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Steering Round the Bend

by

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ONE

BILL SMITH WAS A CONVERT to eco-driving. His nearly new Honda Jazz had a dial on the dashboard which told him how many miles he was driving per gallon, and it proved to be an instrument of change. Put his foot down to overtake, or change into low gear to spurt up a hill, and he could see himself drop decimal point by decimal point. Stay in fifth gear and cling to a steady speed in the low fifties and he could make the twenty miles to work on a third of a gallon.

It also gave him time to appreciate the hawthorn blossom which daubed the hedgerows on both sides. It was shockingly white against the blue sky. The verges at the side of the road were a luscious grass green, ornamented where they met the hedge by occasional bluebells, pink campion, primroses, and stitchwort. Ahead of him the road was dry, smooth, and empty of traffic.

Behind him, half a dozen drivers jockeyed into position, shifted down a gear, edged out into the middle of the road for a quick risk assessment, revved and spurted, then thought better of the approaching bend, braked and ducked back in line.

Bill swept into roundabouts with minimum pause, put the clutch in at the top of Corve Rise for a free ride down to the edge of town, and extended no courtesies to people trying to join the flow on the last stretch through suburbia. He was aware that drivers raging on brake and accelerator behind him would be getting far worse mileage as a result, but he took the view that change never happened unless determined individuals led by example.

He swung into the staff car park in neutral, with just enough momentum to carry him over a speed bump and into a marked parking bay. Over six hundred people worked at the council's headquarters and the vast majority came by car, but there were always spare spaces this early in the morning. A woman from the personnel team pulled up next to him and smiled sweetly through the glass of two windows. People usually smiled at Bill and he usually smiled back.

He lingered behind the wheel to catch the eight o'clock headlines on the Today programme. There had been an explosion in Afghanistan and a shooting in Leeds; another earthquake in China; looming famine in Madhya Pradesh; and scientists said new evidence suggested the arctic icecap was melting even faster than indicated by last month's new evidence. He switched to Radio Covinshire. The top livestock market prices and weather forecast always came first, on the hour, so he was just in time for the local news headlines which followed. Firemen had spent four hours cutting free a cocker spaniel that had got stuck in a culvert; the once-a-day bus service from Culpington to Market Arkholme was facing the axe because only two people used it; and the Leader of Covinshire Council said he was going to write to the Education Minister complaining about the level of funding for the

county's schools. He switched off the radio, scooped up his briefcase, lunchbox, and jacket, and headed for the building.

His route crossed paths with Archie Jones from the audit office. News for Archie was a headteacher with his fingers in the school fund, or highways engineers emailing biggest-tits-ever pictures round the office at lunchtime.

"Morning, Bill. Going to be another scorcher."

"Yes, lovely." Bill hated the gripes on mornings like this about why no one was lobbying the joint consultative committee for air conditioning.

He brushed his left trouser pocket against the security-pass reader and the door swished open for him. That was another point-something of a watt wasted. He'd asked the question and drafted a piece for the staff magazine saying how much the council would save if staff opened doors manually, but the committee had vetoed it. Wheelchair users needed power assistance, so it was power assistance for everyone.

"Morning, Bill," said the new woman behind main reception whose name he hadn't learned yet. She smiled as per customer service protocol – he ran one of the sessions on the induction course -- flicked a button, and the half doors leading through to the lift swung open. He went in and pressed the button for the sixth floor. He took the stairs, on average, half the time, the message being that everyone should do what they can, and a half step is better than no step at all. The doors slid shut and up he went. When the doors opened again, he stepped out and straight out into the copying room, where the drinks stuff waited. He set up a cup of fairtrade coffee, opened his laptop, and tapped on the keys while the black stuff dripped through.

Press Information issued by Covinshire Council

A new record has been set by a member of staff at Covinshire Council for eco-driving to work, it was announced today.

Bill Smith, 41, drove 20 miles from his home in Duckowby to the council's headquarters in Covinton achieving a record fuel consumption of 60.7 miles per gallon.

Celia Drinkwater, Covinshire Council's Cabinet member for Sustainability, said, "As the Council's Press Officer, Bill Smith has been promoting our environmentally friendly policies and practices to local people for the past fifteen years. Now he is leading by example. I'm sure others, both here at the council and out in the wider community, will want to follow his lead, and will hopefully set even higher records as we meet the crucially important challenge of reducing our carbon footprint."

Bill Smith said, "I just wanted to show what one individual can achieve when he is prepared to put old habits aside and really change his behaviour."

ENDS

Bill poured his coffee and checked his diary: four meetings and a retirement presentation. That was a good framework on which to hang the endless stream of urgent, unpredictable enquiries from the media -- and the demands from his colleague officers and councillors, despite his perennial efforts to show how successful public relations were best managed, that he turn excuse into explanation, delay into deliberation, drizzle into glitter. He sighed deeply, picked up his phone to make his first call of the day to the Covinshire Evening Mail, and pressed delete on his laptop.

ANNIE CLARKE, almost in her thirties and struggling on her latest chosen path in life despite having earned her Diploma in Marketing only the month before, settled in comfortably two cars behind a metallic blue Honda Jazz.

