (Muffled response.) *"Oh well. See you after the show."* Big wink, first finger on side of nose and thumb's up.

That's why Clive never started smoking and grabbing other's coat tails. The others in the cast had their moments of glory, like saying 'flocking admirers', but when things went wrong there was a spring inside Clive that sent him onto the stage to bullshit for Britain. Clive had whatever inner voice you needed to be a bullshitter for Britain but not what you needed to be allowed to grope. Clive was sitting at the back of one of the scenery flats when he overheard two girls talking.

"He's nice and polite but so boring."

"What about when he went on when the lights fused?"

"That's good in a crisis."

"So a sort of superman?"

"Who want's an accountant the rest of the time?"

"I don't know..."

"Booooooring."

"I'll ask him for a snog at the last night party."

"Has he been invited?"

"I assumed..."

Clive had a day to rehearse in his bedroom and his mind the grand finale. The ending for the first three days had been the chorus, himself, calling the actors onto the stage to get their applause. That worked, but for the last night he'd invented a surprise Grecian orgy. He worked bloody hard to perfect five seconds of barefoot prancing. Three spare girls gave him curly

hair and stage makeup. The play ended. On comes the chorus, Clive. What! Now he's in a Greek toga sheet thingy, still with his silly hat for a few seconds. He may not be wearing underpants! He's a vital force! He looks around the bare stage and 'empty' auditorium. It's safe for the actors to come on. He coaxes them on with slow and sinuous arm movements he gives each a hug and 'stage' kiss then spins them to show them to the audience (that isn't there) and get their applause. The first two have been told what to do in the last five minutes. They kneel down. The major players follow the pattern. Clive has a magic that owns the stage for this moment. He holds the secret of the stage. The lighting team don't need instructions as this is only a small variation on the plan. At the point where they would normally be standing and bowing Clive jumps to the middle and, kneeling, puts his head to the floor. The cast wonder then do the same. Then they stand and resume their get off and grope routine.

Clive is attacked for hijacking the show. He replies, a play is for the audience not the players. He still didn't end up with a girlfriend, although they couldn't keep him out of the party at one of the girl's houses just down the road.

The school's final report could be summed-up as. *Clive is intelligent but sometimes doesn't apply himself.*

## Flying start

*Clive knew he could apply himself to something worth applying himself to. How simple was that!* With a vision of what he could be, he attacked the advertising agencies in Manchester. He had no interest in university and the idea was unnerving to his parents. Perhaps he was bumptious at the job interviews but he had a quick turn of wit (or bullshit) which filled-in for experience. He made sure to drop names and statistics from Marketing Weekly to impress. *Clive wasn't going to remain a junior* so the firm had to tell him how he would be promoted. He asked outright what the criteria for promotion and bonuses would be. When the interviewers reacted negatively he said that his motto was progress and wasn't that the very ethos of their business? After four interviews where all he'd done was 'made an impression' he decided to take a different approach. It was clear that the stratification of advertising firms was variable but always he should be aiming higher. There were two left on his list so he managed what was supposed to be an informative 'get to know you' session with the personnel section but gatecrashed the managing director's office. *Clive had nothing to lose. Being wayward was the same thing as a determined business man.* Within a week he was on a trial with the special sponsorship of the managing director of an advertising agency in the centre of Manchester. In short, he filled his quota and potential well beyond his initial bluster. His success at selling and producing good copy by not knowing what he 'should' have been producing, was magnified by being the managing director's gamble paying-off. *Clive was the epitome of applied creativity.* In the eyes of the managing director he was a Golden Goose. Clive learned from the others but maintained his special relationship with the managing director. He learned his family details and asked about them and how the stables was going and if his wife had found a decent gardener yet. He was very different. *Clive must always be different.* This was clear within six days let alone weeks. Despite the envy of others, his talent to deliver was undeniable. 'Any weather is Wellings weather' was one of his. Wellings made umbrellas. Clive insinuated that posh people were proud to show their brollies in the fine weather as a badge of sophistication. He had to get them to change their crudely rivetted name tag to a 'gold' or 'silver' W but sales soared. He was thrown at washing powder. What was there new to do there? He found

