GOING OVER

Jackie Hunt stared through the living-kitchen window. Rain beat silently on the double glazing and ran off the plastic sill. Through the gap between two blocks of terraced houses in Front Row he saw 'Tink' Bell's allotment and the black shed on his own. Give it fifteen minutes, and a blue patch of sky would cover the village and he could go over.

His thighs leaned on the stainless steel sink's edge, easing the weight on his arthritic knees. He remembered, as a boy, peering through the net-curtained sash window when the rain lashed the glass panes. Palms flat on the cold top of the old stone sink, he had lifted himself onto his tip-toes to see the allotments. His grand-father had said: "Give it a minute or two, lad. Then we'll go over."

There had been eighty allotments in those days, all kept in fine fettle, dug and set in patched rectangles, which stretched away across the Chesterfield to Bolsover road from the mining village which had been built on land owned by William Arkwright, great-grandson of the cotton millionaire. The latter had set up all his sons with big estates. Grand-dad used to say that rhubarb once grew on Arkwright's fruit farm where the village stood.

Jackie had taken over his grand-father's allotment forty years ago, as soon as he and Sarah had married and come to live with the old man. Sarah had looked after his grand-father, and he had looked after the allotment. Quite a pickle it was in. It had got topside Grand-dad Hunt, but he wouldn't let anyone touch it. "It'll wait till our Jackie's ready" and, "It'll not take thee long to sort it, lad. I've mucked it well for fifty years, and tha knows how to go on."

There'd been space across the main road for the allotments and for a recreation field where the senior boys played football and cricket under the stern eye of Mr. Swindell, who took them for games. "Going to the Rec", had been the expression used when in Swindell's charge. Then "Going over", meant using the Rec after tea when school had finished, or on Saturdays when what you did covered many things- gang fights against lads from the other rows, 'kick-can' with those from your own block, scrawming along the black tarred iron pipe that ran beside the Rec on high brick pillars and carried the sewage from the houses after the earth closets went. It was a space with dens in neglected elder and hawthorne hedges, remote from adult eyes.

The Rec had its uses, but the allotments made a space for boys to meet men and learn of a man's world. They were another place you'd "Go over" to, to sit on an old bench and listen to the men on sunny holidays. Jackie remembered the picture called "*The Boyhood of Raleigh*" which had hung on the wall in the scholarship class: the pointing, outstretched arm of the Elizabethan sailor, and the rapt attention of his young listeners.

There was no plundering the gold of the Spanish Main for the sons of miners. It was black gold his dad and other lads' dads dug out of the earth for miles around. There was enough of it to last his dad's time out and his own, as it had lasted his grand-dad's. What the old men said was more convincing to a lad than sailors with tales of pirate gold.

Once there had been sheds on the allotments where pigs and hens were kept, and others for sheltering from the rain, with seats for resting after a hard dig, or simply for looking out on rows of growing vegetables and feeling satisfied. Satisfied that you had decided what would be prepared, set and harvested, not some task dictated by the management, not some task completed as one of a team, thraping away at the hard seam to clear the face for a day's pay while watching each other's backs for safety.

This satisfaction and its importance to you was something you felt but did not express to your mates, except with a meaningful grin, or a phrase like: "Hey up, then!" And certainly not to women. They saw the allotments as a source of fresh vegetables, eggs and, until it was stopped, bacon cured on the pantry slab. It also got the men from under their feet. Outwardly, they were tolerant and easy-going about it. "It's his hobby, you see", they would explain if a man kept pigeons, sharing his pride if he won a cup by racing them. Or: "Well, the fresh air does your Dad good, you know."

The sky was lightening to the south-west, pearling the glass panes of the window in his black allotment shed. Jackie wondered whether to put on his old anorak and risk it, but the rain still poured steadily. He had given his grand-dad a hand in building that shed and its thick creosoted timbers had withstood over forty Derbyshire winters. Four mates who kept adjoining allotments shared it now. It was more of a social place. It had a brick fireplace in one corner with hollow, square breeze blocks won from the colliery for a chimney. There was an old settee and two easy chairs, a piece of carpet on the wooden floor, 'Tink's wife's old china cabinet full of long-dead George Wilkes' collection of Garden Book Club specials from the 1950's, and a 1936 first edition of '*The Culture of the Chrysanthemum*' by Keith Luxford.

The rough, snow-cemmed walls were hung with their 'trophies': an Hawaiian-type 'grass' skirt bought in Skegness for one of Walt's grand-daughters; one of those funny brown glass wine bottles from the Costa Brava which had a tapered spout you held above your gaping mouth, with a wooden cork in the neck to control the flow of the liquid; several faded photographs of pigeons in flight, or landing, and a Derbyshire Federation Diploma for the 1962 Guernsey Race. On a shelf, beside the mugs and teapot, there was an old 'tranny' radio, wanting a new battery, and someone had nailed, deceptively, a redundant 'H' type television aerial to the shed roof.

