

I am an old man now and I spend my days in a care home where kind women manoeuvre me out of bed every morning and help me to wash. I am then placed gently on a chair, from where I read a book or stare out of the window at a well-manicured lawn while the routine of the place unfolds around me.

I have lived well beyond my allotted span and all those who once loved me, and those I loved, are long gone. I am waiting patiently for the end and, for some time, I have believed that I will welcome it when the moment arrives. I have few regrets. I enjoyed a comfortable life, one in which I achieved much and I was well respected. There is however one thing that troubles my conscience sufficiently that I feel that I cannot let it die with me. I was born a Catholic, and although I have not stepped inside a church for over seventy years, I remember, from those days when I still believed, the cathartic release of confession. And so, I will write this story and leave it in a place where it will be found after my death.

It began on a night when my telephone burst into life a little after nine o'clock. I stared at it in surprise. It was past the hour when people in polite society rang each other and a call at this time usually spelt trouble. It was therefore with some trepidation that I picked up the receiver.

'Davenport,' I said.

'Ah, Richard,' the person at the other end said in a clipped, professional voice which I recognised immediately. 'I was wondering if you might fancy coming round to my place for a brandy. I have an excellent bottle of early landed HINE Homage that I've been keeping for a while and I don't think that I can resist the temptation any longer.'

The mention of that particular cognac was sufficient to set off a Pavlovian response and momentarily I forgot about the hour. However, I recovered myself quickly.

'That sounds excellent Jonathan, but don't you think that it's a bit late?'

'Not at all. Why don't you drop over for a snifter and we can have a chat.'

So that was it. There was something on his mind that he wanted to discuss. Something that couldn't wait until tomorrow, and he was hanging out the prize of my favourite tippie to tempt me. I made my decision quickly.

'Of course. I'll be there in ten minutes.'

I went to get my coat and Sandra, who had been in one of the bedrooms, came to the top of the stairs to enquire as to what was happening.

'I don't know,' I said. 'That was Jonathan Cavendish. He's invited me over for a snifter, but I have the impression that he wants to discuss something. He sounded worried.'

'OK,' she said. 'But don't stay out too late and for God's sake don't get drunk. You have to drive me to London tomorrow.'

'I will do my best,' I replied and left the house.

The evening was warm and dry, the heat of late August still being released from the ground. But it was now over two months since the longest day and there were only faint traces of red from the

sunset colouring the western sky. However, the village was well provided with modern street lighting and I strode off with something of a spring in my step.

Jonathan's house was at the southern end of our little community and was beautiful even by the standards of what was widely acknowledged to be one of the most attractive villages in the county. It had a high, steep thatched roof with two windows to the upstairs bedrooms peeping through. The yellow washed walls were thick and sturdy and the house was surrounded by an artfully arranged mature garden which was his wife's pride and joy, and more or less full-time occupation. I opened the gate and walked past the geraniums in pots on the wall and used the large cast iron door knocker to announce my presence. He must have been waiting for me because he opened the door within seconds.

He was a man of medium height who had retained the slenderness of youth. That, together with a full head of hair, albeit now greying, made him seem much younger than his years. He retained the straight-backed military bearing that he had acquired in thirty years of distinguished service that had seen him rise to the rank of full Colonel. He had spent much of his time in the army overseas and his blue eyes twinkled at me from skin that remained free of wrinkles but which had become permanently tanned.

'Come on in,' he said as he ushered me into the hallway and then to the living room, a comfortable space with low timber ceilings and a log burning fire, on either side of which were arranged a pair of sofas with a low table between. He indicated to me to take a seat on one of these, which I did, and he went to the drinks cabinet. I enquired as to the whereabouts of his wife and was told that she was out at a Women's Institute meeting at the village hall and was not expected back for at least another hour.

He sat down on the sofa opposite me and put the bottle of brandy and two cut-glass tumblers on the table. He took a penknife out of his pocket and cut the seal before carefully removing the cork and slowly filling the glasses. He passed one to me and I took a few seconds to sniff it before taking a small sip, which I rolled around under my tongue.