the answer with a bonus. 'There's something special about wearing a new shirt for the first time... Except this has been washed ten times with Sudso and still feels new.' It was a campaign that confused by being about two things, but resulted in a significant increase in Sudso sales. Also Clive had asked the MD about the make of shirt and could they let the make be shown on the screen for a significant fraction of a second. While the soap ads were being broadcast all shirts showed better sales and their chosen manufacturer much more so because the audience assumed the brand wasn't actually paying to be advertised. Actually it was on a speculative results-based formula. Clive had a large bonus and moved into his own office as the MD's pet. Within a year he had to buy a tuxedo and go to an award ceremony in London. He wanted a car so asked the MD if they couldn't do some car work. They got a contract for Ford Transit vans which wasn't the same thing. Nevertheless Clive took half an hour to realise that it was just a tool for the job and so it should be the tool every tradesman used. A travelling shot along a suburban street showed plumbers, glaziers, roofers, decorators all with Ford Transit Vans. 'From the smallest...' A convoy of five vans in British Telecom yellow (without British Telecom markings) pass in front of the iconic Post Office Tower '...to the largest, rely on Fords.' They got away with it. For some reason BT had ignored Fords for years so nothing to lose from this cheeky insinuation.

To keep the story on the level it's material that by chance Clive was introduced to the civil engineers on the Festiniog railway (only one F in those days) and although 'civil engineer' meant hacking at trees, rebuilding root-eaten slate walls, finding good rails and sleepers to replace the worst, and digging, digging, digging to get the water away from the track, it was a great weekend of camaraderie and achievement. It was different and physical even if the achievement was only in their own eyes, measured by their blisters and blessed with their own sweat.

The MD was a sharp old boy who had made his mark when the only options in the fifties were newspapers and Radio Luxembourg. He didn't understand Clive. Teenagers! When he asked Clive about his social life as a matter of chit-chat he wished he hadn't. Clive told him about the Festiniog railway and that was about it. He tried to be an uncle in the restaurant car to London but Clive didn't seem to have a social life beyond weekends

volunteering at the Festiniog railway and bits of amateur dramatics where they never cast him in any part except as understudy. *Clive isn't a good conversationalist.* Clive tried by showing the MD a photo of the narrow gauge double ended engine they had on the railway. Clive showed-off his poetic side by explaining he'd put his mind inside the engine. One half was always being dragged backwards. It must be a very confused engine. "I can do that. Detach my mind from my head and put it somewhere else." The MD wasn't sure he wanted to hear this delicate uncertainty. *Clive understood* and pointed out that he was encouraging fellow volunteers to be 'marketing minded' and that might mean introductions. The MD relaxed a little. He relaxed more when Clive said "Fingers crossed but there could be a big insurance company in the offing." *Whizzing along perched on the roof in the pelting rain just under the 25KV wire was exciting. The carriages in front bent round the curves in a slow sinuous dance that worked its way back to him.*

At the age of 19 and a half he could afford to leave home. He dreamed of pliant young ladies sharing his flat. Clive was shy with women. *Friendship in the Festiniog mess was easy but after that he refused the jump.* A typical situation was the amdrams where every girl seemed to have a boyfriend, visible or hinted at, or a girlfriend who didn't like Clive for some reason. He took over the publicity and did all the leg-work himself, except when it came to publicising the next event in costume in order to hand out flyers and appear in the evening paper. The cast treated him as a bloody nuisance when they needed every minute to rehearse. He managed to get props provided for free so long as there was a mention of who supplied them in the programme. He sold adverts in the programme. He chased the promised photographs and copy for the adverts as the printing deadline approached. On his own. For little or no thanks! When there were good attendances it was put down to the quality of the production. When Clive asked for free tickets to sweeten advertisers and the press he got sour looks. *Clive sat in his flat and plotted.* At the Annual General Meeting he pointed out that the programmes were now bringing-in money instead of being a cost and were better quality than before. Also the numbers of bums on seats was well up because of relentless marketing. As he might be going to New York soon perhaps an understudy for him was essential as he spent roughly an hour a day for a month on it and he was an award-winning advertiser. Clive waited as the meeting digested the bad news. An anonymous lady of about sixty said "I don't mind having a go." Clive thought she was unlikely to make

a cup of tea in less than half an hour without making a play out of it. "Not to be rude but marketing is for people with energy who want to get on and do two day's work in one. Is there anybody?" No answer. *Clive had prepared for this.* He imagined a young acolyte could be made to appear. A pliant one in a short skirt.

"I'll be in the pub afterwards. If there's no fizzing volunteer or friend who might be encouraged then I'll resign and you'll have to start from square one. The only reason you made a small profit this year is because I brought over four thousand pounds through the doors."

