

# CHRISTOPHER FOWLER



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## TEN-SECOND STAIRCASE



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**To Peter Chapman**  
Hang on, Little Tomato

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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1

## CRADLE TO GRAVE

### MEMORANDUM PRIVATE AND CONFIDENTIAL

Attachments Supplied: 3458SD, 19904KT

**TO:** Leslie Faraday, Senior Home Office Liaison Officer  
**FROM:** Raymond Land, Acting Head, PCU,  
London NW1 3BL  
**DATE:** Monday 17 October

Dear Mr Faraday,

Thank you for your correspondence of 26 September requesting further details concerning my tenure at the North London Peculiar Crimes Unit.

If I understand you correctly, you wish me to outline the recent problems I have experienced at this unit from a personal perspective. While I am loath to commit myself in writing over such a delicate matter, and dislike 'telling tales' on staff members despite their extreme lack of cooperation over the last few months, I feel the time has come to unburden myself to someone in a position of higher authority. In short, Mr Faraday, I can

11

no longer maintain my silence. I have simply reached the end of my tether.

I appreciate that, as the 'new broom' at HO Special Services Liaison, taking over from HMCO Liaison DCI Stanley Marsden, you must have a great deal of background material to study. I shall therefore attempt to save you some work by summarizing our current situation.

The Peculiar Crimes Unit was founded, along with a handful of other specialist departments, soon after the outbreak of World War II, as part of a government initiative to ease the burden on London's overstretched Metropolitan Police Force by tackling high-profile cases which had the capacity to compound social problems in urban areas. The crimes falling within its remit were often of a politically sensitive nature, or could potentially cause social panics and general public malaise. The division's civilian counterpart at that time was the Central Therapy Unit, set up to help the bereaved and the homeless cope with the psychological stress of war. This unit closed after just eleven months because bombed-out residents continued turning to their neighbours for support rather than visiting qualified specialists. There was also, if memory serves, an experimental propaganda division called the Central Information Service (later to become the COI), which provided positive, uplifting news items to national newspapers in order to combat hearsay and harmful disinformation spread about our overseas forces, and to fill the void left by the blanket news blackouts. The PCU proved more successful than either of these, and remained in operation through the war.

I am led to believe that the title 'peculiar' was originally meant in the sense of 'particular', as the government's plan was that the new unit should handle those cases deemed uniquely sensitive and a high risk to

public morale. To head this division, several extremely young and inexperienced students were recruited. One must remember that this was a time of desperation, when most able-bodied men had been taken into the armed forces, and a great many experimental ideas were proposed by the Churchill government, including the employment of Dennis Wheatley, the horror-story writer, as a member of the war cabinet.

A number of successful prosecutions were brought by the Peculiar Crimes Unit in the years that followed, with the result that the unit continued its work into peacetime. The rebuilding of Britain required the suppression of those prosecutions deemed too negative for public knowledge (a fifty-year embargo being placed on sensitive war reports), and many cases handled by the PCU at this time remained *sub judice*.

In order to provide continuity, the sons and daughters of original staff members were recruited, so that the founding team was largely replaced with new employees, but two gentlemen remained in their old positions. I refer, of course, to Mr Arthur Bryant and Mr John May (see attached file 3458SD). This is where the problem starts, for both of them, despite their advanced age, are still here at the unit. They stayed on because the unit granted them a high degree of autonomy, and their specialist knowledge, plus their refusal to accept promotion and determination to continue tackling crime at street level, won them the allegiance of young incoming staff in the Metropolitan Police Force. In years to come, as their supporters moved to positions of power, these loyalties proved useful to the detectives.

I know that the PCU has lately had some success in solving crimes that have come to the attention of the general public. I am also aware that its most senior detectives are highly respected and can offer an

enormous amount of experience between them, but their manner is disruptive and their behaviour – certainly in terms of efficient, modern crime management – is unorthodox and damaging to the image of the national policing network.

Cases like that of the ‘Deptford Demon’, and their long-running investigation into the murders of young women committed by the so-called ‘Leicester Square Vampire’, last sighted in 1975, brought the PCU into disrepute. Their working practices proved questionable and the case remains unsolved to this day. The unit’s brief is admittedly unusual; their cases rarely provide the opportunity to follow direct leads and named suspects, but their methodology is regarded as altogether too vague, intellectual, socialist and downright arty by those who work on the ‘coal face’ of crime, an image the detectives have sought to foster rather than disabuse.