I have never been a fan of the old, rich, and dare I say it, overripened Cognacs. I prefer a brighter, more elegant taste and this ticked all my boxes. It was light and sophisticated, while remaining youthful and energetic, with notes of fresh soft fruits and chocolate. I'd once been told that opera is the music of the gods and, if that is true, then this brandy is what they drink as they listen. I closed my eyes in silent, blissful contemplation and, when I opened them again, he was smiling at me.

'It's good stuff, isn't it?' he asked.

'It doesn't get a lot better,' I agreed.

We settled back into our seats and spent the next twenty minutes chatting about rugby, the state of the services and the mess that the current government was making of the country, while I waited for him to bring up the reason behind his late night call. We were on our second glass when he got around to it.

'Do you know,' he asked, 'how many people are murdered in this country each year?'

It was a strange question but I went with the flow. I hazarded a guess at a thousand and he shook his head.

'It's about three hundred,' he replied, 'but you're closer than most people. You're as likely to die in a fire and much more likely to die in a car accident.'

I began to have a feeling where he was going with this but I let him continue.

'How long have you lived in this village?' he asked.

He knew the answer to that question but I gave it to him anyway.

'About twenty years.'

'We've lived here for fifteen. In your time here, have you known anyone die in a fire or a car accident?'

'No. I can't say that I have.'

'In those years, how many people do you know of who've been murdered in this village?'

I didn't need to think about this for very long.

'There was the girl that was drowned. Then there was that chap who was associated with the church, an ex-army man like yourself if I recall correctly. He was shot. And then there was the awful affair with that American woman who bought the Hall. Three people died that time if my memory serves me right.'

I paused to consider this and then continued. 'There was the seamstress whose husband went on trial but who was acquitted, and of course, there was the horrible incident where the old lady was killed with the sword. So, the answer is seven.'

Jonathan nodded. 'Very good. It was a bow and arrow rather than a sword in that last instance, but that's only a detail. Now, let's look at that in more detail. I went to the library in Brockhampton yesterday and found that figure of three hundred. It means that the probability of someone being murdered in this country is about one in two hundred thousand. Leaving aside the fact that most murders are committed in cities amongst the rougher elements of society and not in the countryside, what do you think the likelihood is of seven killings taking place in a small English village of no more than four hundred people over a period of two decades?'

I tried to do the calculations in my head but the brandy was beginning to have an effect. After a few seconds I threw in the towel.

'I have no idea. Enlighten me.' I asked.

'I couldn't work it out either. But there's probably more chance of you and me playing together in the front row against France at Twickenham next Spring.'

A mental image appeared in my mind's eye of three huge gnarled Frenchmen with cauliflower ears grinning maliciously at me as they prepared to tear me apart. I shook it off.

'OK,' I said slowly, 'I will take your point. But why are you telling me this.'

He shifted in his seat and something like frustration briefly crossed his face before he managed to compose himself.

'Because,' he answered, 'I am sick to death of what is happening to this village and I am fed up to the back teeth of that bloody woman.'

‘You mean Miss....’ I started to say, but he interrupted me.

‘You know exactly who I mean. That woman is the fifth rider of the apocalypse. Everywhere she goes, a corpse shows up in no time. I don’t know how she has any friends because sooner or later everyone around her ends up dead. She’s like a modern incarnation of Typhoid Mary. I’ll tell you something, I had three decades in the army and I never saw anyone who could pile up the bodies like she can. If we have another war with Germany, all we’ll need to do is to send her over and they’ll give up in a week. That’s assuming that there is anyone left alive to make the surrender.’

He had grown more vehement as he spoke and by the time he was finished, he was sitting bolt upright and almost shouting. I had known this man for many years, our friendship predated his arrival in our village, and I had never seen him like this. It left me stunned but I managed to collect my thoughts and tried to introduce some calm to the discussion.

‘It’s not as bad as all that,’ I said. ‘The last of those deaths happened several years ago. It’s been quiet since then.’

‘I’ll give you that,’ he replied. But you and I know that it’s only a matter of time. And in the meantime, she’s off galivanting around the country getting her nose stuck into murders that are none of her business. God alone only knows how many people she’s sent to the gallows. Don’t get me wrong; they all probably deserved what they got, but I wouldn’t want that much blood on my hands.’

He stopped speaking and stared down into his glass. I was stunned by the outburst and the evident lack of control. I gave him a few seconds to recover his composure before speaking.