A fizzing acolyte was found. An economics teacher with a beard. He had a lovely wife who would have made a much better fizzing acolyte. Clive began reading crime novels. One thing he could do was get Roger drunk, but Roger introduced him to cannabis so they became friends. Roger had lots of friends and held parties. Clive went to one a virgin and was pretty sure he wasn't afterwards. Whatever happened it was a passing grope-fest rather than an exchange of phone numbers.

Clive explored the possibility of Madison Avenue in New York. His heroine Dorothy Parker would have been at home there. It was the Mecca of advertising. He had no ties in Manchester and he wanted to get to the top, so how could he get there except by going to New York? After reeling-in the juicy insurance contract he'd told the MD about, Clive asked him what should he do. *Clive knew he was very valuable.* £4,000 to the amdrams was nothing compared to the revenue and reputation at the firm. The MD was aghast inside but put a brave and up-beat face on it. He knew that once Clive was in America he would be lost forever. The MD was quick. "America is a different world Clive. We have a simple life compared to them. Everyone in a long chain takes their cut over there. Our chain is two or three links. Only the superstars get paid fortunes while the rest are working their guts out in the hope of a breakthrough – just like a gambler is sure that one day a win will repay all their losses. It just doesn't happen. If it was easy everyone would do it. I tell you what Clive. You're a loner. Some people call you a weirdo. I think that's unfair. I tell you what – you're a great asset to the company. In confidence I'll do two things for you and you see if I'm not making you an offer you can't refuse. First – in complete confidence remember – with you it could happen. I want you to increase our business by fifty percent. I think you could do more. Just get the business.

You don't have to do the details to produce the ads. That's the first thing. The reason is that then I could sell the business to one of the really big players. If you like that's bringing Madison Avenue here on our terms. You'll get a proper reward. I can't put a figure on it but I've never been mean to you have I?"

Clive shrank under the onslaught of rapid change. "No."

"And I'm not going to be mean to you now. You've told me about the idiots at the amdrams and I feel your pain so here's the second thing I'll do for you. It's a punch in the guts but you need a punch in the guts Clive." *Clive watched as the atmosphere in the MD's office became glass. He was frozen. "You need a girlfriend Clive." Clive shattered inside. How could the MD tell? "You need a sweetheart." Clive melted inside. How could the MD tell? "You need someone beside you who can whisper to skim the fat off your dreams." Clive turned turtle inside. How could the MD know? Clive tried to leave his head but couldn't. I'll see you get happily girlfriended and who knows what will happen next?*



# Wrecked

Clive and Sheila had been married for five years, had two little girls. They lived in Cheadle. Sheila's father was more a stockbroker than a farmer on the hills above Staylbridge. Sheila's mother was more a smallholder than a farmer. Sheila's uncle was Clive's MD. Clive had bitten hard into the marketing cake and was being recognised in the industry as a high-flyer even though he was still not yet 25. He had battered Roger the Economics lecturer into running the amdrams' marketing with the added bonus of making him submit returns on paper. Roger worked much better if forced to submit weekly returns. Everyone was happy. Sheila took an interest in the amdrams to make sure Clive wasn't getting up to mischief. He wasn't. But he was becoming a fire-breathing dragon to fear. He kept saying he should leave the amdrams but Sheila persuaded him to stay. He kept up his volunteering with the Festiniog railway while a pregnant and then children-bound Sheila enjoyed the change of Pennine mountains for Snowdonian mountains. She did! The people were different. Most of all, sometimes the only sun in Wales, Clive was different. Here he was 'one of them' with simple needs not 'an executive going places'. She encouraged him to spend as many weeks as they could in Porthmadoc. Clive's MD, now Uncle Harry, a great deal richer since selling out to Allied Advertising Inc Ltd. had secretly let it be known that, if his wife allowed, he would retire to Porthmadoc and be a 'mini-Clive'. *Somebody who rocks the boat to remind people to get rowing.*

Clive made every effort to help the children but it wasn't until two to three he could get a sensible response from them. Sheila saw the accountant in him. She made up for it as the mother. They had two perfectly healthy and cheerful children. Clive hardly had any moments when his mind left his head, but it happened when confronting the children. *Clive doesn't know how to talk to the kids. Look! He's waving a plastic frog and the child is watching... waiting... waiting for the punch-line. Clive doesn't have a punch-line. Oh good here's Sheila and everything will be alright.* One plus one is two. A-Apple, B-Boat, C-Cat. was his forte. For some reason he started too early, and when the right time came he missed the point completely. *Sheila patted Clive on the back. That was something!* One of these days he'd

have to ask her about her secret with the kids. *But really Clive was happy as things were.* Daddy had to go away for whole weeks. It was just as well the cost of telephone calls back home went on expenses. While he was away on business Clive began to meet some fizzing babes. He was now married which meant road-tested. He ignored them. *A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.* Success brings harpies. He ignored them. Well, he might buy them a drink but then brushed them off.