Heaven knows I am no intellectual, but even I can tell that these gentlemen would be better employed as academics rather than police officers. Mr May once told me that he could be loosely termed a follower of someone called Jean-Jacques Rousseau, a rational progressive who sometimes placed feeling over reason, but Mr Bryant’s philosophical attitude towards criminal investigation is more complex and troubling; although enlightened and well-read, a ‘cold fish’ who rarely empathizes with victims of crime, he is quite prepared to resort to the kind of Counter-Enlightenment mysticism that allows some rationalists to believe in ley-lines and crystal healing when it suits them. Simply stated, Mr Bryant and Mr May are completely out of touch with the problems of today’s youth. Elderly people rarely commit crimes; how can they possibly hope to understand what is happening on the streets of London any more?

The general public must be able to feel that their lives are in safe hands. As you know, not long ago Mr Bryant accidentally blew up his own unit. Subsequently he managed to get himself shut in a sewer, and nearly died. His partner has had one heart attack, and flagrantly defies doctor's orders to lead a less stressful working life. Nor does he help our image by conducting a very public affair with a married woman. The pair keep irregular hours, behave and dress oddly, and encourage everyone else in their employ to do the same. Detective Sergeant Janice Longbright seems to model herself on Diana Dors, the fifties Rank film starlet, and comes to work in the most extraordinarily provocative outfits. I sometimes wonder if we're running a police unit or an escort agency.

Neither Mr Bryant nor Mr May believe in traditional hierarchy. They speak to their colleagues as equals, and frequently ask advice from the most inexperienced members of staff. Obviously, this will not do. Mr Bryant took his exams a very long time ago, and is unwilling to entertain the idea of modern police procedure. He's always *touching* things; it's only luck that prevents half his cases from being thrown out of court due to cross-contamination of evidence. The criminal world has altered drastically since his time. Even constables are required to pass exams in criminal law, traffic law and general police duties, but Mr Bryant has somehow been granted immunity from evaluation tests. He has repeatedly refused to take his Objective Structured Performance Related Examination, and deliberately falsifies results from his continuous appraisals.

Of course, the national police force now operates under a regime of openness and transparency, but Mr Bryant prefers to keep his superiors in the dark because he says 'it is simpler for them to understand nothing'.



As you know, my own background is in forensic sciences. When I sought promotion to a more senior decision-making role, I was brought into this unit as Acting Head. As the title implies, I did not expect to remain in the position for more than three months.

That was in 1973. I am still here, still awaiting a transfer.

By the time I joined, the Peculiar Crimes Unit had become very peculiar indeed. It could be likened to a doctors' surgery that had abandoned traditional pharmaceutical treatments for alternative therapies. Over time, these therapies became more extreme, until we have reached a point where it seems quite normal for Mr Bryant to ignore empirical data in favour of hiring a clairvoyant to search for a missing person. Mr May is not much better; his investigation into pagan elementals a few months ago did result in the capture of a wanted criminal, but he still destroyed a section of the Regent's Canal in the process, and the case appears to have involved a mass break-out of illegal immigrants from King's Cross which both he and his partner aided and abetted.

The bizarre behaviour of these geriatric detectives seems to infect those working around them, so that I am made to seem the 'odd man out'. I am openly ridiculed and humiliated. Mr Bryant's experiments, conducted without any safety precautions, are both questionable and dangerous. My instructions are disobeyed, my reputation has been irreversibly damaged, and my office wallpaper has been ruined.

Both Mr Bryant and Mr May are beyond statutory retirement age and show no inclination to leave. No one seems to know quite how old they are, as their files were apparently lost in the fire that destroyed their old offices, but I am reliably informed that Mr Bryant is three years older than his counterpart. Mr May is

certainly the more amenable of the pair, possessing a relatively youthful outlook. He is at least partially familiar with technological advances in the field of crime detection, but Mr Bryant is quite impossible to deal with. In the last eighteen months he has destroyed or lost seventeen mobile phones and several laptop computers. How he managed to re-program the unit's main police transmitter frequency so that it could only receive selections from *The Pirates of Penzance* is a mystery we have yet to solve.

Speaking frankly, he is offensive, awkward, argumentative and unhygienic. He flatly refuses to follow procedural guidelines, and constantly leaves the unit open to legal prosecution. He insists on employing the services of non-professionals, including disgraced experts, discredited psychics, registered felons, unstable extremists, tree-huggers, witches, children, itinerants, actors, practitioners of quasi-religions and various 'creative' types.

