

Letters from a Shuttered Country Chapter Seven

A mysterious disappearance (Bill's Tale)

What was he to do on another lock-down day?

After the initial period of wondering how on earth we were all going to get through being confined to our homes, Bill could feel himself changing by the week. It wasn't the superficial response of a New Year's resolve but something far more embedded, richer. There was coming upon Bill a growing mood to emulate one of the literary figures he found intriguing and go to the woods to suck the marrow out of life. Except, unlike the poet Henry Thoreau, there were no woods that were accessible. All the pathways to the noticing and the sucking that the woods might offer were denied until further notice. The gates were shut. Yet maybe the closed in world was calling to him anyway with new horizons. He must live a life he imagined elsewhere.

Across half the world, things were wrapped with an eerie, post-apocalyptic silence. Bill knew that the cities were different. Despite police vigilance, they had never really gone to sleep. Traffic was building up though and he knew from friends and media that half of the old life was slowly waking and stretching itself in astonishment. The other half would have to wait for a bit. Little by little, lockdown was being eased. Having required people to stay in doors to protect themselves and everyone else, it was a complicated message to sell that the reverse could now happen, except in fits and starts and hedged with conditions featuring new vocabularies. Everyone was talking about R just as they referred casually to Zoom as if part of their furniture.

R? He had never reproduced personally but becoming Dad to a bewildered infant had been the single greatest joy in life. Speaking of which, he heard loud laughter. "What's amusing you then?" he asks Katie who had just come in.

"Having a laugh with Robert", replies Katie. "We were just trying to do that Italian balcony-singing thing from the other side of the road!"

"Nissun Dorma will never be the same again but we're not giving up the day job!"

"Think it could go somewhere?" Bill is curious but cautious.

"Wouldn't surprise me", says Katie. "We talk most days now and have much lots common. Can you open yourself though after bad experiences? That's the task. But then you must have found that hard after your wife died in that pile up and then finding romance blossoming again with my mother only to find she was a lesbian!"

"It wasn't easy to navigate all that" agrees Bill. "Love to have had something with Beth but she was inaccessible. Like these woods, I just couldn't find a way in".

"But look", he adds a little too quickly, "my old partners in crime are working hard at something creative. Not balcony-singing but something written down to share."

"What you going to do?" asks Katie, who had noticed the gear change.

“Befuddled and bemused”, says Bill. “Drawn a blank to be honest”.

“I have a suggestion Dad”, Katie says after a pregnant pause. “In that chest upstairs with those old letters and keepsakes, I came across something stapled together you had clearly written once. Why not reprise that?”

“Guess I could dust that down”, agrees Bill.

“What’s it about? asks Katie, curiously. “I didn’t read too much of it”.

Bill draws breath. “You sitting comfortably?” he asks whimsically, and then begins.

“The story opens with the disappearance of Joseph Laver, a Professor of Philosophy at Bristol University. His house has been ransacked. He is probably the most famous atheist in the world, regularly wheeled out in chat shows, panel discussions etc, to pour scorn on the existence of God. He has been feted in particular by the North Korean Stalinist regime, desperate to shore up its system in the face of global politics and show that the West is not universally hostile, that here is a famous intellectual who agrees with its stance on the materialist atheism supporting its communism.

“Laver’s son, Richard, is called to their father’s house by his sister, Jackie. She is very concerned that there is no sign of their Dad. When Richard arrives, he is told that word is getting around that recently, Joseph Laver has reversed his whole position. He found dramatic new proof of the existence of God that has caused him to retract.

“Where is he? Who are the people listening in to events in the Professor’s house as they unfold? Quickly, those searching the house find a corpse. It is the body of John Lang, Senior Lecturer at the University sent by Laver to fetch something urgently.

“As the story unfolds, it is clear that Laver is now a prime suspect. He has gone to ground- in fact he has travelled to Peru, to Macchu Picchu to provide background material for the Press Conference he will make in a few weeks time. Both the religious extremist group and the North Koreans listening in to events, have their own reasons for wanting to silence Laver before he goes public with his evidence.

“Ok so why Macchu Picchu?” Katie asks. “Don’t know if we’ll ever get there now!”
“It was built by an Inca Emperor who came to the conclusion that there was one God greater than the sun, focus of Inca worship so it provides a backdrop” Bill replied.

En route, the Professor’s own thoughts are exposed as to why he has changed his mind and what has led him to see new evidence for the existence of God. Everyone wonders what the Professor has found”.

“And that’s as far as I got” said Bill rather sheepishly.

“Never mind that!” said Katie with gentle indignation. Can still be your contribution. Let’s work on it together from those notes you made and what you just told me.”