The Jazz was infuriating everyone else on the road on this blissful spring morning. It was being driven so teasingly slowly that the Ford Mondeo in front of her, and the half dozen vehicles behind, were straining, jostling, and whipping themselves up into a rage.

The issue, Annie mused in a meditative way as part of her strategy for keeping calm, was that society needed to adjust to the fact that the population in Covinshire was aging, dramatically. Somebody had to market the fact that Covinshire's roads were filling up with over-seventies and over-eighties, all out in the sunshine behind the wheel, their eyesight shrivelling and their reaction times multiplying. Thank goodness they didn't need to get to work on time or kids to school before the bell, or the roads would be truly dangerous.

But why 'Jazz'? Annie asked herself, as she reached to the radio and turned off 'Thought for the day'. Every car manufacturer has copied it, but it was Honda that made the granddaddy of them all – the ultimate, paradigm-shifting, old-person-looking car, all 1200cc of it, hunchbacked and bandy-legged, an icon for modern rural Covinshire -- and their marketing team came up with 'Jazz'. Words flew at her: jazz is black, jazz is America; jazz is jive, swing, bebop, boogie-woogie. Maybe "old" was the new jazz. Maybe she was too honest – no, too straightforward, too boring – for marketing after all. It would be a good essay question: 'The marketing of the Jazz and the new generation of old-people's cars – driving or jiving?' She regretted, not for the first time, that she had finished college – again – and had left behind the gang of fellow students of which she had always been a popular, if not leading, member, for the solitary business of finding a job.

Then she turned, letting the van behind her spurt forward briefly and move up one in the chain on the choke of the blue Jazz. She left the highway for a tiny lane that led eventually to the gates of Burnet Hall. She wished she could convince herself that they were about to open on the rest of her life.

An elderly man whose movements rasped of arthritis in every joint hobbled from the door of the lodge house and struggled to slide back a bolt on the gates. Annie thought about getting out and helping, but the driveway consisted of a stony track half submerged in puddles and she was wearing her one and only pair of high heels. Instead she reinforced her decision to go for the sophisticated look and refreshed her lipstick in the mirror behind her sun visor. Then she wound down her window.

"I'm here for a job interview. Sorry I'm a bit late. I was stuck in traffic."

"Maggie'll understand," the old man muttered. "She's been stuck all her life."

An adolescent boy tumbled out of the lodge carrying a laptop and struggling into a tattered old Harris Tweed jacket.

"But time is running out, G-Gramps. That's what Grandma says all the time now." He thrust his head close to Annie's open window and said quietly, "No need to hurry really. But can you give me a lift? Make each other's acquaintance?" He dashed round to the other side of the car, and then was seated beside her, slightly out of breath, smelling of something domestic out of her childhood; spearmint toothpaste overlaid with antiseptic ointment.

"I'm Annie Clarke. I've come for an interview for the post of Marketing Manager."

"And I'm Jeremy. Very pleased to meet you."

She put the car in first gear and edged forward, carefully negotiating potholes.

"Who's Maggie?"

"My Grandmother."

"Would that be Lady Margaret Burnet?"

He muttered a minimally affirmative "hmpf".

Annie took a serious look at the boy next to her, and the car lurched, and then stalled. There was something adolescent about his manner, but now she saw the serious stubble on his chin, and the width of his chest beneath the ill-fitting jacket, and guessed he was into his twenties. She quickly characterised him as cocky aristocrat slumming it with a deeper purpose, and made a mental note to be cautious.

She concentrated on steering her course and he remained stubbornly silent. She was determined not to give him whatever kind of advantage it was he thought he was getting.

"So it's your grandmother who's going to interview me. How about giving me a bit of background to help me out?"

Jeremy pointedly sat up straight and launched into a breathless account so astonishing that Annie was certain he was pulling her leg, which left her thinking double beware.

"Well Mummy ran off with an Arab prince when I was a baby, and Daddy died of a broken heart soon after, so Maggie sort of took over as Mummy and Daddy except she was mostly looking after Sir Thomas, that's her husband and my grandfather who died last month

but had been dying of drink, drugs and depression for the past forty years -- ever since she married him. That's according to G-Gramps, my great granddaddy, Maggie's father, who I live with now at the Lodge because his arthritis is seizing him up completely. It's only an amazing dandelion coffee concoction that he makes for breakfast that lets him move at all, he says, and that generally works off by lunchtime which means if you ever want to get in or out after that you'll probably get me on the gates – and because the Lodge's got Wi-Fi."

He sucked in enough air to keep going.

"There's only the three of us now, compared to twenty-six who were listed as living in the Hall and Lodge in the 1901 census, so the food bill is way down, and the heating and the laundry and all the rest of it, but not the Council Tax which Maggie talks about all the time now, in capital letters, and how every year it goes up by far more than inflation which is terrible for everyone on fixed incomes, or rather no incomes as in our case, which is why we've got to start marketing ourselves, and there she is..."

Annie came to a halt on a reasonably dry-looking section of driveway, turned off the ignition and took a deep breath. Striding towards the car was a short, sturdy woman well into her sixties, whose plentiful grey hair was escaping dramatically from whatever device was meant to keep it in order. She wore a flowery blouse camouflaged beneath a flowery cardigan whose buttons were out of line with their holes by two; a knee-length tweed skirt; and white trainers smeared with fresh mud. She was carrying a trowel in one hand and trying to stretch the other out from her sleeve to check her wristwatch.