Mr Bryant's informants include those on the wrong side of the law, outpatients, migrants, fringe dwellers not recognized as reliable witnesses in a British court of law, and, on at least one occasion, a convicted murderer. He refuses to document his investigations in accordance with official guidelines, his office is little more than a rubbish dump, his personal habits are disgusting and, I suspect, illegal. He smokes and drinks on duty, abuses official property, requisitions police vehicles for personal use, falsifies reports, and on one occasion borrowed clothes awaiting DNA tests from the Evidence Room in order to attend a fancy-dress party. He has an infested Tibetan human skull on his desk and has been known to keep animal parts in the unit's refrigerator for experiments.

Unfortunately, these transgressions cannot be dealt with through the usual disciplinary channels because,

technically speaking, the unit is no longer part of the Metropolitan Police, and now falls under your jurisdiction. However, I am informed (by Mr Bryant himself) that you have no power over staff employed before the revised Official Security Act of 1962.

My work at the unit is personally humiliating. Whenever I attempt to exert some kind of control over him, Mr Bryant plays practical jokes on me. He once convinced me that my wife had taken a French lover, which had a disastrous effect on my marriage. Heaven knows, I like a joke as much as the next man, but in this case the next man happened to be my counterpart at the Sûreté, and did not take kindly to being accused of adultery. In short, Mr Bryant acts as if the serious business of solving crime is a children's game. Lately I have begun to wonder if he has developed a strange form of senility. Mr May frequently takes his partner's side against me. I know they are laughing behind my back. They practise nepotism, favouritism, and, in Mr Bryant's case, occasional witchcraft. The mother of their detective sergeant was formerly in their employ, and now it appears that Mr May's granddaughter, a girl with a history of psychological problems, is to join the unit. Mr Bryant and Mr May are not just representatives of the law, they are old people, and it is time for them to move on.

Which is why I would like to recommend a psychiatric evaluation report on the pair of them. If their incompetence can be officially proven (as I very much suspect to be the case) then I will finally be able to replace them with younger, more technologically literate unit supervisors. Mr Bryant's and Mr May's consistent refusal of promotion is a ruse that has allowed them to operate 'hands on' as detectives through most of their cases. An evaluation could perhaps recommend they be transferred to positions of part-time consultancy, where

they would not come into direct contact with criminal investigations, and would only have powers in a reduced advisory capacity. Mr Bryant refers to himself as a 'cradle-to-grave' law officer and, in short, I think it is time he headed for his grave.

For some unearthly reason, both Mr Bryant and Mr May command an almost fanatical loyalty among the rest of the PCU staff. Therefore I am sure you appreciate the need for absolute discretion in this matter.

I remain,

Yours sincerely,

Raymond Land

Acting Head of the Peculiar Crimes Unit (1973–present day)

## 2

### SMALL PROVOCATIONS

'I hope you're not going to be rude and upset everyone again.'

Detective Sergeant Janice Longbright examined her boss for signs of disarray. She scraped some egg from his creased green tie with a crimson nail, and grudgingly granted her approval.

Arthur Bryant took a deep breath and folded his notes back into his jacket. 'I see nothing wrong with speaking my mind. After all, it is a special occasion.' He fixed his DS with a beady, unforgiving eye. 'I rarely get invited to make speeches. People always think I'm going to be insulting. I've never upset anyone before.'

'Perhaps I could remind you of the Mayor's banquet at Mansion House? You told the assembly he had herpes.'

'I said he had a hairpiece. It was a misquote.'

'Well, just remember how overwrought you can get at these events. Did you remember to take your blue pills?' Longbright suspected he had forgotten them, because the tablet box was still poking out of his top pocket. 'The doctor warned you it would be easy to muddle them up - '

'I don't need a nurse, thank you. I'll take them afterwards. I haven't quite drifted into senility yet.'

Unlike most men, Bryant did not look smarter in a suit. His outfit was several decades out of date and too long in the leg. His shirt collar was far wider than his neck, and the white nimbus of his hair floated up around his prominent ears as though he had been conducting electrical experiments. Overall, he looked like a soon-to-be-pulped Tussauds waxwork.

Peering out through a gap in the curtains at the sea of gold-trimmed navy blazers, Sergeant Longbright saw that the auditorium was now entirely filled with pupils. 'It's a very well-heeled audience, Arthur,' she reported back. 'Boys only, that can't be very healthy. All between the ages of fifteen and seventeen, I'd say. I don't imagine they'll be much interested in crime prevention. You'll have to find a way of reaching them.'

