

He was watching the park gates from his usual bench by the pond. The girl would soon be joining him for her mid-day break. For several days now they had sat at the same bench and exchanged pleasantries after she had laughed at the way the ducks fought over the crusts he had thrown to them. She was twenty-ish, attractive, with a pulse-quickenning figure, but he did not flatter himself that her interest was in any way sexual. He subscribed to the adage "No fool like an old fool". Besides, he was

10 more than twice her age.

To him it was a harmless flirtation — a fillip to his middle-aged man's morale — and he had found himself looking forward to their lunchtime "assignments".

Earlier that morning, however, events had taken a more serious turn. The girl had paid a visit to the Vehicle Registration Department in the Town Hall.

His secretary had come into his office. "There's a young lady here, Mr Smythe, asking if we keep records of car ownership... MG sports cars in particular. I said I thought not."

20 He had felt a twinge of unease at the mention of the car type. "Quite so," he had replied. Tell her registrations are all on the national computer now. In any case, we couldn't give out that kind of information."

He had peered at the reception desk through his office's glass partition. The enquirer was the girl from the park bench. An odd coincidence, he had thought. Or was it something more? Now, as she entered the park gates with that long stride and purposeful expression, his unease returned.

"Hello — we meet again," she said, sitting beside him.

30 "Ah, yes... sky looks a bit overcast. Hope we aren't in for some rain." He gestured at the apple she was peeling with a penknife. "Lunch?" "Yes, worse luck. I'm on a diet."

He smiled. "You seem to be here most days. Do you work hereabouts?"

"Oh no. In fact, I don't live here. I'm just staying in town while I'm doing some research. I'm from Elmston, actually."

"Really? I know Elmston..." he began. The words were out before the warning bell rang. "Well, I don't exactly know it...pal of mine... knew him years ago... used to live there. Is this your first visit here?"

40 "Yes."

"Nice place," he said. "Bit dull, though."

"Not at all. It's charming."

"What are you researching? Our town's chequered history, perhaps? Parts date from the Roman occupation."

"How interesting. But no — I'm trying to trace someone."

"Ah! Bit of detective work?"

She smiled. "In a way, I'm beginning to find out what a job it is tracing someone who may not want to be traced. No wonder the police have to spend so much time on investigations."

50 "And the "trail" has led from Elmston to here?"

"Indirectly, yes, But I've had to spend time in several places first. I'm hoping this will be the last."

"Sounds very intriguing," he said, hoping to entice her to reveal more without seeming to be prying into her private life.

"I suppose it is, in a way. I'm going back more than twenty years, though." She made a wry face. Which is setting myself a difficult task."

"I don't suppose you were even born then?" he said.

"I was—just! Anyway, I've managed to unearth a few clues. The  
60 person I'm looking for had an MG sports car then and got married  
during the same period. I know it's a bit of a long shot, but it might  
just pay off."

His unease became a shiver which set him on edge even more. He  
was like the rabbit hypnotized by the snake, wanting to get away but  
unable to move. "But I mustn't bore you with my personal affairs,"  
she went on. What about you? What line of business are you in?"

"Oh, nothing much. Civil servant, actually. Quite dull, I'm afraid. I  
wish I could be an 007 like you but... I'm just a nine-to-five chap."

"Don't be so modest. There's nothing wrong with being a civil  
70 servant."

He made a deprecating gesture but inwardly he was thrilled that a  
pretty girl was finding him interesting enough to want to flirt with  
him.

"Married, of course?"

He was on the point of saying no when he noticed her glance at the  
ring on his left hand. He nodded.

"The dishy men always are! Lived here long, have you?"

He did not like the turn the conversation was taking. "Oh, quite some  
time." He made a show of checking his wristwatch. "Well, I must be  
80 getting back. The grindstone waits for no man! I, er... that is,  
perhaps we might see each other again tomorrow?"

"Yes, let's. About one o'clock?"

He said that would be fine.

As he walked back to the Town Hall doubts and fears scurried around  
his head like cornered rats. It was just too damned close to be  
coincidence any more. For he used to run an MG. And he had married  
twenty years ago.

He could not concentrate at the office. An hour before finishing time,  
he got his car from the staff car-park and drove to his semi in a leafy  
90 suburb on the outskirts of town.

Margaret, his wife, was doing some work in the garden. 'Robert, is  
that you? You're early. Nothing wrong at the office, is there?'

'No, of course not.' Why did women always think the worst? 'I  
thought I'd finish off that lampstand in the shed while there's still  
some day-light.'

'Right-O! I'll call you when dinner's ready.'

He put the inside catch on the shed door and made sure his wife was  
still in the front garden. Then he got a metal box from behind his  
workbench.

100 The key to the box was hidden under a bottle of weedkiller. Inside  
the box were two yellowing clippings from the Elmston Observer.  
One was headlined: *GIRL, 10, KILLED IN HIT-AND-RUN*.