Visible success enough to have his name whispered as a celebrity amongst the volunteers and permanent residents of Porthmadoc attracted less fizzy but more sensuous acolytes. He made a point of being with Sheila as much of the time as possible. Devious acolytes will find excuses from 'My Mini has broken down. Can you help?' to 'The sheep have escaped! Come quick!' Of course he would. *Clive didn't realise these were often contrived excuses to push him into a corner for a private viewing until it was too late.* He kept faithful and told Sheila. She held him like she held the kids.

At last Clive had the opportunity to visit New York on business. He made sure he was flying first class. Any hotel would suit him. Three weeks in offices and two weekends as a guest up-state made Clive appreciate the wisdom of Uncle Henry. There wasn't an hour of the week available for drifting. Clive waffled about two foot gauge railways and was directed to bus nutters and museums of electric railways as the best alternative. When he mentioned his part in the amateur dramatics he was taken to Broadway Musicals. *Eugh.* Clive couldn't wait to get away from the city that clung to you like toffee bus exhaust.

When he landed in the grey dusk at Manchester airport he smelled the familiar rich air and rejoiced. Tonight he'd wake up his children and tell them he'd never be going away for so long again. It didn't matter if they understood. He would. Sheila would and breathe a sigh of relief. While waiting for his suitcases on the conveyor he used the phone booth to call home. There was no answer. He'd turn up unexpected then! Surprise! Look who's back!

Uncle Henry was waiting for him at the airport. They exchanged smiles then made their way to the short stay car park. After the 'good trip?' and 'I'm

pleased to be back – so much to tell you ' routines, they sat in the front of Henry's posh car but he didn't turn the ignition.

"I've got some bad news Clive. Sheila has taken herself and the children to a solicitor in Congleton. She doesn't deserve you. Come and stay the night with me and Hilda."

"Really?"

"Yes."

"Sorry uncle. I knew you wouldn't fool me. I just can't... Really?"

"Yes. I told her she was being stupid."

"So it's over? Just like that?"

"Possibly. Um – you're tired and upset. I would be. Come home with me and we'll deal with tomorrow tomorrow."

*Clive recognised genuine 24-carat honesty.* "You're a lifebelt to a drowning sailor Henry. I can't believe it!"

"Neither can I Clive. It's the truth."

"Really?"

"Yes. Brendan Chaplain. Lives in Congleton. Known her for years."

"She won't get a penny!"

"Let's deal with tomorrow tomorrow son. Hilda says it's my fault for introducing you. But whatever anybody says you're not fit for a battle after a transatlantic flight."

*This was a crisis so Clive could decide in a second.* In his mind he murdered Johnny Solicitor. "I'm going to fetch her back. And the kids. Will you drive or do I Henry?"

"I know the way but can't you wait? Being a bull in a china shop won't help."

Solicitor dies in accident during family row. Clive stepped aside to avoid punch and solicitor loses balance . "A stitch in time saves nine. Come on!" Orange lights in the dark drizzle tend to show the roads in their most bare form. *As each heartbeat of electric sodium shadow flashed over the front seats of the Jaguar so Clive found his weapons.*

Henry said "What are you going to do?"

"Get her back. Make her grovel." *Clive would use Henry to get the front door opened then find out where the children were. Then take them*

*whatever it took. Shouting in Sheila's face. Kick in the stomach for him if necessary. He had a budget of two minutes. Aha! Clive pulled the phone from the wall. Then Sheila could come if she wanted. Clive shouted "Get your slut carcass in the car!"*

Henry stopped the car in the lights of Congleton High Street. "You can't drag her by her hair. You can't hurt anybody."