'Teenagers are suspicious of anyone over twenty,' Bryant admitted, brushing tobacco strands from his lapel, 'so how will they feel about me? I thought there were going to be more adults here. Children can smell lies, you know. Their warning flags unfurl at the slightest provocation. A hint of condescension and they bob up like meerkats. Contrary to popular belief, they're more naturally astute than so-called grown-ups. The whole of one's adult life is a gradual process of dulling the senses, Janice. Look how young we were when we started at the PCU, little more than children ourselves. But we were firing on all synapses, awake to the world.'

Longbright brushed his shoulders with maternal propriety. 'Raymond Land says the sensitive are incapable of action. He reckons we need more thick-skinned recruits.'

'Which is why our acting chief would be better employed in parking control, or some public service which you could train a moderately attentive bottle-nosed dolphin to perform.' Bryant had little patience with those who frowned on his abstract methods. Critics offered him nothing. They made the most senior detective of London's Peculiar Crimes

Unit as irritable as a wasp in a bottle and as stubborn as a doorstep.

‘They are waiting to take your picture for the school magazine. They’ve seen you on TV, don’t forget. You’re a bit of a celebrity these days. Show me how you look.’ Longbright jerked his tie a little straighter and pulled his sleeves to length. ‘Good enough, I suppose. I need photographic evidence of you in a suit, even though it’s thirty years old. Make sure you stick to Raymond’s brief and talk about the specifics of crime prevention. Don’t forget the CAPO initiative – we have to reach them while they’re in the highest risk category.’ Seventeen-year-olds were more likely to become victims of street crime than any other population segment. Their complex pattern of allegiance to different urban tribes was more confusing than French court etiquette – territorial invasion, lack of respect, the wrong clothes, the wrong ethnicity, attitudes exaggerated by hormones, chemistry, geography and simple bad timing.

‘My notes are a little more abstract than Raymond might wish,’ Bryant warned.

Longbright threw him a hopeless look. ‘I thought he vetted your script.’

‘I meant to run it by him last night, but I’d promised to drive Alma to her sister’s in Tooting. She fell off her doorstep while she was red-leading it, and needed a bread poultice for her knee.’

‘Surely the head of the department ranks above your landlady.’

‘Not in terms of intelligence, I assure you.’

‘You should have shown him what you’re planning to say, Arthur. You know how concerned he is about the media attention we’ve been receiving.’

The unit had lately been the subject of a television documentary, and not all of the press articles following in its wake had been complimentary.

‘I couldn’t stick to Raymond’s guidelines on the history of crimefighting because I don’t want to talk down to my audience. They’re supposed to be smart kids, the top five per cent of the education system. I don’t want them to get fidgety.’

‘Just fix them with that angry stare of yours. Go on – everyone’s waiting for you.’

The elderly detective took an unsteady step forward and balked. He could feel a cold wall of expectancy emanating from the crowded auditorium. The hum of audience conversation parried his determination, stranding him at the edge of the stage.

‘What’s the matter now?’ asked Longbright, exasperated.

‘No one in our family was good with the young,’ Bryant wavered. ‘When I was little, my father tried to light a cigarette while holding me and a pint of bitter, and burned the top of my head. All of our childhood problems were sorted out with a clout round the ear. It’s a wonder I can name the kings of England.’

‘Don’t view them as youngsters, Arthur, they’re at the age when they think they know everything, so talk to them as if they do. The head teacher has already introduced you. They’ll start slow handclapping if you don’t get out there.’ It occurred to her that because Bryant had attended a lowly state school in Whitechapel, he might actually be intimidated by appearing before an exclusive group of private pupils from upper-middle-class homes.

Bryant dragged out his dog-eared notes and smoothed them nervously. ‘I’d have thought John could at least come here to support me.’

‘You know he had a hospital appointment, now stop making a fuss.’ She placed a broad hand in the small of his back and gently propelled him on to the stage.

Bryant stepped unsteadily into the spotlight, encouraged by a line of welcoming teachers. Having recently achieved a level of public fame for his capture of the Water Room



killer, he knew he should enjoy his moment of recognition, but today he felt exposed and vulnerable.

