



born in the bleak country

& 1

Waiting for the long overdue bus, the two of them kept talking, as if to keep warm. Behind them the panorama of the Rowley hills looked marvellously smoky in the twilight but they failed to admire its rugged winter beauty. They were concerned with other matters.

– *Gerring' that bus up Kings Hill is loike gooin' rahnd the world, mate. It's loike visiting the lost tribes of the Amazon.*

– *Yow'm right theer. I feel loike Cap'n Cook, goin' wheer no mon had gone befower.*

– *Yow got that wrung, cocker. 'E wor the fust to get theree. Theer was some other bugger theer befower 'im. I'd be the fust ter admit it if he got their fust; 'e was just the fust white bloke.*

– *So what yow'm saying is that he wuz just the Gaffer that said he discovered it.*

– *Ahr, I am. And then he went to the papers abaht it, and yow cor believe everything they write theer. I mean, if the Phoenicians had papers they might have told us they'd discovered Tipton. I know there wuz people them days gooin' all ways in reed boats, and it may be they did come up the canal. I dai say they got their loike, but yow can bet they give it a damn good try!*

– *They was travellin' all abaht the place in them days, like tinkers, selling their wares left roight and centre. I mean, they loiked their nomadin', dai they? Gooin' 'ither and thither, not bothering nobody.*

– *Them ancients, before Christ loike, were damn clever. Tek the Pyramids! Wimpey cor build loike that, can they? What I want to know is who paid 'em?*

– *They probably dai get paid. Gaffer probably legged it mate!*

– *Yow cor fault the werkmanship though. They med 'em to last, dai they? Yow dow see that kind of werkmanship today. Tek the Council House. It's loike a bloody big tin bucket with 'oles in it, ay it?*

– *Ahr, it's the modern times, ay it?*

– *Modern means somethin' that dai werk properly, if yow ask me!*

– *Yow come to think abaht it, tek the Middle East... they was all nomads. I mean, there was settlements loike, but they moved from plerce t' plerce, dai they? They enjoyed that way of loife. Now, they'm all in cities and to my moind that's half the trouble in the Middle East now. All on top of one another, no room to breathe.*

– *Yow'm roight theer. Now wheer's that bloody bus?*

– *Misbehavin', that's wheer it is, if yow ask me...*

(thanks to Steve Trow for dialect coaching.)

& 2

In the old days, you knew where you stood. With iron and steel, them old heavy manufacturing industries. You could see the pollution! When you walked near the foundry, you could taste it in your mouth, all gritty. Nowadays, it's all behind closed doors, behind the facades of these new bland looking industrial units. Hydrochem – Suppliers to Industry. Suppliers of what? We had a great heritage of industry, of beating metal, bashing out pig iron and chain links and sending it round the globe. We were made for it – you can still see them remnants in our kids today. Look what they produce – heavy metal, thrash, trash, sonic, speed metal. They make noises like you haven't heard for 30 years round here. Though they hark back, even what they call themselves. Look over there, there's a flyer for Social Work - headlining at the King & Horses - supported by Vomit. But what music they make, the soundtrack of our history.

&3

It was a dreadful accident, they were told. He was found dead on the railway tracks at Charlemont, with another man. A note was found on one body suggesting a joint suicide. The driver heard a bump and when he arrived at New Street station they found blood on the front of the engine. The young man had been unemployed and lived alone in an attic flat in Thynne Street. He had a drinking problem and had been in prison. His probation officer had felt that art therapy might be the answer, but he had only attended two sessions before that fatal night.

&4

I'm not real Black Country. I was only passing through. I arrived from Shropshire when I was five with my Mother and Father and a Grandfather for a while. We moved for jobs - what other reason would you come here? It was different landscape. There was quarries across the way, always blasting, night and day. No cars like there is now back then, just quarries, quarries, quarries and the roads full of lorries and quarry dust.

&5

They came to dig up the water pipes at the flats. They dug a trench, then a second. They couldn't find them. No one knew where they were. Hilda said to the workmen, Go and see old Jim, he knows where the pipes are. Don't be saft, they said.