*"You talk sense to her Henry. She's your niece. I'll grab the kids." After Henry gave his name the door opened and he stepped inside followed immediately by Clive. His fist swung up under the chin of a confused solicitor in slacks as hard as he could make it. Clive kicked his stomach and watched the disconnected oaf crumple. Sheila mouthed something. Clive wasn't listening. He ran upstairs and found the children. Bugger! He hadn't got anything to carry them in. "Um. Wait a minute Henry. I need a way to hold two kids with one hand. Suitcase? No. Washing basket. Haven't got one. I know! I brought Sheila a kimono as a present. I'll wrap them in that. Wait!" He jumped out and rummaged in the boot for half a minute. "OK Uncle. No violence remember. Possession is nine tenths of the law. I'll have my kids back in their own home whatever anybody says. She can crawl back. Tell her how stupid she's been and the sooner she comes back the better. Soon as in ten seconds not ten hours. Let's go. You're a great mate and a bastard Uncle. I think you know what's best for her and she's been stupid."*

Henry sat still. The car stayed parked with engine idling, windscreen wipers smearing the feeble raindrops into orange arcs. "I'll go in first Clive and try persuasion. I'll tell her she won't keep the kids. Your lawyers will paint her as an evil and unstable woman and you as a steady father with a good wage, good suit and wouldn't dream of the upheaval of taking young children from their home. If that fails then we'll do it your way."

"Why should she give in?"

"Because Mister Chaplin was an impulse buy. That's what I'm betting on. I'll sell her children's future back to her. I'll sell you back to her."

"How?"

"I'll do a few seconds of market research then ask how you fail. If she says boring or feeble in bed then that's easy to fix if she works at it... Or is she a dumb blond?"

"What about slime-ball solicitor-boy?" *Clive couldn't help tying emotions to things by alliteration.*

"Who? Oh. You and your gift for names. I'll tell him to get the kids ready for coming back with me."

*Clive recognised Henry's wisdom. Clive felt cramped. He wanted to make some movement... Like embrace Uncle Henry.* "Why are you so clever Henry? How do you see these things? I still can't believe she would just leave. We've hardly ever argued and then – well you know – it was mountains out of molehills and things we could be grown-up about later."

"If women weren't impulsive we'd be out of a job."

"Hey we sell to men too..."

"Another time Clive. When we get there you stay in the car. But if you see me standing in the door for a while then that's your cue to do what a man has to do."

Stocky's house was down fifty yards of driveway between rhododendrons. Henry passed the driveway before recognising and had to reverse down the lane. *Clive wanted to stop the police finding the murder scene.* The car crunched the gravel in front of the four or five bedroomed house with hung tiles and a tennis court. Henry went to the front door and was let in. Clive was alone in the dark. He opened his door and tried not to make a sound on the gravel as he made his way to the road. With no passing traffic down this side road he worked at removing the name 'Nuthatches' carved into an oval log. The nails soon worked loose. He threw it into the bushes and returned to the house. There were yellow gaps in the curtains showing the false diamond leads of the window panes. He couldn't see anything through the gaps. Hey! That was his car parked there! It wasn't her car. She didn't have one. This was his company car. Theft! A cut and dried 999 call if necessary. Clive carefully and slowly crunched across to the Cortina. Yes it really was his. Ha! One way or another he'd be driving it home tonight. Clive wondered if Henry was fooling him? No of course not. Clive wondered if he should knock on the door and be civilised? *No. He wouldn't be. Clive was a maniac determined to get his children back. If it meant stinky-Brendan died or he had to punch Sheila to the floor then so be it.* Clive started taking deep breaths and clenching his fists. Clive had never fought except in desperation in the playground and that didn't get him anywhere, but tonight he had a plan to get his punches in first. Clive was getting wet in the rain. Clive went back to sit in Henry's car. Possibilities and consequences kept trying to distract Clive. He kept muttering 'kill the bastard' to keep focussed.

Henry's plan worked. Sheila understood the need for a civilised separation rather than a calamity for everyone. Uncle Henry was a voice of reason in a storm of many emotions. She had never associated Clive with vicious strength but Henry was a master salesman. As he came out he waved to Clive to keep down. *Clive said to Slimy "If you see Sheila again your house and business will be firebombed on the same night."* Henry ran to the car and as he opened the door hissed "keep down!" He shut the door, stared the engine. "I've done it. "Keep down!" The car threw gravel behind as it headed for the snaky drive. "She'll be following. Keep down!" Clive was huddled as far as he could in the foot-well. What was happening?

"Henry! You're a genius or a genius liar. Is she really coming?" By now they were at the lane.

"It's alright. You can get up now." Clive unknotted himself. "Shut up a minute. Uncle Henry has saved your bacon."