For the umpteenth times he read how the girl had been knocked  
down on a pedestrian crossing while on her way home from a school  
friend's house.

The details were embedded in his memory. He had driven over to  
Margaret's parents' house in the MG that evening. They had lived just  
outside Elmston then.

Because of some road works, the traffic had been diverted.

110 He had been exceeding the speed limit, too. It was an unfamiliar  
route and the crossing had taken him by surprise.

The car's brakes were slack because he'd skipped a service to save  
money, and a shower had made the road surface slippery...

Even though it was twenty years ago, he could still remember the  
sickening thud... the scream... the crumpled body on the side of the  
road.

Of course, he should have stopped, but he had panicked. He had been short-listed for a new job for which a clean driving licence was a condition of employment and it was only days away from his wedding. Reporting the accident would have ruined everything. The second clipping, headed *POLICE APPEAL FOR WITNESSES*, said several people had heard the screech of brakes but none had seen the accident.

A police spokesman was quoted as saying they were 'pursuing several lines of enquiry'.

He locked the clippings away again and returned the box to its hiding place. He had never fully understood why he had kept them all those years. What, he wondered, would the psychologists make of that? A guilt complex, perhaps? A subconscious desire to punish himself for his crime?

It was his favourite tuna-fish salad for dinner but the memory of the accident had dulled his appetite. He pecked away at it, nodding absently as Margaret related the events of her day.

All through the meal the thought kept hammering in his brain: how long before the girl found out that he was the hit-and-run driver? More than likely she was a former schoolfriend wanting to see justice done. Or a relative... the dead girl's sister, even.

The police enquiries had no doubt fizzled out years ago—they would have had far more pressing cases on their plate — but the little girl's family and friends would not have given up the search.

That night he hardly slept. At the office next day he clockwatched until it was time to go to the park.

The girl was already there when he arrived.

"I was hoping I'd see you today" she said. "You see, I'm certain I've come to the right town. You know I mentioned an MG... well, how's this for amateur sleuthing?... There's the car's number."

A muscle in his cheek began to twitch rapidly as he read what was in her notebook. His MG's number. But how had she...? The newspaper report said there had been no eyewitnesses.

"I'm missing the middle one or two digits in the numberplate — but it's enough."

"Very cloak-and-daggerish" he said, forcing a smile. "Have you tried the local Vehicle Registration Department? Perhaps they can help."

"Oh yes. No luck, though. But guess what? I've got a photograph of the car."

The park seemed to spin. He gripped the bench with both hands.

"You all right?" she asked.

"What? Oh yes. Just a twinge of indigestion."

"Well, I haven't actually got the photograph," she went on. "I've only seen the negative. I'm having a ten-by-eight print done from it."

"You have been busy!" His voice sounded unreal. "Look, that friend of mine from Elmston. I've just remembered. He had an MG. He could be who you are looking for... I might still have an address for him at home... Have you got a phone number where I can contact you? Better still, an address in case I miss you here tomorrow."

She wrote down both in her notebook and tore the page out for him.

"Now I must be off," she said. "I've got more sleuthing to do. I'll look out for you here again tomorrow."

He gave her a minute or two's start, then began to follow her.

Her first stop was at a photographic shop near the main square. She came out carrying a large buff-coloured envelope.

That would be the MG print, he thought, as he observed her getting her bearings.

He kept about fifty yards behind as she crossed the town centre to the offices of the Evening Gazette.

He followed her through the revolving doors, keeping the public newspaper stands in the foyer between himself and the point where she was talking at the enquiry counter.

Pretending to leaf through the week's back numbers, he could hear  
180 snatches of conversation above the din of typewriters and telephones.

"... wedding report twenty-one years ago... would it be possible to..."  
... archives are on the fourth floor... first door on the right as you come out of the lift..."

He watched the girl take the lift. Time passed. People came and went. He felt clammy and conspicuous.

Eventually she reappeared out of the lift. The receptionist smiled.

Had she found what she had been looking for?

Yes, she had.

190 He was in a cold sweat now, but he had no difficulty keeping her in sight, for he knew the town like the back of his hand. Where would she head next? Oh God, he thought, don't let it be the police station.

"Robert! Long time no see!" He started. It was a man he knew from the Parks Department. He felt like a schoolboy caught playing truant.

"Stretching your legs, eh, Robert?"

"Oh, er, yes." He could see the girl disappearing down a side turning.

"Popped out for cigarettes."

The man was grinning. "Some looker, eh?"

"What?"

200 "That girl you were staring at."

"Oh," he forced a smile. "Look, can't stop now. Let's have a drink next week. I'll ring you."

When he finally got away the girl was nowhere to be seen. He spent the rest of the afternoon fretting at his desk. Whose wedding had she looked up? And why?

It was not until he and Margaret were watching TV that evening that the answer came to him; in fact, it was staring him in the face...