But he knew you see. He lifted up the floorboards and showed them the stopcocks too. That's where they are, he said. He'd worked for the Engineers Department, helped build the flats all those years ago. When he'd retired, he'd kept the plans. He wrote to the Council, told them he'd got the plans but they never replied. Bloody typical bureaucracy, he said to them, left hand never did know what the right hand was up to.

&6

The well-publicised clampdown was not helping the job problem. Nuisance youths were at work again. A fish and chip window had been smashed. Thirty different examples of graffiti were identified. Rubbish bins were being emptied onto the street. Eggs were being thrown at doors. Intolerance, violence and lack of respect were said to blame. The Chair of the residents committee claimed the area was "like Beirut".

&7

I did my own market research. Every week I'd go and buy one or two records and take them back to our terraced house. We had a big window onto the street, and that was where the record player was kept. A real record player, mind. I'd pull the venetian blinds closed. I'd wait for a group of kids to come down from the corner before I put on the records on, Elvis or the Everlys at full volume. As they came past, if they'd stop in their tracks and listen I'd know what I felt about the records. They could feel it too, see. All that energy, that sense of excitement. Sometimes you made a dreadful mistake, like a Cilla Black b-side. The street would empty.

&8

He always had a nice suit, at work and for casual. He stank of aftershave, like he'd had a shower in it. I like the smell of aftershave on a man, but I didn't like him. He was so soppy. And I can't stand to see a man shaving while he's driving.

&9

Two fat cakes, 48

Was she worth it? 69

Number 9, the Brighton line

The first one out, 78

You at the back, can we have some order!

All the two's, 22

All the sevens, sunset strip!

Droopy drawers, 44

Dirty knees, 33

Was that a call? No, it's Norman...

HA! HA!

It's no good putting your hand up. I can't see you in the smoke, love.

HOUSE!

&10

I go on a regular basis to the Public Library. I like historical romances and, well, anything that has history in it. There used to be this book they had about the American Civil War. It was published in 1883. It was about the General on the Union side, the one that won it for them. Ulysses Grant was his name. Did you know he just used to be a clerk?

As I recall, it told the story of when and where and how he fought, and all in words of one syllable. It was all in capitals as well. GEN-ER-AL GRANT WAS DE-TER-MINED TO FIN-A-LLY CRUSH THE REB-EL FOR-CES A SEC-OND TIME AT SHI-LOH. I think all books should be like that.

&11

A statue named Polly that once stood in the centre of Oldbury has finally been found. The five foot cast iron statue was donated to the town by a businessman in 1882, and stood there until New Years Eve, 1949, when she was accidentally knocked off her pedestal and later disappeared. She has turned up in a garden in Trowbridge, Wiltshire.

&12

They were offered a set of lovely chairs from the Labour Club. They could have the brown ones at 50 pence each seeing as they were a charity. The Secretary said he had a set of 6 himself at home. There were also some low stools going for £3 each. They needed a bit of a clean but would come up nice and were just the sort of thing for slipping out of bed in the morning and putting your socks on. There were, he said, 53 in the back. The community centre would have a set of 12 for the Saturday morning surgery. There was another set of 35 with metal frames which the Chess Club used to use. They won't be very pleased when they come in next week, he said, they don't like change.

&13

He was a bachelor through and through. He didn't deal with women. Not that they were inferior. He was never intimate with them, so he didn't know how to be with them.

His neighbour came to us, saying he'd cut his throat and there was blood everywhere. He was having a nap and this abscess and it burst. Blood everywhere. He wouldn't see a Doctor, hadn't seen one in 40 years he said. Geoff talked to him and we cleaned him up. A Doctor finally came. We brought the sheets home and his clothes to be scrubbed clean. We had to pretend that Geoff had done it all on his own, all the ironing, just cos of the old man's pride.

&14

He took 10 pounds down to the Midland Bank. He'd just paid it in when the branch was robbed by three old age pensioners. They carried a shotgun without a trigger and an air rifle. The driver had cataracts and crashed the car several times as they made good their escape.

The police station was just round the corner, so police officers came down on their bikes and not in a squad car. They were due to retire soon. The constable who stayed outside the bank had his bike nicked. He could not account for this as he had been outside the bank all the time. He thought one of his mates must be having a joke on him.