Bill's Tale (part One) The Professor who disappeared

1

John Lang sat in his car, listening to the storm, watching mighty forces locked in mortal combat around him; raw power; concentrated furious fighting going on in the atmosphere. Lightning forked in massive surges of electricity, a display of raw power combined with vibrating, jagged voice. Rain threw itself at anyone foolhardy enough to venture out. Thunder shook the house that was his destination. The house was similar to all the others. Tonight, however, floodlit by occasional lightning, the house was the stuff of nightmares.

Many dreams had come and gone. Like Trish. Marriage to a vivacious lady whose vitality took his breath away had been good while it lasted. Sadly, Trish was now out of his life. Trish was capable but she was not a warm person. Her mother was not a warm person. Her mother's mother had not been a warm person. Julie was different.

As soon as the worst of the storm abated, John Lang lit a cigarette and walked up the garden path. There was no reason why he should notice the van across the street.

The Professor's instructions were quite clear. No big problem in locating what was needed and bringing it to him. The Professor had explained the situation and John Lang, knowing the increasing tension in recent weeks, was happy to help out.

He turned the key in the lock. The kitchen was smart, the lounge surprisingly shabby, the dining room functional. John Lang wandered around looking for what he had come for. Then he heard sounds from upstairs. He climbed the steps cautiously. He heard his own heart revving up as if on a race track, watching as two men appeared from nowhere. Their presence in the doorway filtered through to him in the same moment as a single shot ran out. His last impulse was a crazy reach for his mobile phone to let Julie know he wasn't going to be able to see her later. Then there was a single explosion in his chest as if he was struck by the lightning he had witnessed earlier. Then there was nothing.

2

It was the kind of April day that made you feel glad summer was just around the corner.

Not that Richard Laver was in any mood to drink it in. Tiredness had been stalking him since Winchester, a ghost that leered at him down the many miles of the A303 as he pushed on. Not far to go now. He knew he should not be driving. To keep himself awake as his eyelids insisted on doing their own thing, Richard reached for the water bottle on the passenger seat. He opened it and poured some down his neck. The reaction was sharp enough to jerk him back to full consciousness. Not far to go now.

It had been a long twenty four hours. The flight back from South Africa had been dreary and uneventful and after three weeks out there on a job with the Investment Bank he worked for in London, he was decidedly glad to get back. If it was not for the snoring man occupying the Business Class seat next to him, he might even have caught a few hours rest. Then had come the bus from Heathrow to the train station and an hour later, Richard was sinking into his own bed in Crawley.

The Peugeot purred on across the Wiltshire countryside, eating up the miles. It began to rain, a soft gentle rain that made no demands on anyone. Richard thought of that phone call from his sister Jackie that was as mysterious as it was insistent.

“Richard, its Jackie. Look I’m really sorry to disturb you and Susan tells me you have only just got back from a business trip.”

“Can this wait, Jackie?” he had responded sleepily but puzzled.

“Can you to come down to Wells?” she said.

“When?” he asked, with growing puzzlement sensing that something was very wrong.

“Can you come now please Richard? I’ve had a phone call from a very worried neighbour”.

She wouldn’t explain over the phone but five words were enough to jerk him out of bed, explain to Susan he needed to go again and to ease his car out of the driveway “Its Dad”, said Jackie simply. “He has vanished. Not sure if he’s been murdered or gone off on a trip he had been talking about.”

“I’ll be with you in a few hours” he said without hesitation.

Not far now. “Bridgwater 12 miles” proclaimed the sign after turning off the A303 and going what he called ‘the back way in’ towards the village where Dad lived. He knew something must have happened that warranted this level of urgency. Jackie had simply said he was not dead, or so she assumed. So where was he?

From far off, Susan had told him about the controversy that was engulfing her father-in-law. It was that report in the Daily Mail that set the cat amongst the

pigeons. It was Joseph Laver's fault, she said and Richard knew what she meant. His father always had a sense of the theatrical. As a boy, stories of how his dad had been the first to climb Everest and had got to the moon before Neil Armstrong had regaled him. Not that his Dad needed building up in his eyes. A Professor of Philosophy at Bristol University had some status attached to it, though not the sort of status that a lively boy could fathom until he was twelve years old. His friends at school and sometimes his teachers would bring him newspapers where his father had featured. Or they told him they had seen his Dad on the TV. Being the son of probably the most celebrated atheist in the world had some kudos though it was not the kind of celebrity status that attached itself to the footballer heroes that populated his horizons at that stage.

"You won't believe this!" proclaimed the headline, Susan had said over the phone. It seemed that the most celebrated atheist in the world was reported as deciding after all that he had been wrong all these years. There was much at stake here, Richard observed.