Annie got out of the car, and in going forward to shake hands she wobbled on her heels. Jeremy was beside her in a flash, steadying her with one hand on her forearm and the other across her back.

Maggie smiled cheerfully, clearly dismissing, or forgetting, any reprimand she might have been considering about her failure to make the appointment on time. And though Annie pulled away from Jeremy promptly, Maggie said bizarrely, "Such a natural couple."

Annie told herself not to think Alzheimer's. It was becoming the Covinshire equivalent of seeing a juvenile in a hoodie and thinking anti-social behaviour. She said slowly, "I'm Annie Clarke. I'm here for the interview."

"No need for an interview, my dear. You're the only person who answered my advertisement, and I can tell from your application that you're expert at what you do, and I can see that you are young and female as requested, although the newspaper made a mess of it and missed that bit out. And I can tell Jeremy likes you though it seems at the moment that he is absorbed by the appearance of your shoes. I think we'll have to find you something a bit more practical. But I'm talking to myself again. Have we got a spare pair of wellies for Miss Clarke, Jeremy?"

Jeremy blushed deeply, immediately, and made rapidly for the front doorway of the hall.

Annie said it wasn't necessary.

Maggie said it was very necessary. She said the walled garden was a terrible mess as Thomas had kept pigs in it for over twenty years but the last one had gone to the butcher a month ago and she knew in her heart of hearts that the walled garden was the key to their future. The walled garden and proper marketing.

Annie asked what the line was, and when Maggie looked confused, Annie quoted her advert in the local paper: "It said 'marketing manager wanted -- to bring new life to old line'. So what's the line?"

"Why, Burnet, of course! The line goes back who knows, probably to the Doomsday Book or something. It's Jeremy's brilliant idea. He says we'll use new media, which he says he knows all about, which is just as well because I haven't got a television licence."

Jeremy came back carrying a pair of enormous rubber galoshes. He tipped them upside down and solid matter sprinkled to the ground. He put his nose to the openings, and couldn't avoid making an involuntary grimace. Then he beamed at Annie: "I think they're fine? You can hold on to my shoulder to steady yourself?"

"Perhaps we could discuss your plans indoors. I really don't think I need to see the entire estate."

"The walled garden pretty much is the entire estate, my dear. And you need to see what there is of 'our line'," Maggie insisted.

Annie took a deep breath and stepped out of her shoes and into the galoshes while her mind grappled with the possibility that this woman had buried her husband in the walled garden recently vacated by pigs.

"It's just starting to show a bit of new growth," Maggie said cheerfully, waving her trowel and setting off briskly. "You two come along in your own good time."

Jeremy blushed again, and offered to carry Annie's shoes. She hung on to them.

"Sorry about Maggie," he said. "She thinks she's not long for this world and wants to get things settled about the estate, which means getting me hitched up to someone with practical skills. But don't worry, she's another fifty years in her at least, and I'm thinking about launching off on my own somewhere, to get a bit more worldly-wise as G-Gramps calls it. But it would be good if Maggie could get stuck into some new project or other before I go, to take her mind off things."

A narrow path made of old, frost-shattered bricks led through a patch of emerging nettles, dock, and ground elder. Annie pictured decades' worth of pig manure seeping into the soil and spreading outwards from the walled garden, feeding monster weeds which by mid-June would take over the whole place. Bindweed had already climbed halfway up the

rotting timbers of an old boiler house and other lean-to structures on the outside of the wall and goose grass rose like a tidal wave ready to sweep away what remained of what might once have been a chicken coup. Maggie pushed open a rusty iron gate into the old vegetable garden and Annie ducked under the brick arch above it.

The walls were a good fifteen feet high, and they rose from a level, featureless surface of slowly baking, sweet-smelling, mud. The flat earth stretched at least a hundred and fifty feet in front of them, and fifty feet on either side. But immediately in front of Annie's galoshes there was a single, three-inch wide row, about ten feet long, of something wispy and green.

"Burnet!" Maggie said triumphantly.

"When I was very young," Jeremy said with a tone of self-deprecating modesty, "I used to daydream about being a scientist who discovered a new vitamin that was absolutely essential to good health and which you could only get from eating burnet."

"By the end of the summer we'll have an acre of it," Maggie beamed. "We'll be the biggest producers in the country, I'd like to bet. And we have the name to go with it. I believe you call it a "brand". All we need is a marketing strategy."

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Salad Burnet: a marketing strategy for the new taste of Covinshire

Annie crossed out the last four words and substituted 'taste of Old England'. Then she crossed out the entire heading and wrote: marketing -- identifying, anticipating and satisfying customers' needs. She identified her own most pressing need as the urgent desire to look, smell, and feel clean. She put her clipboard and pen on the chair by the bath and reached for her mother's enormous dispenser of liquid soap. She lined up back-brush, sponge, and pumice, and then submerged her entire body in the deep, hot water.

She needed an income.

How could she be coming to the end of her twenties, after working for years in one tedious office job after another, winning praise from one boss after another, and have no money?

She needed to move out of her parents' house.