&15

No-one really seemed surprised when the 16 year old youth was found hanged with a rope around his neck in the bin area of maisonettes. Earlier that night, the father of his 13 year old girlfriend had warned him to keep away from her. The girl said that on a previous occasion, after she'd told him she didn't want to go out with him, he had climbed a lamp post and tied a plastic washing line around his throat. She had been seeing him since the age of 10. His cousin said they had visited several pubs that evening, and that the girl's father had come into one pub to return a camouflage jacket and several rings given to his daughter by the boy.

&16

They met for a lunchtime drink. They commiserated with each other. The world was going to hell.

You know, he said, I'm thinking of giving up Marxism.

After 35 years? Bloody hell, that's serious, said the other. I'm devastated, mate.

It's all coming apart, he said. Religious fundamentalism, that's where the future is. Maybe we should start a new religion, be a guru.

Dow yow need to give up summat for that? asked the other. We cor give up beer, can we?

That set him thinking hard. Let's give up something we don't like, he said. Lettuce, ar, that's it. No-one likes lettuce!

&17

There were long queues for the Elvis Presley Exhibition, set up in a large marquee next to the war memorial. Elvis's 1974 Cadillac with its gold ignition key was on display, along with the only signed guitar known to exist – a 1963 Ovation – and his shirt from the 'Frankie and Johnny' movie with his name stamped inside the collar. But the real crowd puller was surely the first opportunity to view rare footage banned in the USA. Joe Esposito's home movies showed Elvis at home with Priscilla, on the beach, fooling around and much much more. The most tasteful item on display was a life-size illuminated 3D copy of the gravestone of The King. It stood in a corner on a carpet of fake grass. Every day people left plastic flowers all around its base until it became quite an eyesore.

&18

She'd stay up all night with the patients, in some of the poorest parts of the district. Women who'd have 5 or 6 kids already and were haemorrhaging. She'd stay with them till they were all right. Then she'd come into the clinic and say, I'd die for a cup of coffee. Always the same thing. She'd never had a breech birth – she always knew how to turn them. They'd say she had magic hands. I believed them. She was from Dublin originally. When she qualified, she went straight to Rome and had her hands blessed by the Pope himself. She smoked like a trooper. Her fingers were stained brown. She never married.

&19

The formation of a new organisation was announced today. Wednesbury Liberation Front will begin a campaign to fully reinstate the old borough boundaries with the adjacent town of West Bromwich. A spokesman said that they aimed to collect over 55,000 signatures to present to the Secretary of State for the Environment, demanding a return to the boundary of 1966. This is not a political campaign, he said, politics don't come into it.

&20

A horse was taken from grazing in a field to the railway line and tethered to sleepers in the path of the 9.15 express from Birmingham. Police said that the killing was senseless.

&21

You work all day and you don't know whether it's rain nor shine and you only make an extra £5. It's 8'o'clock before you've got the dirt and grime off your hands and out of your hair. You get all the crap jobs because you won't play up to the Charge Hand. You

see all the other girls doing it, getting him his coffee, giving him a little smile, showing a bit of leg. He comes round and asks for a cigarette. I tell him, I've only got four and I'm broke. Does that mean no, he says? Yes, it means no, I say. Ever since then I've had the worse jobs. I come in and he says, Do Number 64. And you do it. No argument. I'm not after trouble. I just want fairness.

&22

Bloody ridiculous, that's what it is. This is a fine pat on the back after all these years of service. What am I going to tell the wife? 'Nice cup of tea, luv... Oh, by the way, they've sacked me as Reigning Champion.' Seven years at the top of the Turks Head Darts League. Then the new Entertainments Committee brings in all these new Championship rules and seedings and they expect me to go in at Round One like some bloody novice! This ai Wimbledon, this is Wednesbury!

What am I going to tell Gloria? 'Glor, luv, I packed it in. I'd had a belly full. Yes, I took my dartboard with me.' I was founder member and I bloody well brought it in the first place! So I took it. You should have seen the look on their faces! Priceless.