The detective wiped his watery blue eyes and surveyed the hall of pale varnished oak from the podium. Absurdly youthful faces lifted to study him, and he saw the great age gulf that lay between lectern and audience. How could he ever expect to reach them? He remembered the war; they would not remember the 1980s. The sea of blue and gold, the expensive haircuts, the low sussurance of well-educated voices, teachers standing at the end of every third row like benign prison guards. It was surprisingly intimidating.

Most of the students had broken off their conversation to acknowledge his arrival, but some were still chatting. He fired a rattling cough into the microphone, a magnified explosion that echoed into a squeal of feedback. Now they ceased talking and looked up in a single battalion, assessing him.

He could feel the surf of confidence radiating from these bored young men, and knew he would have to work for their attention. The boys of St Crispin's were not here to offer him respect; he was in their employ, and they would choose to listen, or ignore him. For one terrifying second, the power of the young was palpable. Bryant was an outsider, an interloper. He rustled his notes and began to speak.

'My name is Arthur Bryant,' he told them unsteadily, 'and together with my partner John May I run a small detective division known as the Peculiar Crimes Unit.' He settled his gaze in the centre of the audience, focussing on the most insolent and jaded faces. 'Time moves fast. When the unit was first founded, much detection work was still based on Victorian principles. Anything else was untried and experimental. We were one of several divisions created in a new spirit of innovation. Because we're mainly academics, we don't use traditional law-enforcement methods. We are not a part of the Met; they are hard-working, sensible men and women who handle the daily fall-out of poverty and

hardship. The PCU doesn't deal with life's failures. The criminals we hunt have already proven successful.' His attention locked on a group of four boys who seemed on the verge of tuning out from his lecture. He found himself departing from the script in order to speak directly to them. He raised his voice.

'Let's take an example. Say one of you lads in the middle there gets burgled at home. The police handle cases in order of priority, just like doctors. They send a beat constable or a mobile uniformed officer around to ask you for details of the break-in and a list of what's missing. They are not trained as investigative detectives, so you have to wait for a specialist to take fingerprints, which they'll try to match with those of a registered felon. If they don't get a match, your loss is merely noted and set against the chance of the future recovery of your goods – a possibility that shrinks with each passing day. The system only works for its best exemplars. But at the Peculiar Crimes Unit, we adopt a radically different approach.' As he still seemed to have their attention, Bryant decided to forge ahead.

'We ask ourselves a fundamental question: what is a crime? How far does its moral dimension extend? Is it simply an act that works against the common good? If you are starving and steal from a rich man's larder, should you be punished less than if you were not hungry? All crime is driven by some kind of need. Once, those needs were simple: food, shelter, warmth, the basic assurances of survival. We can predict the sad lives of many criminals as surely as if they were specimens in a Petri dish. Let's imagine a boy like any one of you, but born on a run-down estate. His family is poor, he never knows his real father and is beaten up by his stepfather, he's trouble at school, a nuisance on the streets, put into care, abused, arrested by the time he's ten, in custody at the age of fifteen. He'll be lucky if he makes it to thirty. But he's not unique. Our prisons are full of such people. But as soon as our needs are taken care of,

new crimes appear within society. There were over eleven thousand cases of gun crime in Britain last year, and nearly 30 per cent of all schoolchildren have carried a knife at some time. As we become more sophisticated, so do the reasons for our misdeeds. Once we are warm and fed and properly raised, we covet something more complex: power. Spending power, power over others, the power to be noticed. And sometimes that power can be achieved by violating the accepted laws of the land. So criminal sophistication requires sophisticated methods of detection. That's where specialist units like ours come in. Think of internet fraud, and you'll find it is being matched by equally subtle methods of detection that require as much knowledge as the criminal's. I'm sure you boys know far more about the internet than your parents, but does that place you at less of a risk?

*He's off to a decent start, thought Longbright from the wings. A bit all over the place, but no doubt he'll draw it all together and make his point.*