The car settled on the road outside Joseph Laver's home, a familiar sight to Richard and usually a welcome one. His father was not the easiest person to relate to, especially after Mum had died from cancer. Jackie was there to greet him. They hugged.

"What's happened?" Richard asked as they trudged up the drive past Jackie's car and his Dad's Focus Estate.

"See for yourself", she said and opened the door.

Richard could immediately see there was something very out of place from the chaos that greeted him as they stepped over the threshold. Dad was a tidy animal, everything in its place. But not now. The sideboard in the hall had drawers flung open, suspended as if frozen in time. Papers were strewn over the floor.

"If you think this is bad," Jackie said, "look at the study".

Richard obediently followed his sister to the intellectual sanctuary where the thoughts and speeches and books had been fermented. This time it was not just papers that had been tossed everywhere. Bookcases had been emptied.

"Who on earth?" asked Richard.

"And where is Dad?"

"Pass on both questions. I just don't know" Jackie said.

"We must call the police now" said Richard insistently, puzzled why Jackie had not done this already.

"They will be here soon" said Jackie. "I didn't do it at first because there was no sign of Dad lying dead or anything. And for all I know he may have made it on a trip he was planning".

"And left the place like this? O come on!" exclaimed Richard with a mounting sense of anger at his sister's slowness to act.

"It just that... well I had a message on my answerphone saying he was OK."

"When was that?" asked Richard.

"Thursday night"

"But this is Saturday" Richard said. "Good God Jackie, anything could have happened."

"It's all very puzzling" said Jackie. "He was controversial but why anyone should have anything against him enough to kill him just blows me away".

"And we just have no proof that he has been murdered or anything", she added.

"Just a room that has been obviously searched and a missing person" Richard groaned.

An obvious question rose in his mind.

"Can this have anything to do with his latest controversy" he asked. "What's all this about him retracting?" he said. "That doesn't sound a bit like Dad".

"I know" Jackie agreed. She shot an anxious glance at him as the police car drew up.

"This will surprise you. Rumour has it that he had discovered something that shook him to the core. He was inscrutable. But what he said shook me rigid.

"What's that?" asked Richard with surprise as he opened the door to the police.

"It seems he found new evidence for God; a clincher, proof that changed his mind"

3

To the occupants of the black van drawn up a hundred metres down the street, the conversation they were eavesdropping on had not proved very helpful as yet. The recording devices seemed to be working though.

"When did you find the house like this?" A man's voice was asking.

"This morning, about ten I should say" replied a woman. From the earlier conversation, the occupants of the van knew the voice to belong to Professor Laver's daughter.

So why had she not raised the alarm immediately after seeing obvious signs of a ransacked house?

"By the way, I'm Sergeant Peter Daniels", the questioner said, introducing himself.

“Well..... “ There was a pause. “It’s just that I had a phone call from Dad on Thursday to say he was all right.”

“And why should he want to re-assure you on that point?” the Inspector probed.

A pause hung in mid-air.

“I suppose it’s the harassment he had been experiencing recently”, Jackie replied.

“And then I had a phone call from a worried neighbour”, she added.

Whatever the Inspector made of that was lost on his eavesdroppers. Either that or thoughts were not clothed with words that they could detect. The voices became a bit muffled as the people in the house were evidently moving from the hallway deeper into the interior.

The bug planted in the professor’s study crackled into life.

“How do we know this was no ordinary burglary?” Sergeant Daniels was asking.

“So where’s Dad?” asked a man in exasperation.

“You are Professor Laver’s son I take it?”

“I am indeed” came the reply. “I’m Richard Laver”.

“Where’s Dad? Well that is indeed the question” the Inspector said, as the dimensions of the puzzle grew before his eyes.

“You’ve not heard from him since Thursday night?” he said.

“Neither of us have. As I said” Jackie rejoined. “He had been very anxious recently and wanted to assure me he was ok. I only came down because a neighbour phoned to say he had seen a lot of disturbing things going on but didn’t say what.”

“And was he in danger?” asked the Inspector. “We’ll talk to this neighbour”.

“I’m not sure” said Jackie. “He had stirred up a reaction after that item in the Daily Mail and has never shied away from making strong views- but not that anyone would want to kidnap him or anything, I’m sure”.

“He was billed as the most celebrated atheist in the world but that’s hardly cause for anyone wanting to bump him off” added Richard.

“Unless he was the target of a religious extremist” suggested the Inspector.

“Maybe, so where is he now?” Jackie said, wondering if she should go into details.

“Can we phone him?” suggested the other policeman helpfully.

“No he didn’t take his mobile with him” said Jackie “He never does, or leaves it turned off or something.” “He has never quite got the hang of being on-line all the time”.

“But he phoned you from here?” she was asked.

“O yes. I did the 1471 later. It was around 9.30”.