‘This is not like you Jonathan. We’ve all struggled with the pressure of having her living in the village, but it comes with the territory. She was already making a reputation for herself before you moved here.’

‘I know,’ he replied, ‘but I never imagined that it would become such a circus. Everything is so difficult now. This should have been a period of peace and quiet for Fiona and me. Our golden years played out in a beautiful village amongst our own kind of people. It was to be a reward for Fiona in particular for leaving everything she had grown up with and following me all over the world. But that damn old woman has become a national celebrity and the village is full of day trippers and reporters and television crews from all over the country. And it’s getting worse. The international TV stations are getting interested and one of the tabloids reported yesterday that people in Hollywood want to make a film about her. Even the BBC carried the story. On top of that, she’s got a fan club. I’ve been told by the postman that she gets over twenty letters on a good day. The council won’t do anything about trying to reduce the number of people looking to access the village. She’s too much of a celebrity and they’re afraid to do anything that might annoy her. As for the police, they now have a dependency relationship with her. She has the Chief Constable in her back pocket and anyone making a complaint about her would probably be arrested.’

‘You’re preaching to the converted,’ I said, ‘but you didn’t ask me over here just to let off steam, did you?’

He shook his head slowly before lifting it to look me in the eye.

‘No,’ he said. ‘A number of things have happened recently that have brought this thing to a head. You don’t know about them yet but I’m going to tell you now. You need to brace yourself for some bad news.’

He paused and drew a breath before continuing.

'You and Charles Carpenter are my closest friends in this village. I know that you don't see eye to eye a lot but that's just a personality difference. What you may not know about him is that he doesn't have any real pension, which is why he's still keeping that antiques business going, although he's not far shy of seventy. The reason I'm saying this is because about six or seven years ago, he tried to get life insurance so that, if he keeled over, his wife wouldn't be left destitute. I say he tried, because no life insurance company would touch him with a barge pole once they found out where he lived. The reason why that's pertinent is because he was diagnosed a few weeks ago with liver cancer and there's no hope. He has about six months according to his doctor.'

I absorbed this in silence. Jonathan was correct, Charles and I had never really clicked but I had always seen that as a case of two good people who just weren't necessarily good together. I bore him no ill will and I was shocked to the core by the news and how it must have devastated my friend. But there was more to come.

'Closer to home, Fiona has been diagnosed with MS.'

I felt like someone had punched me in the stomach. For a few seconds I was speechless. Then I found my voice.

'When was the diagnosis made?'

'About three months ago. We've only just told the children.'

I couldn't recall seeing any change in her the previous occasions I'd been in this house from which I concluded that the disease was still in a relatively early stage.

'Do you know what type it is?' I asked.

'We were told primary progressive.'

I nodded. Even though I was a surgeon, I remembered enough from my training to know that this was characterised by a slow progression where symptoms gradually, steadily but relentlessly worsened over time.

'You have a long and difficult road ahead of you,' I said.

'Yes,' he agreed. 'That much has been made clear by the consultant. But here's the thing. This house is completely unsuitable for Fiona's future care. We need to sell it to buy a more appropriate property, which we can modify to her needs as the disease progresses. But that will take a lot of money. And Charles needs to sell his house so that his wife can downsize and still have something to live off after he's gone. But we can't sell. Nobody wants to come and live here. If I do find a buyer for this place, I'll be lucky to get half the value it would fetch in one of the other villages around the county.'

'Perhaps,' I said, 'she who we dare not mention might come to the end of her road soon. She's getting on. She must be well into her seventies by now.'

I was grasping at straws and we both knew it. He looked at me balefully.

'Have you seen her lately?' he asked. 'She's as thin as a rake and as fit as a fiddle. She could last another twenty years. I watched her cycling through the village a few days ago. She passed two

tractors and the Vicar in his car. I'm convinced that the grim reaper won't dare come near her in case he suffers the same fate as everyone else.'

We sank into silence, staring into the depths of our glasses. What he was saying was true of course. The tranquillity of our bucolic village had been slowly and inexorably destroyed over the past decade and it was apparent who was responsible. It was also obvious that she didn't care. The fame had gone to her head and it was clear that what had previously been a dull and uneventful life, supported, it was said, on the whim of a financially secure relative, had suddenly become wonderfully exciting. The only person in the village unwise enough to give an interview to a newspaper in which he had expressed the sort of views which Jonathan was vocalising, and which were common currency amongst the locals, had subsequently been torn apart in print, accused of jealousy and spite. Nobody had dared put their head above the parapet since.