How could she have wasted so many years living in a place that had become like a museum of her childhood, just because slumming with her parents was so much easier than slumming on her own?

She needed a job.

She had the diploma. She believed she had the creative flair and the confidence.

But as soon as her mother came home she would yell up the stairs “Have you got the job?” and when she yelled back no, which her mother would know already from the fact that her daughter was lounging in the bath in the middle of the day, indulging in self-pity as she saw it, then she would be lectured yet again about how college taught you everything about marketing except how to market yourself.

She’d only worn the high heels that morning to make her mother happy.

She also needed a boyfriend. Well, wanted one. It had been over a year since she split up with boring Graham and at least six months since her last firm decision that she had done the right thing.

As the steam condensed out of the air she forced herself to focus on the task in hand and picked up her clipboard again.

Positives:

Once established, just seems to go on year after year

Problem-free

Easy-feeder

Green all year

Negatives:

Undistinguished

Bland

Heavily veined and sometimes greyish

Becomes lanky after flowering

Well out of fashion

Unique selling point:

Nobody else alert to commercial possibilities

Because there aren’t any?

And then, although she knew you could only have one USP, she added:

Delicate scent, reminiscent of cucumber

A delicate whiff of cucumber in a sea of pig muck.

Her destiny was clearly not going to be inextricably bound with a dynamic strategy for marketing salad burnet to the twenty-first century.

Then, because she was a thorough person and liked to weigh up all the evidence before she made a decision, she followed the exercise on the product with the same exercise on the job.

Positives:

Jeremy was actually quite cute.

Maggie was actually rather sweet.

Negatives:

Jeremy seemed like the perfect younger brother.

Maggie was as mad as a hatter.

They could only pay her in shares, in a zero-capitalised business that had zero prospects of earning any profit.

Unique selling point:

The job was unique. It had no selling point.

She topped up the bath with more hot water and wished she could stay in it forever.

JEREMY BURNET KNEW that he didn't know much, if anything, about marketing or about females. But he was certain that Annie Clarke would not be coming back to Burnet Hall.

He'd sent her an email anyway, with a link to a website with lots of information about salad burnet. Well, there wasn't actually a lot of information about salad burnet, but he was a true millennial -- as quick as lightning on the web -- and whatever was out there he'd found and collated on an attractive set of pages illustrated with botanical drawings and photographs. The email would be waiting for her by the time she got home. He didn't explain that he'd created the site himself, from at least a dozen sources, because she probably already thought he was a bit intense and he didn't want her to think he was a computer nerd.

He wanted people, and especially young women, to think he was smart, interesting, and likeable. He knew that was at heart a truthful description. If only he had the chance to show it, instead of saying stupid things without thinking because he wanted to sound interesting, then clamming up with shyness because he was also sensitive and knew how people reacted. If chance would just create a bit of space for him to show himself as himself.

He watched a single egg come to the boil and tapped into his laptop so it would beep when three minutes was up. He knew that it was time he made his own move. He'd been telling himself this for about three years. His qualities of being smart, interesting, and likeable, had only really been tested through blogging, and he wasn't so sure how he would fare when it came to making his way unplugged. He buttered two slices of white bread and cut a ripe pear into quarters, and took out the core. Then he lifted the egg out of the pan with a teaspoon, sat it in an eggcup, cracked the top open, and took it through to G-Gramps on a tray.

“Do you think I should join the army?” he asked.

“I thought you were a pacifist. That was the problem last time we had this conversation.”

“Yes, I suppose I am still. I could run away to sea, maybe. Merchant Navy.”

“I don’t think we’ve got a fleet anymore. Ships are all crewed by Koreans, or Poles or something. What about the Church? Always was a good standby. And the old ladies would all fall in love with you. “

“I think the church only works in inner cities these days, where they don’t have old ladies. They have drugs and knives and social exclusion, and I don’t know much about any of those things.”

“You don’t know much about feeding an old man, either,” G-Gramps said. “I can’t live on baby food.” He dipped the corner of the thinly sliced white bread into his egg yolk and for a brief moment contemplated his mortality.

“I’d die for a pepperoni pizza,” he said.

BILL SMITH picked up a ready-made pizza at the supermarket on his way home. He was going to buy a ready-washed bag of salad leaves to go with it, but he’d read there was something dodgy about the gas they pumped into the bags to make the salad look fresh for days on end, and in any case he was feeling too depressed to think he might be caring about his body.

His council had just that day awarded its New Enterprise of the Year award to a business that would be making bio-fuel out of a new fast-growing grass crop, and he had to promote it to the media. This could be the saving of Covinshire’s farming community his press release said, quoting Alfie Bagehot, the Cabinet member for Economy. No quote about saving of the world’s eating community. No quote today from Celia Drinkwater, the Cabinet member for Sustainability. No note to the Editor clarifying that the growing of crops for bio-fuel would delay people seriously changing their energy consumption levels for decades. That the world wouldn’t be growing enough rice.

Alfie also insisted that wind farms had to be fought on planning grounds because they spelled the death of Covinshire’s tourist economy. He’d insisted that Bill get this message into the New Enterprise release to suggest that somehow they were complementary policies. Bill didn’t question policy. His job was simply to explain policy to the people of Covinshire. He had to explain the democratic process that led to the policy and he had to celebrate the achievement when it was realised. This was only the latest offensive in a long assault by politicians blue, red, and yellow on his newly green soul.