“So he was here on Thursday night but then when you came to the house this morning, no sign at all”. The Inspector was clearly puzzled. It was all very strange.

He would have even more puzzled if he had noticed his Sergeant filtering through the a few drawers hoping to find a piece of paper he was under orders to retrieve. Then he went upstairs, sifting through a waste paper bin in the computer room. He was greatly relieved to find what he was looking for. Peter Daniels took the piece of paper and folded it in his jacket pocket, carefully checking he had not been seen.

4

“What’s all this about Dad changing his whole position?” Richard quizzed Jackie with astonishment, as the Inspector wandered around the downstairs, glancing through papers strewn over any surface going spare. His eyebrows narrowed as he came across something that might just be relevant.

“It seems to be true”, Jackie was explaining. “Dad told me he has just uncovered new evidence that seems to demonstrate the existence of God”.

“Beyond any reasonable doubt, I suppose” said the Inspector as he came back into the room.

“But that” sputtered Richard, “would be like backing his car down a very long drive he has been motoring up for years! Unbelievable!”

“What on earth could he have found that suddenly made him do that for goodness sake?”

“Quite” said Jackie. “And what’s it got to do with any of this?”

The occupants of the van listened intently, wondering when the house would yield up its secret. Within a few minutes, Peter Daniels called out from upstairs.

“Sir!” he exclaimed, addressing the Inspector. “You need to see this!”

The Inspector put on a burst of speed and mounted the stairs two at a time, pursued by Richard and Jackie. When they reached the landing, it was not hard to see what it was that had drawn the Inspector upstairs.

In one of the bedrooms, the door of a walk-in had been flung open. Inside was a man, fallen against the shelves, a tall man in his mid-forties, with dark hair matted in small curls. A short beard had flecks of white. But it was the red that drew their eyes down. Congealed blood had dried on his shirt from a gunshot wound to the chest.

5

The men in the van drawn up down the street exchanged glances. The police had found the body. Silencing their intruder was not part of their brief when they were the intruders. The Director would not be pleased. It would cause unnecessary complications.

As they went through Joseph Laver's house the previous night, they hadn't heard him at first. A key had turned in the lock. He had surprised them and there was no alternative. The Director would understand that even if the police were inevitably to be involved. One shot through the heart, one practiced shot and their intruder was cast into silence. One shot. The Director would be pleased at that.

6

On the other side of the world, a man paced the floor in impatience. The operation was not going to plan.

The Director pushed back his hair with his left hand. He was used to ordering the death of anyone who needed to be liquidated. Countless enemies of the State had been rounded up and mysteriously disappeared. Neighbours were left to puzzle but in the unreality that characterised the atmosphere in which they were compelled to live, no questions asked and no discussion. Disappearance was unexceptional.

But this development was uncalled for. Now the British police were involved and were swarming around the house he had despatched his operatives to the previous day. The police were an unknown factor. The Director could not control them as he would in his own country. But although annoyed, the Director was not unduly alarmed. His operatives would find Joseph Laver before the Press conference he had announced for two weeks ahead. The Professor would not be able to cause trouble.

And the Director's mood became optimistic. The police being involved might even be beneficial. A murder enquiry might even lead his operatives to the Professor and flush him out. He gave instructions to keep listening in and to follow developments.

7

They heard Jackie scream, a stunned, startled scream that reverberated through the van in which they sat, listening intently. It was not hard to guess what was happening. A man's voice rang out in the gathering dusk.

"That's not Dad!"

The inspector spoke into his mobile phone, calling for immediate support.

"Who the hell is he then?" he asked summarily.

"I've seen him before", Jackie's voice broke the silence, "I think it's a colleague".

"Probably rules out religious extremists being behind all this", observed the Inspector. "If they were targeting your father, why murder someone else? What was the last you heard from your Dad?"

“All he said”, Jackie said “was that a week ago, he had a visit from someone else. He didn’t say anything about it but I know the visit left him walking about as if he had hot coals under his feet. The next day, he told me he had asked his secretary Julia to book a flight urgently”.

“So he’s gone to earth”, said Richard.

“Not to earth, no” observed Jackie forcing a smile despite shaking with shock.

“OK. He said he needed to book a flight to Lima.” Julie replied. “I just hope he’s safe as I have no idea if he made it. I’ve heard nothing more from him since”.

“And now this”, she added.

“Peru?” asked Richard with astonishment. And he knew instantly that if his Dad was in trouble, he needed to get to him- and quickly.

Whatever might have been said in response to that was lost. Just then, the men listening in the van down the street were startled to hear a phone ring. They were not the only ones to be surprised.

“This doesn’t happen every day of the week!” they heard the Inspector exclaim. The ring tone was coming from the corpse.