The problem was that there was nothing to be done and we both knew it. We talked into the night and I let him vent some more steam until Fiona appeared, as bright and charming as ever. I stayed a further ten minutes, not letting her know that her husband had told me the news and then left. I did so with an air of foreboding. Jonathan had revealed himself to be a man in despair, unable to care as he wanted for the woman that he loved more than any other. He was also a capable man of action, and that combination was dangerous.

Life went on in our little village as summer became autumn and the first frosts made their appearance. Our most famous resident was in the news again just after Christmas, solving a murder in a hotel in which she just happened to be staying. The case was so complex that the details, when I read them in a newspaper, threatened to leave me wanting to apply for a place in a home for the bemused. In the meantime, Charles Carpenter went into a hospital in London as the end grew near.

Meanwhile, I watched Fiona closely but I was unable to see any signs of degeneration in her physical condition. However, Jonathan had told me the name of the doctor who had carried out the tests and I was fully aware of the man's abilities. It was very unlikely that he had been wrong.

That winter seemed never ending. The snow and the frost hardened the ground until well into March and a bitter east wind kept most people indoors unless it was essential to venture out. It was on such a day that I sat in front of the fire reading the *Daily Telegraph* while digesting the excellent dinner which my wife had placed in front of me not an hour before. The doorbell rang and I turned in my chair to watch as Sandra went to the door. I heard voices and then she said, 'Please do come in.'

I stood up as a man in a police uniform entered the room. It was still the age of deference (I had recently seen our cleaner curtsey to Sandra when they met in the street) and he appeared nervous, his fingers moving around the rim of the helmet that he held in front of him, almost as a shield.

'What is it?' I asked.

'There's been a death, Sir,' he responded. 'The house at the end of Old...'

I interrupted him. 'You don't mean Miss....'

It was his turn to intrude. 'Yes, Sir. She was found at the bottom of the stairs by her companion about an hour ago.'

‘Why am I required?’ I asked. ‘Don’t the police have a Medical Examiner available? Or what about the local GP?’

‘Dr. Proudfoot is incapacitated, Sir. He slipped on the ice a few days ago and broke his ankle. And the ME is based in London. The roads are treacherous and he is unwilling to travel for what my Inspector sees as an accidental death.’

‘So,’ I said, ‘as the only doctor available, I am required to confirm the death.’

‘That’s not for me to say, Sir. I am just delivering a message.’

I considered this for a few seconds and then said, ‘Let me get my coat.’

The house was quiet when I entered. The body lay twisted and crumpled at the bottom of the stairs. A man in plain clothes introduced himself as Inspector Langley and I could hear the sound of female sobbing from what I guessed was the living room. Langley informed me that the source was the companion.

I knelt down beside the body and carried out an examination before confirming that the woman was indeed dead.

‘There will be a post-mortem of course,’ I said, ‘but it looks like she died of a broken neck, probably caused by a fall on the stairs.’

Langley nodded sagely. ‘That’s what it looks like to me as well, Doctor.’

In the rush to leave my house, I had neglected to prepare properly and I suddenly realised that I was in need of relief.

‘Do you mind,’ I asked, ‘if I use the bathroom?’

He looked surprised but had no reason to refuse the request. I went upstairs as he went to speak to the weeping woman.

The funeral was held a week later. Most of the community turned up, as did a large number of journalists. The village was the centre of national attention for a few days and then, in the manner of these things, something else grabbed the media attention and the circus moved on, leaving us to rediscover the peace and solitude which we craved.

I gave it almost a month before going to see Jonathan. I hadn’t called before arriving on his doorstep and he was slightly surprised to see me. But good manners and breeding kicked in and he invited me inside.

‘Fiona isn’t here,’ he said. ‘She’s gone visiting. In fact,’ he looked at me in a puzzled manner, ‘she’s with Sandra.’

‘I know,’ I said. ‘I wanted to see you alone. We need to discuss something that is for your ears only.’