Tomorrow a committee would agree that it was time to look again, after barely a year, at a five-year plan to modernise Covinshire’s rural infrastructure. Journalists would yawn. He

would tell them it was necessary given the accelerating change in the rural demographic. They would yawn so wide, councillors could fall in and never be seen again.

And there on the doormat when he walked into his flat was the decree nisi. The decree unless. Unless Yvonne could accept that there were more important things in life than three foreign holidays a year? Unless he'd been more ambitious, and earned enough to afford all the things she yearned for? Unless they could turn the clock back twenty years and regain the passion that had brought them together? His wife had rejected his body, and he was selling his soul. What was left?

He put his pizza in the oven and an image flashed through his mind of himself dozing in front of it in the only chair, empty bottle of aspirin and bottle of whiskey at his feet, while the sordid little flat filled up with gas. He opened his laptop, clicked on the template for press releases, and tapped out:

Press Information issued by Covinshire Council

It was with shock and great sadness that staff and councillors at Covinshire Council heard of the death last night of Bill Smith, aged 41, the council's long-serving Press Officer.

Bill joined the council fifteen years ago, after working on the Covinshire Evening News, where he started as a junior reporter. During his five years on the Evening News he covered virtually every aspect of local journalism, including sports, business, and features. He had served for two years as the paper's municipal correspondent, covering local government and the health service, before jumping ship for a better pension and learning to spin the news instead of dramatising it.

Clive Robertson, Leader of Covinshire Council, said: "Bill Smith always found exactly the right words, and put them in the right order. If I had attended the media-training course he ran for councillors I am confident I would be able to follow his example and do him justice now. He will be sorely missed by both councillors and staff – and indeed by the local people and all the different communities in Covinshire whom he served so well."

Chief Executive of Covinshire Council, Peter George, said: "Before Bill Smith, there was no public relations function at Covinshire Council. I suppose we just got on with the job and did what we knew was best for everyone. In changing the way the council communicates and consults with its various publics, Bill made a huge contribution to public life. He was at the heart of the cultural change which has put our selfish, myopic customers at the heart of everything the council does.

"On behalf of all the council, I offer my condolences and deepest sympathies to Bill's lovely wife, Yvonne, who left him over a year ago for a wholesale tyre dealer who has a fast

car, three five-hundred-watt outdoor lights, and a five-gallon patio heater, at his executive home.”

Note to Editors:

Covinshire Constabulary would not indicate the cause of death, pending the Coroner’s Enquiry. An officer has confirmed however, that the body was discovered at the Duckowby flat rented by the deceased and that despite contamination of the scene by cheap whiskey and a double-pepperoni pizza there do not appear to be suspicious circumstances.

ENDS

He burned his fingers when he took the pizza out of the (electric) oven without a hot-pad. And then the topping took a layer of skin off the roof of his mouth. He had over a dozen packets of aspirin and paracetamol in the bathroom cupboard -- he’d played press officer in a multi-agency exercise testing the readiness of public services for dealing with a flu pandemic and he’d learned that there would be an unmanageable run on painkillers – but he took just two of them. He went to bed wondering if he’d ever break sixty-five miles to the gallon on his journey to work, or if something else would break first.

TWO

RAIN CAME DOWN hard and fast against the skylight in the tiny bedroom of Bill's flat. The harsh sound echoed round the cold, damp room, which had been carved out of a loft space. Maybe the council's planning people, or building regs people or whoever was responsible wouldn't allow this kind of conversion nowadays, without insulation. Maybe Trading Standards wouldn't allow the estate agent to call it a special feature. And maybe the disability access people would have something to say about the alpine stairs, another special feature.

Bill Smith didn't care, for once. He didn't feel himself. He put on clean underwear, one of his two ironed shirts, a sober tie, his dark blue suit, and black shoes: the same as every day. But dressed, he felt even less like himself. He laboured over his morning routine, feeling sore and morose. He signed the letter from his solicitor about the divorce, and stuffed it back in the return envelope, but then left it on the kitchen table, among his dirty dishes and the pizza wrapping.

JEREMY BURNET LEFT a hand-written note for his grandmother and an email for his great-grandfather. Both communications explained simply that he was leaving to find his own way in the world and that he was doing it this way because he didn't want them making a fuss and turning it into something else. He had a bit of birthday money saved up, he said, so he'd be all right until he got a job, and he'd keep in touch as and when he could, but in any case before too long.

On Facebook he wrote: Jeremy has left home. As soon as he'd posted, he realised it sounded juvenile and rather pathetic. So on Jeremywiz, his blog, he said "Gone life shopping" – which he thought sounded bold.