'Fraud, robbery, assault and murder are all cause-and-effect crimes requiring carefully targeted treatment. But all modern lawlessness carries the seeds of a strange paradox within it, for just as ancient crimes appear in cunning new versions, others appear entirely unmotivated. One thinks of vandalism. Some will have you believe it was invented in the postwar period, but not so. Acts of vandalism have been recorded in every sophisticated civilization; the defacing of statues was common in ancient Rome. Now, though, we are reaching a new peak of motiveless transgression. Criminality has once more assumed the kind of dark edge that existed in London during the eighteenth century. London was always the home of mob rule. The public voiced their opinions about whether it was right for a man to hang just as much as the judge. The joyous assembly would jeer or cheer a prisoner's final speech at Tyburn's triple tree. They would choose to condemn a wrongdoer or venerate him. Pamphlets filled with prints and poems would be produced in his

honour. He would achieve lasting fame as a noble champion, his exploits retold as brave deeds, and there was nothing that governments could do to prevent it. Criminals became celebrities because they were seen to be fighting the old order, kicking back at an oppressive system.’ Bryant eyed his audience like a pirate frightening cabin boys with tales of dancing skeletons. ‘Often, thieves’ necks would fail to break when they were dropped from the Tyburn gallows, and the crowd would cut down a half-hanged man to set him free, because they felt he had paid for his crimes. They rioted against the practice of passing bodies over to the anatomists, and pelted bungling hangmen with bricks. If a murderer conducted himself nobly as he ascended the gallows stairs, he would become more respected than his accusers. But time has robbed us of these gracious renegades. Last week, less than a quarter of a mile from here, in Smithfield, a schoolboy was stabbed through the heart for his mobile phone. An elderly man on a tube platform in Holborn was kicked to death for bumping into someone. The criminals who perpetrate these acts are not to be venerated.’

A murmur of recollection rippled through the auditorium.

‘Statistics show that the nature of English crime is reverting to its oldest form. In a country where so many desire status and wealth, petty annoyances can spark disproportionately violent behaviour. We become frustrated because we feel powerless, invisible, unheard. We crave celebrity, but that’s not easy to come by, so we settle for notoriety. Envy and bitterness drive a new breed of law-breakers, replacing the old motives of poverty and the need for escape. But how do you solve crimes which no longer have traditional motives?’

*He’s still got their attention*, thought Longbright, feeling for a chair at the side of the stage. *Let’s hope he remembers to talk about Raymond’s initiatives and can get all the way through without saying anything offensive*. She knew how

volatile her boss could be, but now was the time for him to exercise restraint. For once, the fortunes of the Peculiar Crimes Unit were on the rise. Indeed, they had been ever since a remarkable murder in a quiet North London street had placed them all in the public eye. Arthur's partner, John May, had appeared on a late-night programme discussing the importance of the case with several bad-tempered social commentators, a number of articles in the *Guardian* and *The Times* had examined the case in detail, government funding for the coming year had miraculously appeared, and mercifully no one outside the unit knew the reality of the case's conclusion; if they did, Longbright doubted that any of them would have survived with their careers intact. Arthur Bryant's decision to break the law in order to close the investigation had been so contentious that Longbright had turned down the BBC's offer to feature her in their film, in case she accidentally let slip the truth.

Basking in the glow of publicity, Bryant had been asked to deliver a lecture to St Crispin's Boys School, the exclusive private academy founded by a devout Christian group in 1653 in St John Street, Clerkenwell, and had shyly accepted.

Longbright turned her attention back to the stage.

'What we have here is a fundamental alteration in the definition of morality,' Bryant argued. 'What does it now mean to have a moral conscience? Do we need to develop different values from those of our parents? Most of you think you can distinguish right from wrong, but morality requires information to feed it, so you build your own internal moral system from the intelligence you receive, probably the hardest thing anyone ever has to do, judging by the number of times the system fails.'

'In London's rural suburbs, not far from here, middle-class Thames Valley towns like Weybridge and Henley are awash with a new kind of malicious cruelty. Here the system appears to be failing. The criminals are not suffering inner-city deprivation, nor are they gang members protecting their

turf through internecine wars based on divisions in ethnicity. They are wealthy white males facing futures filled with opportunities. So why are they turning to unprovoked violence and murder? Part of a generation has somehow become unmoored from its foundations, and no one knows how to draw it back from the harmful shallows. You all face complex pressures, problems that gentlemen of my advanced age are scarcely able to imagine. From the day you were born, someone has been targeting you as a potential market. Your attention has become fragmented. You are offered no solitude, no peace, no time for reflection. You are forced to create your own methods of escape. Some choose alcohol and narcotics, others form social cliques that combat the status quo. All of you in this hall are in danger. Many people of my age would suggest that you desire to break the law not because you've had a hard time growing up, but because you haven't. You've been spoiled with everything you ever wanted, but you still want more.'