He laughed, and I imagined that I detected a slightly nervous tone. ‘That sounds all very mysterious. Why don’t you come into the kitchen and I’ll put on the kettle.’

We did as he suggested and he busied himself. When at last we had two steaming cups of tea in from of us and we were seated at the table, he asked me what I wanted to discuss. I got straight to the point.

‘You will know,’ I said, ‘that some weeks ago, I was the person who certified that our most famous resident was dead.’

He nodded. ‘Indeed I do. I understand also that you thought that she had fallen down the stairs and broken her neck, something that was confirmed at the post-mortem.’

‘That is correct,’ I replied, ‘and the Croner has ruled accidental death.’

‘So, what’s the problem?’

‘I’ll explain,’ I said. ‘When I got to the house that evening, I examined the body and confirmed that she was indeed dead. I’d had to leave my home quite quickly and I found myself, as the euphemism goes, caught short. I asked the police Inspector who had attended the incident if it was OK to use the bathroom. As you will know, in those old cottages, that is always upstairs next to the main bedroom.’

He was staring at me intently and I thought I saw a facial tick under one of his eyes. But he said nothing and I continued.

‘When I got to the bathroom, I noticed that the large window behind the cistern was slightly ajar, which surprised me given how cold the night was. I opened it further and peered through it and saw that it overlooked the roof of the kitchen extension, which was in turn abutted by the garden fence. This was of a sturdy wooden construction, well capable of taking a man’s weight.’

I paused and he said, ‘Go on.’

‘But the most interesting thing that I saw was that there was a trace of mud on the windowsill and, most damningly, when I looked closely, I also observed the outline of a footprint on the toilet seat and on the wooden floor. They were very faint but definitely discernible. And here’s the thing Jonathan, the footprints were really quite large. I have no expertise in these things but I would say that the owner was a man wearing a size ten, or perhaps even eleven shoe.’

I paused to see if this generated a reaction but he now seemed quite relaxed.

‘Where are you going with this?’ he asked.

‘I am aware,’ I said, ‘that you have unusually large feet for a man of your size.’

He leaned back and looked at me thoughtfully for a few seconds before responding.

‘What did you do then?’ he asked.

‘I dampened some toilet paper and wiped the windowsill, toilet seat and floor until all traces of the person who had clearly broken into the house had disappeared. I also locked the window.’

The room went silent as we stared at each other for what seemed like minutes, but was more probably seconds. When he spoke, his voice was faint.

‘Why did you do that?’

‘Because you are my friend and I didn’t want to see you hang.’

The words hung in the air between us and it was he who eventually spoke.

‘You compromised yourself by those actions. You could have been caught and that would have been the end of your career. You could have gone to prison.’

‘I suppose I could,’ I said, leaning forward and putting my elbows on the table. ‘But it was difficult to see how anyone could have found out. And what good would it have done if I’d gone to the Inspector with my suspicions? The police might have eventually discovered that you were responsible. You’d have ended up on the gallows, Fiona would have had nobody to take care of her and your family would have faced disgrace. In that light, what I did was the best course of action.’

We paused again before he spoke.

‘Why are you telling me this? Why didn’t you just keep your suspicions to yourself?’

‘Because you need to know that someone knows. What you did was wrong Jonathan. OK, I’m not saying that she wasn’t an interfering busybody and that her presence in this village didn’t make our lives more difficult than they ought to have been. But that was not a reason to kill her. I can’t even begin to imagine how terrified she must have been when you suddenly appeared and threw her down the stairs. Nobody deserved to die in that way. And what would you have done if the fall hadn’t killed her? Did you ever think of that? You’d have either had to leave the house with her as a witness or finish her off, and either way that would have been the end of you. You committed a reckless and foolish act and got very lucky.’

I was shouting by the time I finished and I banged my clenched fists on the table. I waited for him to respond but he just sat there, dumb and motionless. Eventually, I stood up and walked to the front door. I opened it and heard him follow me into the corridor. I turned and spoke to him for the last time.

‘Your secret is safe with me Jonathan, but you are no longer to consider me as your friend. I hope that you will put this house up for sale as soon as possible and leave the village. You have no place here now.’

That was the last time I saw him. Within a month, he and Fiona were gone.