ANNIE CLARKE HAD PREPARED for Maggie Burnet a one-page explanation of why she believed the opportunity was not ripe for marketing salad burnet to the world. Her preliminary research online, she wrote, suggested there was no demand. There was also as yet, of course, no supply – and no information as to how much it would cost to create that supply. And while there were certainly a number of companies marketing native herbs and herbal products – for cosmetic, medicinal and culinary purposes – they had most likely not overlooked burnet, but positively ruled it out, on the grounds that it had virtually no taste, no fragrance, and no curative properties. Annie's summary suggested that a venture based on mixed herbs and salads might be more of a possibility. Those with desirable attributes and uses were already grown on a large scale, but a smaller-scale venture making good use of

the Burnet family name to create a traditional, or heritage, brand might be a possibility. First of all, however, she would need a horticultural plan, and a sales plan, with realistic estimates of what could be grown, at what cost. Only then would it be sensible to consider what could be sold, at what price. She added that she hoped this advice was helpful, and that as it did not constitute a marketing strategy she would not be submitting an invoice.

In fact, she would be signing on with a temping agency. She had an interview in Covinton in an hour. She picked, from among the breakfast ingredients her mother had left out, a low calorie fruit yoghurt and a mini-pack of sugary cereal she could munch on the way. She stuffed the report in an envelope, put on her sensible walking sandals on a point of principle, and strode defiantly through the rain to her car.

THE RAIN HAD LOST its persistence by the time Jeremy made a bowl of porridge for his great-grandfather and decided to leave. He checked online and established that there was a bus down the main road to Covinton at ten past every hour. He thought he might post his adventures at some point, though, and he just couldn't see starting with "I caught the bus into town." Hitchhiking would be much better, though he'd never done it before and there was so little traffic on the lane he'd have to walk at least to the main road. So he rummaged in the shed at the back of the lodge until he found the bike G-gramps had begged from a postman who retired when Jeremy was in his early teens. He pumped up the tyres, and raised the saddle a few inches. It had three gears, mudguards that would stop the rear wheel from throwing mud and water up his back, and a rack behind the saddle to which he could tie his suitcase. Jeremy felt pleased with himself for this practical turn of thinking.

BILL TURNED HIS WINDSHIELD WIPERS OFF as the rain lessened. The more electrical things you ran, the greater the fuel consumption. But other vehicles kept overtaking and cutting in front of him, sending spray all over the windshield so that he had to keep flicking the wipers on and off, and he knew with computers at least – because he'd challenged the IT people at work -- it took a surge of power to start them up every time and that put a strain on the hard drive or something, which meant it broke and you had to replace it earlier than if you just left the power on standby, and if you did all the sums it left a greater carbon footprint turning it off than leaving it on.

It was all hopelessly counter-intuitive and he suddenly realised that he'd had enough. Let them all race on without his good example. There was a turn-off coming up on his left and without another thought he literally turned off. He swung into the lane without braking. A driver close behind him blasted his horn, which had the effect only of driving Bill into an even deeper withdrawal. He put the car in neutral and took his foot off the pedals. He didn't even

have the energy to steer. He just aimed his vehicle at the middle of the lane round one bend after another as he gradually lost speed.

ANNIE MADE A QUICK CALCULATION and decided she could make a detour to drop her note at the lodge of Burnet Hall and still make her interview on time. She left the main road and accelerated along the country lane, distracted in her haste from noticing that the rain had stopped and her wipers were drying the last spray from the road into an opaque smear.

IT SEEMED LIKE YEARS since he'd been on a bike, but Jeremy felt he got the swing of it pretty quickly, and as the rain petered out completely, he broke into a whistle. He sat up straight to fill his lungs and realised that he could just see over the hedges. He felt that he had instantly gained a new perspective on the trappings of his life.

BILL CAME TO A HALT. The road was level and the car moved neither forward nor back. It idled quietly, and he slumped over the wheel.

JEREMY HEARD A VEHICLE in the middle distance and was bringing his attention back to the task in hand as he glided round a gentle bend to find a shiny blue car facing him right in the middle of the road. He gripped both brake levers as hard as he could and the old rod brakes started the gradual process of reducing his momentum.

ANNIE TOOK A BEND faster than she should have done, and when she saw the back of a blue car, looming right in front of her as if it was hardly moving, she hit the brake pedal harder than she should have done, and felt herself sliding slowly sideways on the wet road. She eased off the brake and steered into the skid, then tapped on the brake gently and realised she wasn't going to stop before she reached the car, but that although it was bang in the middle of the road, there was a gap between the road and the hedge on the right that she might just make it through.

JEREMY HEARD THE MOVING CAR, coming towards the blue car and himself, and thought the safest place to be in the circumstances was off the road. He steered to the left, tilting his body, and as soon as the bike left the road for the soft verge he felt it tipping sideways.

ANNIE SAW BIKE WHEELS, tilting dramatically towards the horizontal. She swerved away aiming for the other side instead. She went straight off the road, felt the car tip as the passenger side sank into soft ground, and then again more dramatically as she came to a

halt in a drainage-ditch. Her body lurched forward, her seat belt bit into her, and then she was thrown back against her seat and headrest.

JEREMY SLEWED SIDEWAYS and felt simultaneously how wet the ground was along his right side, and how heavy the bike was as it weighed down on his left. His head came to rest in a clump of dripping dead nettles.

BILL TURNED OFF his ignition, and could hear only the deep sigh of his own out-breath, and then birdsong.

THEN ALL THREE heard an unlikely reggae beat, masking the engine of another vehicle. The music surged in volume as a cream-coloured camper van, shifting down into second gear, came round the corner with the presence of an ice-cream van entering a suburban estate. The van pulled over onto a patch of hard verge in front of a field gate, and the driver turned off his engine, leaving the music clear and bright.