"How?"

"Shut up! Let's get going. We've got to get you home and innocent. Just shut up a minute."

*Clive recognised authority. This was a crisis wasn't it. He'd been demanding at the airport and Henry had won him round.* Now Henry was being demanding. Henry was the man to be silent for. "Where are we going Henry?"

"We're putting you to a jet-lagged bed where none of this has ever happened. Sheila will have her excuse in the morning and you'll accept it without the blink of an eye. Probably she got today mixed up with tomorrow and she'd stayed the nights with her parents."

"You're a bastard Uncle Henry. Now you mention it I am tired. I'm marshmallow-tired. Stuck in a sweet goo. If it works then you're a genius. If it doesn't then you're the next best thing." *Clive's realisation of Henry's cleverness opened like a flower turning from a budding caterpillar into a scented butterfly. WHAT! He really was tired.* "Thank you Henry. Thank you. I was going to invade Poland and you stopped me. Wow! That's worth a gold star in anybody's money." It dawned on Clive that Henry might not be fit to drive after such a stressful half-hour. He wasn't sure about anything. But he could trust Henry. Definitely. The best mate he ever had. Clive didn't know how to thank Henry as the daylight of reason showed him the carnage Clive would have caused.

The handbrake rasped as they drew up in front of Clive's semi-detached semi-executive house. It was time to reconnect with Cheadle and tap-water and pillows. "Take a raincheck on thanks Henry. I'm done-in." Clive took a moment to remember he'd got two suitcases in the boot. Clive used the hidden front door key to enter an empty house, gave Henry the thumb's up with one hand and held up the key with the other. *What was wrong with Clive?* He managed to climb the stairs. The rest of that night belonged to oblivion and a persistent question which vanished with waking-up. Asked many times, it had been asked many times. It was important with life-altering depths but by the time he woke the question and answers were evaporated mist. Oh shit! *Clive was alone again.*

# Recovery

It was light. It was what day?... Sunday 8:22. Clive spoke to an empty bedroom. "Why do I have to be part of the world?" Clive realised he was ranting. His head... perhaps lungs... most of him that sucked and pumped anyway, was lethargic. *Clive isn't normally lethargic.* The cascades of Sheila's desertion, his fruitless confusion and Henry's magic spell settled him to a wonderful calm. Whatever happened with Sheila, Henry was gold and titanium. He lay in the empty room in the empty house as the neighbour's children and lawnmowers pulled at his curtains.

He phoned the farm. Sheila's father answered. After pleasantries he said Sheila would be arriving later and between the two of them he didn't think there was anything other than a silly frustration.

"Thanks dad. I'll do my best to love her all round, all over, all ways and for all time."

Dad laughed "Always the one with the jingle Clive! What soap powder is that from?"

Clive laughed "New improved Sheila. Bosses faster than anything. You've cheered me up mate. I better put a pinny on and look busy."

"But can you look innocent?" They laughed.

The grass did need cutting. There was cereal and tea but no milk. Fifteen minutes walk to the corner shop in the spring would do him good. Clive couldn't focus on solving his problems. People wore clothes he wouldn't wear. Children clattered with skateboards. Girls clung in twos. Their ages may have changed their discussions but they were always in twos in the most serious discussions. It was that sort of idle Sunday morning, more summer than spring, where being outside with friends was natural. *Clive wasn't with his friends.* After 'being a man' and charging the washing machine with his New York detritus according to the instruction booklet... How could it be so complicated!... Now he understood. 'Sensa-action' sold tin buckets and motors. He wondered if men were any more rational. No. Definitely not. Perhaps he could sell washing machines to men... Fuck! he'd have to do his own ironing. No. He'd find a new girlfriend. He'd done it



once... Um actually Uncle Henry had found Sheila... *Being alone or with an undemanding partner was natural for him but others might need company and chatter. Sheila's dad had chatted and made him feel better. So he must be more positive with Sheila.* "YES!" As he thumped the breakfast bar a note fell from the microwave. It was an apology cum manifesto from Sheila. Clive read the three-line statement of facts and two lines of excuses. He put the card where he thought it had been left and covered it up by pushing the toaster in front of it. With any luck she'd think he'd never seen it. The lawn needed cutting whatever happened or whoever happened to pass or arrive back, so he might as well spend half an hour showing the neighbours that everything was completely normal. Clive always meant to think about 'things' when mowing the front and back lawns but he always forgot his troubles or tantalising goals.