Is she going to say, 'Well done, luv, you made the right decision. They dai appreciate you...' No, more like she's going to say, 'Well, Brian, this puts me in a right position. I enjoy my nights at the Turks with the General Knowledge Quiz.' It helps, of course, that I usually set the questions and give her little hints. I mean, someone has to know that the State Capital of Florida is Tallahassee and not Miami. She's won enough tankards to sink a brewery, but that ai going to placate our Gloria. I'm in a right pickle now.

&23

He was standing for the Council again this year. The Agent didn't like him but worked hard on the campaign, even leafleting every single house on the night before the election. The Agent sweated day and night for the cause. The candidate hadn't worked for 16 months following a heart attack. He worked for the Council and he knew he would have to resign if he was successfully elected. On election night, he said he should have seen a Doctor and got retired because of ill health, thus preserving his pension rights. Though it's a bit late for having second thoughts, he does and announces out loud to all present he doesn't want to stand anymore. He doesn't win anyway, much to the relief of the Agent.

& 24

Father was an electrical engineer. Before the war came and took him away, he went down on Mondays to London to the BBC. He came back late on Friday. At weekends, he worked in Uncle's radio repair shop. We didn't see much of him for two years. And when we did he talked about transformers and algorithms and told us about this wonderful bloke called Logie Baird he had occasion to work with in the capital city. I didn't want to know about some Scotsman. I always wanted to know about the King – how splendid did he look riding down the Mall in his carriage and so on? Father didn't know. He said he was a Republican and a Socialist. He was always a disappointment in this respect.

After the war years, everything seemed to change. Mother did this and that. Father didn't go to London anymore, though he kept up correspondence. He subscribed to the

Electrical Society of Great Britain and seemed content to work in Uncle's shop. One day, a packing case arrived marked FRAGILE. Father took it down to his shed. He said it was a television tube, sent to him from one of the engineers in London. He owes me a favour or two, he said.

He tried to explain its properties: it's made of glass, it receives transmitted pictures. He'd come back from the army with three stripes and all sorts of funny ideas. He even spoke a bit of Italian. We paid him no attention. He continued to spend all his time down the shed building a wooden cabinet to put this tube in. When he was finished he put it in the living room for all the neighbours to see. You only had to look at their face to know what they were thinking: what is this, some new kind of fishpond? Of course, there were no pictures to receive as such, not yet anyway, that was some time away. He had to go to the Post office to get a licence for it. They looked at him funny too.

&25

He once worked as a Relief Manager for Benefit Shoes. Worked all over the north. When he was in digs in Oldham, he drank in a pub called Help The Poor Struggler. It was run by the public hangman, Albert Pierrepoint. He thought he was a nice chap, quiet and unassuming. Not the sort you'd expect to see on the gallows, someone who had executed an estimated 433 men and 17 women, including Nazi war criminals. He wondered what it took to do the job. Oh, it takes all sorts, Albert told him. There had even been a couple of very professional public executioners from the Black Country. It's just a job, much the same as any other, Albert told him, At the end of the day, we're all on the King's payroll.

&26

The Treasurer could not pass up an opportunity to reference the great canons of English Literature. After the shortfall in the bingo money had failed to be satisfactorily explained, he concluded proceedings with the following statement:

It was writ by Dickens, wasn't it? Mister Micawber said, If yow've got 20 shillings comin' in and yow've got 21 shillings goin' out, yow're out of business.

&27

Her case looked heavy. He asked her if she'd travelled far. The Third World, she said, I'm a missionary, inter-denominational. That usually stops people in their tracks. Not me, he said. It's an ungodly country now, she said, people have no time to worship. Maybe we have something in common then, he said. She didn't look convinced.

There's lots of other religions in the Third World, he said, it must be hard work for you. There's a great deal of spirituality, she said, adjusting her hat. And poverty, he added. Maybe it's not so different here.

We have some very interesting speakers, she said. One just the other week, an eminent scientist. Told us that the prophecies are coming to pass, and that these are truly the last days. He told us that the world has consumed more resources in the last 40 years than in the whole of history, and that if we continue at this exponential rate we will run out of

resources by 2010. Then, another speaker, a mathematician, had calculated – using the Julian calendar – that Christ could return about that time too.