Annie unfastened her seat belt, rolled her head, first clockwise then anticlockwise, then lifted and dropped each shoulder in turn before climbing out of the car. She was so surprised to find her body apparently in good working order, that she repeated the movements on the road, falling naturally into the rhythm of Pink Floyd's 'Time' from a cover version called 'Dub Side of the Moon'. Then she remembered there had been a cyclist, and with a sinking feeling in her stomach she ran to the blind side of the blue car, where a man was struggling to his feet, and righting his bike.

"Oh, it's you," they both said. Then again, with perfect timing "Are you all right?" But then instead of laughing awkwardly at each other, Annie said seriously, "You're not wearing a helmet." When he looked confused she said it again, louder over the music, then stood back, embarrassed at sounding so ridiculously like a big sister.

Jeremy rubbed the back of his head and inspected his hand. "No blood anyway," he said cheerfully. "Not even a scrape. Just a bit wet." He pulled his trouser-leg away from his skin and shook his leg.

They both turned to the blue car which had caused it all. The driver was slumped sadly over his wheel but seemed fully conscious. Annie opened his door.

"Have you broken down?" Jeremy asked loudly.

Bill turned slowly to look at them. "Yes, that's it. I've broken down."

A small, elderly, man appeared beside them just as 'Time' rolled into 'The Great Gig in the Sky'. He was wearing brown moleskin trousers and a mustard-yellow corduroy jacket over a black tee shirt, with tennis shoes on his feet and grey dreadlocks on his head. He

placed a hand on Jeremy's forehead and with great authority held it there and considered. Then he put a hand across the back of Annie's neck and again held it still.

"You had a brush with death," he said. "You're both very lucky." Then he offered his hand to Bill, and when Bill took it, he eased him up out of the car. "This is sure as sunlight your lucky day, but we gotta move this car to keep it that way. And since I'm light and in no rush, y'all get behind me and give me a push." He climbed into the driving seat, put the clutch in, and checked that the handbrake was off.

The three stood gaping.

Annie said, "I need to ring my insurance company. I'm not sure we should move anything before they tell us to. Maybe we should call the police. I've never been in an accident before."

"We don't call them accidents," Bill said in a thin, weak voice. "Accident implies no blame. As if it's fate. Road users must take responsibility. We call them collisions."

"Attaboy, now we're talking!" said the man at the wheel of his car. "But no one's collided with anyone. And nobody's hurt. But they might be if we don't get this load off the road, so get behind me here. Then I'll make a nice cup of tea for you three, and you can work on the text for what comes next."

They did as he asked, and with some effort pushed Bill's Jazz up to the camper van, and safely off the road. The man in the driver's seat pulled on the handbrake and said, "This is a nice old man's car. And I'm a nice old man. Harold's the name, and helping's my game. Pleased to meet y' all."

Like sheep, they followed him and piled into his van: Annie sat next to Bill on one narrow bench and Jeremy sat opposite, facing them across a narrow, Formica-topped table. Harold lit the gas under a kettle in the kitchen section behind them and put three mugs on the table, each containing a teabag, then a small carton of milk, and a bowl containing sugar lumps wrapped in two's and bearing the logo Café Dudley.

Annie noticed for the first time that Jeremy had beautiful, large blue eyes. And then she felt her hands shake uncontrollably, and sat on them. Jeremy's were shaking too, barely visibly, and she realised with the certainty of her years in the Girl Guides that his pupils were dilated because of a rush of adrenaline – that they were both in delayed shock.

Jeremy fidgeted to camouflage his shakes. He'd had a brush with death, the man said. It would read well on his blog, especially from a third party.

"So my friends -- let us relax after all this excitement. Let us put it in the grand perspective of our prospective. Tell me what you are all about." Harold poured water into the mugs.

Nobody said anything.

"Okay, then. Tell me where y'all were going."

Annie was the first to become so uncomfortable with the ensuing silence that she broke it. "I was in a hurry to get to an interview. I ought to ring them."

There was another silence, and again she felt drawn to fill it: "It was only at a temping agency. I know they'll take me on any time. I don't suppose it matters if I miss it today."

"I knew you weren't going to work for Maggie," Jeremy said.

"But I've written her a note. That's why I turned up this lane."

"Finding out what I'm all about is actually what I'm about," Jeremy said. "I was leaving home. To find my own way in the world."

"On a bike?" Annie said.

"I thought it would look good on my blog. I brought my laptop. In the suitcase on the back."

"I read you," Harold nodded.

"I don't have a lot of experience. I mean my Facebook profile starts off 'Education – none. Work experience – none.'

"Oh, come on," Annie said.

"I mean I've never had a job, for money. And I've never been to school or college or anything. I had a few nannies early on but I don't think any of them stayed very long. Then the money ran out and Maggie had to look after Grandfather more and more and I suspect she never got organised enough to think about school and I didn't want to be any bother for anyone so I just sort of got on with growing up and I don't think anyone from the authorities ever noticed, really. The Burnets have always had a bit of a knack for not being noticed, which I think is why we're still there at the Hall despite marauders over the borders and the Wars of the Roses and the Reformation and the Civil War and the Agricultural Revolution and the Industrial Revolution and all the rest of it."