*We apologise for the service interruption. Normal deception will be resumed as soon as possible.* Sheila drove into the drive with perfect timing just as he was finishing the front lawn. Clive acted the TV adverts of smiles, dropping everything, and bee-lined to a perfect middle-class wife, perfectly lit by a perfect sun. A kiss and then she apologised. "You're a day early! What a surprise. When did you get back?"

"Late last night."

She was the perfect model in front of the lights of the sun and camera of the neighbours. "I was at mum and dad's. Oh you must have been worried."

Clive resisted the sardonic 'no not really'. "A bit. But I was dead-beat and after trying to find pounds instead of dollars for the taxi I was worried but not capable of doing anything. There was no blood on the carpet or note or piles of post under the letterbox so I assumed you'd taken the kids to hospital or the seaside." Clive had imagined half a dozen meetings while pushing the lawnmower. "Are you alright dear?"

"Yes."

"The kids?"

"Yes." Clive made his pre-planned flanking manoeuvre. He opened a back door and crouched down to the level of the kids in their seats. "Hiya kids! Howdya like to go to Nu York?"

Clive gave their lives a trajectory for the next twenty minutes. "I've got to finish the back. It's so good to smell fresh grass after the fumes of New York.

I'm not upset you got the day wrong dear. What about giving my parents a ring and we'll take them for Sunday lunch?"

"OK Dear. Sorry about getting the day wrong." Ha! Instant agreement. So she'd read a script! Henry was a magician! More an illusionist who deceives by cheating, but 'it was a good trick if you could do it'.

Clive took the rest of the day at a canter. *What a good advertising hook... Jumping social fences with bad breath or grey teeth. Or having the confidence of that extra horsepower when you needed it for overtaking. Or after a posh canter across the common then what to wear or drink?* When he checked, the incriminating note was gone. A good sign.

That evening when the kids had been put to bed they sat on the sofa together. Clive said "Did you cope OK without me? Uncle Henry said you were lonely. I'm sorry." He'd rehearsed this pause many times. "While I was in the plane I wondered what would happen if it crashed. Then what would you do if I died. I'm too young to be messing with life insurance."

Sheila said "I missed you. I couldn't help think you'd run away with a secretary."

Clive had trained in his head and now it paid-off. "What did you miss?"

"You." There was nothing more. She kissed him. He was sure she was smothering him.

"I may not be the perfect husband but you must have missed something?"

"You worry too much Clive."

"Just a practical question. I could be run over by a bus tomorrow. If you don't miss me then why bother with a boring husband that takes you to Wales whenever he can to play with trains?"

"Stop it Clive! Sometimes you're so morbid. Death is all you can think about."

"Tell me honestly what would you do if I was killed tomorrow?"

"Something. You think ahead dear but I don't worry about all the millions of things that could happen but don't. Shall I go upstairs and put that gorgeous silk kimono on? You can come up in five minutes."

"You're not really worried about me being killed are you Sheila? Shrug and carry on."

"What do you expect me to do! Throw myself on your funeral pyre! I've got the kids to think about. If I died tomorrow then what would you do!"

"Look after the kids and find a new mother for them."

"So now who's the casual one?"

"Not me. I'd be desperate to find them a new mother. I'm not really a mother magnet am I? If it hadn't been for Henry playing Cupid I'd never have had the balls to ask you out. Once a month I get approaches from optimistic women – girls more like who think long legs and mascara are irresistible. I lust for a minute then come home to my own sweetheart who makes life worth living, who puts the decoration on the prickly Christmas tree of life."

"What if I got ill?"

"I'd work hard but wouldn't throw you in the rubbish. Is that what you meant?"

"I suppose so."

"If you were in a wheelchair I'd push you in the quiet hours but I'd work to earn the money to pay for carers in the day time."

"You're not really a caring parson are you Clive?" She took his glass and poured them more wine.

"No. I might learn but I'm a rocket man rather than a cradle rocker."

"Why do you have to come out with these smug sayings?"

"Do I?"

"Rocket man and cradle rocker!"

"It's the way my mind is wired I suppose. It pays the bills. Why does it upset you?"

"Because you have an answer for everything."

"You know I don't. Stop being melodramatic. Why can't we have a soft evening of love like I've been thinking of for the three weeks. You're like the smell of new cut grass. New York was horrible. Pressure and toeing the line. Creativity was squashed under the wheels of conformity. You know the 'grease on the collar' campaign I did at the railway? Where I started with oiling the engine then to the station master's shirt collar? They lit up for twenty seconds then faded into how to do side deals with railways and shirts and perhaps a tie-in with a film. In New York there's no such thing as an pure advert. It's always a deal. I was disgusted."