It was a social place with a special function, similar to one which the tap room of the village pub had, before its conversion to 'Bar Snacks' attracted the women-folk in. Wives kept away from the allotments. Occasionally one would bring a grandchild on the pretext of being out for a walk, simply passing a neutral remark about the look of her husband's vegetables, as if they were the washing on a friend's line. And the men would seem uneasy, their talk about old days in the pits interrupted, resumed only when the woman went. " A bit like t'manager coming on t'face," Walt once observed.

In a way, the shed was an anachronism, its use now ritualistic. There were other sheds on the allotments, though most of them, like the allotments they stood on, were neglected, with doors ajar and walls at crazy angles. The rest were drab and functional, store places for a spade, fork and dibber and, perhaps, a stack of clay plant pots unused for decades. Eleven allotments were still in use: sixty nine were wildernesses.

As many theories were discussed in the black shed about the decline of the allotments as there were in the pub bar about the crime rates. Their use had peaked in the 'Dig For Victory' days of the last war. Then, Jackie's generation of schoolboys were dragooned by the County Education Committee's hastily appointed Horticultural Adviser into doing what, in the eyes of their fathers and grand-dads, came naturally anyway and so was another school skive. Supermarkets were recent scapegoats, with their exotic, hygenically 'fresh' fruits and vegetables from countries overseas. Whose wives would now put up with a bunch of beet with soil still clinging to the roots? Cleaning the produce in an old washing tub with rainwater from the shed roof was a half-hearted attempt to compete with the opposition.

The run-down of the allotments was admittedly part of a more complicated process. People now had cars. They were responsible for the supermarkets. Home comforts and television placed a premium on leisure time. Holidays on the Costa or at Skegness meant neglecting the weeds for two weeks. There were instances of what the sociologists of the 1950's recognised as the growing privatisation of the nuclear family. Without needing to understand that jargon, many of the villagers traced the roots of change to the 1960's when the National Coal Board knocked down the lavatories which stood in the middle of the common yards between the rows and put in bathrooms, while at the same time bull-dozers dug up the open drying yards, put soil and lawns in their place, and fenced off each householder. One hundred and sixty gates now guarded the back doors. Later, they were given the right to buy.

The closure of the local pit, it was generally agreed, knocked some of the stuffing out of the community, though the transfer of miners to and from other pits had already weakened bonds between neighbours. After all, the village's pit was forty years younger than the village. Until it opened in 1938 you worked in the Ell Coal, Deep Hard, or Black Shale seams at nearby Markham colliery sharing one pit-yard, one pay office and, when they opened, the same pithead baths.

Jackie watched the rain now gently pattering on the panes and the wispy edge of the rain-cloud revealing the blue patch of sky. One thing, and one thing only, he knew, was responsible for the death of the allotments. That was the methane.

When the local pit shut, the drifts cut from the surface to give access to its coal seams had been plugged with concrete by the management, and the pumps which drained the workings were stopped. A few months later, a redundant miner noticed that his open fire which burned flameless, smokeless fuel had tongues like gas jets coming from it. British Gas claimed their gas was not leaking and that it was unrefined methane gas. Tests were speedily done and dozens of homes had to be evacuated. After a few days, the authorities let the families return and gas-monitoring apparatus was installed in all suspect homes.

The shadow of the Terror remained. It remained after British Coal denied that the methane was being forced out by the rising water table, though they drilled down into the old workings and put in a pump to suck out the gas. When two years had passed, and some traumatised families had left the village, British Coal put up a huge marquee and called a public meeting.

Still denying any responsibility for the methane problem and "out of sympathy" for the one-time mining community, it offered to knock down the old village and build a new one. Those who had bought their houses would get a new one free. Architects would draw up a plan and villagers would be fully consulted about the type and layout of their new homes. Their old ones, with all their problems and antiquities of design would be replaced by much more valuable ones, each with its garden.

There was a cost for all this to British Coal. But in its magnanimity that enterprise was prepared to foot the bill in exchange for local authority planning permission to opencast four million tons of coal from 417 hectares of farmland around the new village. The new one would be built on the other side of the Chesterfield to Bolsover Road, and would face onto the site of old village whose land would be landscaped for a recreation area. The new site was free from the terror of methane gas. The open-casting would only take ten years. The allotments would have to go of course but, if there was a strong enough demand, land at some distance from the new homes could be given to the District Council for new allotments.

Since then, mused Jackie, another two years had gone by, and this week the allotment holders had been told by letter that they would have to vacate the land after this year's crops were lifted. He had been struck by British Coal's words: "Your family will soon be going over there to live." Like Walt, now dead from pneumoconiosis and heart trouble? Jackie focused again on the gap between the two terraces in Front Row. The rain had stopped. His shed's windows shone with the gold of the afternoon sun. Now he would go over.

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