Annie tested herself by stirring the three mugs and squeezing out the tea bags between two teaspoons. She was getting steadier and could almost feel the adrenaline dissolving away. Jeremy was clearly still in full flow.

"I think I'm quite sane and everything because I got all the attachment stuff from Maggie as soon as my Mother left. I did a website for a professor of early childhood so I know all about having the one person who is there for you whatever. But I still think I was a bit like a chick that gets imprinted on something inappropriate, like a research student's scarf, because although Maggie was always there, I've never spent much time with people my own age, never had to fight my corner, never really sort of worked out what to expect from life, or what was expected from me, you know? My best friend is actually my great-grandfather, who taught me woodturning and then got me going on the web as a sort of co-conspirator, so I could get him into a virtual lap-dancing club, and I suppose I've learned all sorts of things through doing people's websites, but it all comes in boxes and bullet points, if

you know what I mean -- there's not a lot of the joining-up stuff that you sort of need if you're going to make sense of what it's all about, really, if you know what I mean."

"Phew," said Annie. "Take a breath. I think we're experiencing a bit of delayed shock -- after the accident."

"Collision," Bill said.

"Right, I collided with a hedgerow and Jeremy collided with a ditch."

Harold took away the dead tea bags. "Looks to me like you collided with the future, folks."

"I think I crashed out of my life," Bill said.

"Just like I said."

As if on cue, rain came down again like the crash of a cymbal, followed by organised pounding on the roof like a parade of tin drums. Jeremy dashed out to get his suitcase and rescue his computer, and Annie to get her purse and phone. When they got back, their hot breath, the moisture on their clothes and steam from their tea formed a thick curtain of condensation on the windows.

"It's cosy in here," Annie said. "I could stay all day."

"Be my guest, make this your nest," Harold said. He gave her a tour, showing her how the beds folded out, where the little fridge was, and where his stash of books, magazines, and CD's were kept. He produced a packet of digestive biscuits, put on more reggae, said that all three of them should make themselves at home, and then slipped out in the rain to attend to his "personal business".

Jeremy wanted to check that his laptop was okay after the tumble, and show the others how it could run off the cigarette lighter on the dashboard.

Annie called the temping agency and said she'd be back in touch when she found out if her car was going to be all right. Then she called her breakdown recovery company and learned that because of flash flooding in the region they couldn't say exactly when they would get to her, especially since based on the information she had given, she did not appear to be at personal risk.

Bill borrowed Annie's phone to call the council and they heard him tell someone that he had broken down and didn't know how long it would take to be repaired. When he'd finished, he sat back, and sounding like a Radio Covinshire newsreader hauled out of a long retirement to keep the show going while the living crew recovered from something dire and infectious, said aloud:

Press Information issued by Broken Down of Covinshire

Covinshire Council's long-serving Press Officer Bill Smith broke down on his way to work this morning.

Witnesses at the scene reported no obvious cause for the breakdown, though sources close to Bill Smith said that at a time when global energy use is critical, he had become critical of the energy he was having to use explaining why at Covinshire Council 'reduce, re-use, recycle' had become 'renege, rescind, regurgitate'; and his wife had finally left him for a man with more money.

Bill's Honda Jazz, in which only yesterday he had set a new personal mileage record for his "eco-driving" to work, is not thought to have been implicated.

Jeremy clapped his hands, and asked what was eco-driving.

Bill pondered the question then said in a voice so thin it threatened to disappear altogether, that he thought it was an example of consumerist spin to let people like him off the hook.

Annie said that surely the best eco-driving was done with handlebars or by someone in a train, or bus, carrying a load of passengers, or at least by a driver with car-sharers on board. This old van, she said, probably got half the mileage of his Jazz, but with three of them on board it would still be more ecological. Then Jeremy copied Bill's press release format, but with all the enthusiasm of a new starter on Radio Five:

Press Information issued by three eco-sharers in a camper van

Three communicators from Covinshire today packed up their troubles in an old kit bag, slung it on board an old camper van, and challenged the world to give them a good green job, or they'd get moving and find it themselves.

"We could be the eco-jobless," he said triumphantly. "We could start a new employment agency, and get people to come and grow Maggie's burnet."

"You're forgetting about our host," Annie said. "Where's Harold got to?"

"Our father which art in heaven, Harold be his name. Give us this steak and daily bread and forgive us our mattresses. Lead a snot into temptation but deliver us some emails."

"He never did tell us what **he** was about, did he? Or where he was going?"

"He said he was going for a pee."

Annie turned the music off and they heard the sound of an engine accelerating away from them. She wiped the front window with her forearm and watched the blue Jazz, back on the road, pick up speed and then disappear round a corner.

"We can chase him," Annie said. "The key's in the ignition."

Then she saw that Harold had left them a message, tucked under the windshield wiper. Jeremy retrieved it from the rain, and handed it to Annie, who read aloud:

"I reckon y'all three have a journey to make. Long distances may not be at stake, but the van sleeps three with real ease. So take it please. Besides, I'm done touring for a while and an old man's car suits my new style. Meet me here in just one year -- in this same lane - - and if you want we'll trade again."

"He's signed it 'Love Harold'. And there's a postscript with his phone number."