*He's forgotten the script, Longbright worried, and he's stabbing his finger at them. At this rate he'll have them throwing things at him.* Some of the pupils were fidgeting in annoyance. They were clearly uncomfortable with the hectoring tenor of Bryant's sermon. The old detective hadn't given a lecture in years, and had forgotten the importance of keeping the audience on his side. *Keep it light in tone but heavy on factual data,* Land had warned. *Be positive but don't say anything controversial. Remember, their parents are fee-paying voters with a lot of clout.*

Bryant's raised voice brought her back to attention. 'Well, I don't believe that,' he was saying. 'Children today have a far more complicated time growing up than I ever did. At the Peculiar Crimes Unit, we have the time and capability to see beyond stock answers and standard procedures. We claw our way to the roots of the crime, and by understanding its cause, we hope to provide solutions.'

As the audience half-heartedly pattered their hands,

Longbright rose and made her way to the rear of the hall, where she accepted a polystyrene cup of coffee. Only the question-and-answer session was left now. Longbright had tried to talk her superior out of holding one, bearing in mind his capacity for argument, but half a dozen teenagers had already raised their hands. There was a palpable attitude of aggression and defiance in the pupils' body language.

'You say it's a question of morals,' said a pale, elongated boy with layered blond hair.

'Stand up and give your surname,' barked the teacher at the end of the row.

The boy unfolded himself from his seat with difficulty and faced the audience. 'Sorry, Sir. Gosling.' He turned to Bryant. 'Are you saying we're the ones who commit crimes because we lack a moral code?'

'Of course not,' Bryant replied. 'I'm just saying that it's understandable you're confused. You know that trainers are made in Korea for starvation wages, so you buy a pair from a company promising to make their product locally for a fair price. Then you discover that the company you chose destroyed ancient farmland to build their factory. How do you feel about your purchase now? You've been lied to, so why shouldn't you commit a victimless crime and steal them? You're given horrible role models, your divorced parents are having sex with people you hate and have given up caring what you do, you're expected to take an interest in the lifestyles of singers who'll make more money than you will ever see. It's no wonder you start taking drugs and behaving like animals.'

The hall erupted. Longbright covered her face with her hands. Bryant had never been much of a diplomat.

A small lad with a pustular complexion rose sharply. 'Parfitt. You just don't like the fact that we're young, and still have a chance to change the world your contemporaries wrecked for us.'

A heavy set boy with shiny red cheeks, cropped black hair

and bat ears jumped angrily to attention. 'That's right, we're the ones—'

'Surname,' barked his master, leaning angrily forward.

'Jezzard – you always blame the young, but we're the ones who'll have to correct the mistakes of the older generation.'

'My dear boy, don't you see that you no longer possess the means for changing the world?' replied Bryant, adopting a tone of infuriating airiness. 'You've been disempowered, old chap. It's all over. The things you desire have become entirely unattainable, and you take revenge for that by being angry with your seniors all the time.'

Another boy, slender and dark, with deep-set eyes and narrow teeth, launched to his feet. 'You're accusing us when you know nothing about us, Mr Bryant – nothing!'

'*Name!*' squealed the teacher at the end of the row.

'Billings. It's not us who's the problem, it's you. Everyone knows the police are corrupt racists –'

Now several more pupils stood up together, all speaking at once. Their teachers continued to demand that they identify themselves, but were ignored. Sides were swiftly being taken. Bryant had managed to divide the hall into factions. He threw up his hands in protest as the pupils barracked him.

'You condescend to us because you don't have a clue –'

'You victimize those who can't protect themselves –'

'Why is it that young people never want to take responsibility for their actions?' protested Bryant, as students popped up from their chairs in every section of the hall.

'Just because you messed up your own society –'

'Why should we be blamed for your greed when –'

'We're just starting out,' shouted Parfitt, 'and you're trying to make us sound as cynical as you.'

'I am not cynical, I simply know better,' Bryant insisted, trying to be heard. 'And I can tell from experience exactly how many of you will fall by the wayside and die before you



progress to adulthood, because the cyclical nature of your short lives is as immutable as that of a dragonfly.'

There were so many things wrong with this last sentence that the detective sergeant could not bear to reflect on it, and could only watch the response helplessly. The lanky boy, Gosling, was the first to kick back his chair and leave. His friends quickly followed suit. The questionable authority of the teachers collapsed entirely as chairs were knocked over, causing a defiant ripple that quickly spread throughout the hall.

Longbright had been worried that Raymond Land might get to hear of the debacle. Now she was more concerned about getting Bryant out in one piece.