Well, we've got a few years left then, he said, five years at least, you know, like the old David Bowie song.

She smiled at his uncertainty. She said, Perhaps I could leave you with a leaflet?

& 28

The pub was called The Hand & The Wall. You couldn't miss it. There was a large glass hand floating over a wall, pointing God knows where. On any given day of the week, it was a lonely place for lonely people.

&29

Everyone agreed. Langley Festival had outdone itself this year. Two six year olds were selected to be treated as royalty for the day, with their own retinue of servants and riding in a horse drawn carriage accompanied by the May Queen, aged 15. Wacky events which excited the crowds included welly bashing and rhubarb bashing, a pig roast, skittles, tug'o'war, model train rides, a kazoo demonstration, a group of Vikings and traditional African drummers. The day was accompanied by a history exhibition in Ebenezer Wesleyan Reform Church.

&30

ROAD TO RUIN

Many of our younger folk are now becoming 'Environmentally' conscious, and rightly so. How curious then that they ignore their own contribution in the form of 'Visual Pollution' in dress, hair styles, bones through noses and whatnots. Anything outrageous goes, and of course anything seen on television is a mist, despite the obvious low mentality of the actors and script writers involved. To these TV addicts everything seen on the screen is real.

Now we have burly bricklayers wearing ponytails, apeing their screen idols. We have navvies wearing earrings. Who is brainwashing our young? Those who do not have a brain to wash of course.

We read that our very clever medical scientists can now produce at will the predetermined sex of a child – how long will it be before they bring forth into the world the socialists dream – a sexless creature?

Name and address supplied

&31

There were calls from the opposition benches to celebrate the opening of the new Civic Centre with restraint. It was believed that tea and biscuits would be sufficient for all the local dignitaries and special guests.

&32

When she jumped she couldn't have been thinking about how far it was or how green the grass looked or what would happen when she hit the bottom. It was the fourteenth floor and 120 feet in the sky and doesn't take long to plummet. He said she was in the living room watching re-runs of Starsky & Hutch and then she was on the balcony and then she was gone. Just like that. When he looked out over the parapet and saw the body below he did not believe it had really happened. He's been reading the paper in the toilet. When she jumped she left behind seven years with him and a 14 year old son. Time flies, he said, and she plummeted like Icarus. She was not the only one to jump from those flats and make an end of it. Thank God, they're knocking 'em all down now.

&33

He said he was a man of few opinions. These were a few he offered to all and sundry.

All kids are potential terrorists...

The Left haven't disappeared. They're just drunk...

You should do as I say, not do as I do. Do as I do and you're dead meat...

All consultants, without exception, should be put up against the wall and shot...

There are some specimens of the fairer sex who are capable of saying something serious, but I somehow doubt it...

I can see by the light of the moon in your eyes, and that's because you're a lunatic.

I thought we'd benefited from the insight of Copernicus, that the world revolved around the sun, not that the world revolved around you.

&34

I'd applied for sixteen jobs as a bell boy at 4 star deluxe hotels but never with success. I think I was attracted by the uniform. The uniform was smart. I was too small for the Army. I'm glad now I didn't end up as a Head Porter in a bad hotel. I'd rather do driving for Ray. He's done quite well for himself. I've had some that'd push you around – tea boy rather than bell boy – but that's not Ray. I admire him. I don't want to be like him. I want to do it my own way. He's a charmer though. He never has to raise his voice to get a job done.

&35

They've brought a special man in for the November 5th job. He talks of cannons and mortars and Spanish fireworks like his life depends on it. He's called a Pyrotechnician. He seems very professional. So was Johnny. Johnny lit up everything in sight. Unofficially, of course. Wastepaper bins at junior school. The old empty houses by the playing fields. Even the wooden shed where the railwaymen stopped for their tea break.

Johnny was nothing if not thorough. He'd jemmed the lock on the shed and had a good look inside first. He liked to know what was going up in flames. There were old pots of paint, a few large tools, and a wooden banana box stacked full of Men's magazines. Johnny looked through them all, then used them for kindling. He told me they were full of women with very large nipples in a variety of artistic poses. All burnt up now though, before anyone else had a chance to look. He loved a good conflagration and he never had to worry about the Health & Safety aspects.