"What about California?"

"Eh? What about it?"

"Are they different there? California itself stretches from Scotland to Italy. Can we go to San Francisco?"

"Whoa! If I had a million pounds then I would take you to the moon. At the moment the best we can do is the moonscapes of the North Wales slate quarries. One day we could chill-out in California." She snuggled up to him. "You think I'm a genius don't you Sheila?"

"A bit. I'm sorry about getting the day wrong."

Clive realised she was weeping. *Clive should have practised harder.* He didn't know what to do. Celebrate triumph or be magnanimous in victory.

"I'm twenty five. That's like zero in Earth Years. I work hard don't I? I make money don't I? I love you and the kids don't I? I will love more if shown how won't I? You will stay with me won't you?"

"Of course. I'm sorry love."

"As your dad would say" he put on a imitation ex-army voice "I like a girl with spirit. Shame she married such a wimp."

Clive took his lead from Uncle Henry. Uncle Henry teased the golden goose. The golden goose laid awards and contracts. Clive continued to work as a volunteer on the Festiniog railway. When the (now double f) Ffestiniog railway reached Blaenau there was 'job-done, now retire' opportunity. His world and mates were dinosaurs in a world of maintenance and schedules rather than squelching through what might one day be a track-bed if they could tip this mixed rock and earth somewhere. Clive had lots of options but the one he wished for most was being a navvy with his fellow navvies for one day each weekend. Yes he'd kept on until the end. Yes he'd seen the dream come true.... But now what? 1982 was a bad year for Clive. Within the space of 18 months, Sheila's father, Henry's wife, Henry's son died of drawn-out cancer, sudden cancer and 'drug overdose' in Thailand respectively. Clive put himself as the MAN in the first case, MATE in the second and OLD FRIEND being told a secret for a good reason in the third. He hadn't even known Henry had a son. For each of these roles he bled his grief a little onto Sheila.

The kids were brilliant fun, but their questions to him as a bonkers dad when compared with his contemporaries, sometimes scraped close to the bone. Dad? Why don't we go to Wales any more? Dad? Why does Miss Brocklesby say you're clever? Dad? Can you help me with my homework? This last was a winner! Clive wasn't afraid to say he didn't know about the wives of Henry the Eighth but he would show them how to find out. The first source to try was Uncle Henry. He knew most things and a lot of other trivia besides. As Dawn and Eve grew up into jumping schoolgirls 'uncle' Henry would take them under his wing for a day and then weekend. When he lost his wife he wanted to take the grandchildren on outings.

New year for the start of 1983 at Sheila's mother was fun because it was supposed to be fun 'for the children'. More an exercise in anti-loneliness. It was a success of a sort as Clive was a pleasant and energetic son-in-law and the background of losses was compensated by the children in the foreground. Clive was used to the weather of North Wales so he was prepared for a walk up the moors on New Year's morning. He'd kissed a sleepy Sheila, grabbed a crusty roll with a slice of ham, checked the bag he'd packed last night for water, Ordnance survey map, compass and sketchbook. Before leaving the kitchen he left a message propped to say he would be back by noon. He stepped out into the quiet, damp, half-light with Sheila's father's carved walking stick as his only companion. *Clive needs to assert his authority and independence. Also he has inherited responsibility which is still a strange concept. He has Henry as a guide.* Once across the farmyard and out onto the moor Clive aimed at a reservoir about seven miles away. It was much as he remembered it from three years ago but without any sun or little moorland flowers. *Clive must be methodical.* He tried to think of his family and friends then work. *A solitary figure walked steadily along the worn track. The land sloped away in three directions as it rounded the curve of the moor. The figure gazed over Lancashire in the murk below him. Hundreds of creatures burrowed, nested and hid in the tufted tussocks around him but he couldn't see any. In the distance he couldn't see people he knew were in the farmhouses and semi-detached either.* His mother and father were proud of him. *Clive is ashamed he isn't a closer child.* They'd always been self sufficient and contained. He didn't know how to make their lives better. Was he getting pompous? A flash of an idea illuminated an issue. The kids were Sheila's private property, with Clive as a stand-in patron. Perhaps now they were older he should try them out with his parents. *Clive uses capital letters to write a new years*

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