On the piano was an ornately framed picture of him and Margaret on their wedding day. Of course! Why hadn't he thought of it sooner?

210 The other photos in the family album: there was one of the MG.

He found the album and flicked through it. There it was — the pair of them, snapped in the MG as they were leaving the reception to go off on honeymoon.

He stared at himself from twenty years ago: thin face, unlined, thick curling hair. Now he had a double chin, was balding, wore a moustache and bifocals. Unrecognisable!

On the back of the MG was a 'Just married' placard, which obscured the middle two digits on the rear number plate.

220 The girl must have gone to every photographer in the district until she found the one who had taken their wedding pictures. The negatives would have been on file, probably in a storeroom.

The girl had got a print. Then she had searched the Evening Gazette's back issues for the paper's own picture of the same couple in the MG... which would tell her the names and parents' addresses.

And there the search would stop, for Margaret's parents had emigrated long ago and his own parents were dead. He was safe.

Then it struck him like a blow. 'The electoral roll,' he said out loud.

'She simply goes through it, street by street, until she finds my name...'

230 'Did you say something, Robert?' Margaret called.  
'What? No, nothing.'  
It would be only a matter of time now before his skeleton was out of its cupboard. He would be branded a child-killer, all the more heinous because he had covered his tracks (he had sold the MG immediately they had got back from honeymoon).  
He would get at least five years for manslaughter. He would lose his job; his reputation would be ruined; everything he had built up over the years... down the drain!  
He knew he had not got the strength of character to begin all over again; he was too set in his ways...  
240 'I think I'll go to The Swan for a pint, love. Don't wait up. I might be late.'  
'Oh, all right. I'll leave something out for your supper.'  
At times like this, he mused, it was positively an advantage having a conventionally predictable spouse.  
It was a fifteen-minute drive to the block of service flats where the girl was staying; hers was on the ground floor.  
She came to the door in a dressing-gown with a towel wrapped round her hair.  
250 He was sorry to barge in on her unannounced, he blurted; but he had found himself in the neighbourhood, so he had thought he would give her that information about his friend.  
'Oh, well, come in. You'll have to forgive my appearance — I'm in the middle of washing my hair. Can I get you a drink?'  
'I won't, thanks. I'm driving.'  
'Ah yes... the old breathalyser!  
'He tried to smile but couldn't move his face muscles. 'That friend,' he began, swallowing. 'His name's... Smythe... Robert Smythe.'

'That's it,' she cried. 'The same one I've been looking for! I found his  
260 address this afternoon, in the electoral roll at the Town Hall.'  
So it was true, he thought; she was tracking him down.  
'Perhaps I will have that drink,' he said, slipping a hand into his jacket pocket.  
She was at the drinks cabinet, her back to him. 'Gin and tonic all right?'  
'Fine.' He pulled out a length of cord. It went round her neck so easily. He did not make a sound as he pulled it tight. Nor did she...  
At the breakfast table next morning Margaret thought Robert looked pale and drawn; there were dark rings round his eyes and he seemed  
270 unusually preoccupied. Clearly he needed a holiday; he was working far too hard at that office.  
She knew it probably would not be much good urging him to take the day off but she decided to try; to her surprise, he agreed.  
'I do have a bit of a migraine, love,' he said.  
'The rest will do you good. I'll ring the office and tell them you're not well.'  
The 'plop' on the mat inside the front door told her the post had arrived. 'I'll go,' she said.  
Two letters. One was Robert's bank statement, the other was for her.  
280 An unfamiliar handwriting.  
She tore it open on her way back to the kitchen. It was a three-page letter, with a snapshot. The sudden shock, as she began to read, made her giddy.  
*... all I had to go on was your maiden name... you'd be surprised how many Margarets with that surname have got married since I was born... it meant checking each one to find if it was the right Margaret...*

She stared at the attractive, fair-haired girl in the snap. Could it be...  
after all these years? It was something she had buried in her  
290 memory, something she had thought would remain buried; but, deep  
down, hadn't she always known she would never be able to escape  
from her past?

*... when I first learned the truth about myself, I was hurt and angry  
... but now that I'm grown up myself, I'm able to understand why  
you did what you did...*

She sat at the table and rested her hands on the scrubbed pine to  
stop them from trembling. She glanced at Robert but he seemed  
unaware of her agitation.

*...finally traced you through your marriage to Robert Smythe... and  
300 now I feel I must meet you... of course, my adoptive parents will  
always be 'Mum' and 'Dad' to me but...*

Blinking back the tears, she heard Robert asking if the letter was bad  
news.

'Bad? Oh no...' Quite the contrary, she thought. But how would her  
husband take it?

The guilt she had borne all those years suddenly overwhelmed her  
and she pushed the snapshot across the table.

'Robert, I don't quite know how to... there's something I've got to tell  
you... something that happened before I met you...'