&36

A local female licensee has been banned from playing darts in her own pub. The darts aficionados claimed she is just too good for them. A disgruntled customer said, You don't stand a chance against her. She'll wipe the floor with you every time, so what's the point? She has been playing for over 27 years and is a former representative for Midlands and Shropshire Counties. In spite of the ban, she still plays competitively at least four times a week.

&37

In the 1960's, the Right Honourable Barbara Castle was invited to speak at Wednesbury Labour Club. This was going to be a momentous occasion. They'd ordered a fish'n'chips supper for her. When she arrived at Snowhill station in Birmingham and found there was no-one to meet her, she rang up to find out what was going on.

The bloke at the end of the phone said to her, Wednesbury, it's easy to get to, my lover. Yow just come out of Snowhill and catch the 75 bus and get off opposite the White Hoss in Wednesbury. Walk straight up the hill and you'm there.

She got back on the train to London. They'd even booked a hotel in Birmingham for her and had a raffle for the room so it didn't go to waste.

&38

Of course I don't see Dave as much as I used to. He drives dumper trucks now, lorries, that sort of thing. For the Council. After work, we used to have a round or three in the pub and play dominoes or 501. He always went for bull. Never fail. And get it too. He had an angry squint just like a bloody bull. You could look a bull full in the face, I told him. Bloody bulls eye. He'd laugh at this, drain his jar and get on with the game. Put his arrows dead centre, spot on.

Bastions of working class culture, we are, he'd say. Well, I didn't feel that way. All seemed a bit far-fetched. Dave used to be in the Army after school. Probably a crack shot. Got to be Sergeant and he's still in the Territorials. I couldn't see him killing anyone; he seemed so amiable and easy going. You haven't lived till you've seen the sunset in Belize, he said once to me. Bloody flies! Put him off his food, he said. He was never much of a meat eater. A nibbler more like, though he liked a nice chicken of a weekend. He'd keep a leg to pack up for work on Monday. The rest of the time he lived on cheese and onion crisp sandwiches.

His son grew up to be a punk, with a full Mohican haircut, the works. Dave never bothered, didn't bat an eyelid. I think he'd seen things and done things that would make his son wince.

&39

Upon her retirement, Baroness Betty Boothroyd, former Member of Parliament for West Bromwich West and the first woman Speaker of the House of Commons, gave away to the local community many of the gifts, artefacts and memorabilia she had collected over her many years in politics.

Two items were donated to the Beacon Centre for the Blind: a framed oil painting of Cimentiere Colliery in Yorkshire by Edna Lamb, H 694 mm x W 1,100 mm; and a signed limited edition print of Bedford School (No. 551 of 850), from an original drawing by John Western.

These were auctioned in due course, as part of an annual Celebrity Auction. The other items that were auctioned included signed photos from Graham Norton, Jordan, the Wombles, Michael Caine, Luciano Pavarotti, Albert Finney, Sting, Peter Gabriel, Phil Collins, Margaret Thatcher and the entire casts of both Channel 4's 'Brookside' and BBC's 'Casualty'; an autograph from David Beckham; signed books by Nick Hornby, Melvyn Bragg and Germaine Greer; Hilary Benn's 2001 election address; Nick Ross's script from 'Crimewatch' with his notes; a Match of the Day script (England v Italy, 27th March 2002) signed by Gary Lineker; a book donated by Carl Chinn but not signed; a Parker pen used by Noel Edmunds; earrings worn by Julie Goodyear; Barbara Windsor's coat from 'Eastenders'; an original suit by Vivienne Westwood; ties from both Bruce Forsyth and the Mayor of London Ken Livingstone; sketches by Tony Hart and Rolf Harris; a float vest signed by former Olympic swimmer Sharon Davis; Warren Mitchell's West Ham scarf worn in the comedy series 'In Sickness and Health' and miscellaneous items from West Bromwich Albion.

Some items were apparently in a damaged condition but nevertheless they were sold, including the signed photo from Caroline John who appeared in 'Dr. Who' on 1970.