

Global short stories competition

February 2008 Winners

First Prize Winner

Time's Ticking Clock

David Aldus

In the slow sneaking, sly creeping way of things, she grew old without noticing. Her face scarecrowed in the mirror, and taloning hands sprouted more vein tributaries than the Nile delta, fingers with joints like bamboo.

Now, in the strangeness of her age, she drags a Windsor chair onto the pavement outside, and sits in crow black clothes, staring at whatever crosses her path. Not much. Glasses bought from a charity shop do no favours, everything blurred unless four inches away.

A whacking big thing, white all over, hums to a bottle-rattling halt, obstructing her myopic view across the road of terraced houses, neatly painted, but reeking of the pits, and redundancy.

"Bore da, Mrs. Oddinot. Looks a bit wet today, isn't it?" Dink a Mint, forced off the dole when found digging his allotment, and him claiming a bad back, delivers two pints of silver top milk, spits onto the tarmac, and jumps back into his milk cart.

Mrs. Oddinot whispers a litany, vainglorious in the extreme. "Aye, boyo. Spit away. You'd have had my drawers off in the old days. Now they're only good for pissing in. See if I care. Travelling on the same one-way track we are, and let's see what you look like when you get to ninety."

Foolish stuff, to whisper innuendoes at Dink-a-Mint like that, delusional as Christianity.

And the curtains of confusion draw across her. She no longer knows who she is, and maybe nature is kind after all, for who would want to comprehend the sort of mess she's in?

Nature has no feeling, red in tooth and claw. To prove it, rain dribbles from the darkening sky onto the old lady, who means no harm. Globules glisten brightly on her black clothes, and the bat-like creature does not appreciate she must move.

Not since she was a girl has she had a dress so beautiful, all sparkly, pretty pearls everywhere, but why is she wet? She ought to do something. Nothing occurs, nothing instructs her limbs.

The Seventh Cavalry come down the road. An old Vauxhall vibrates up to her house and a girl, good-looking to the unprejudiced, gets out.

Bottle-bottomed glasses can tell colour. "Oi, you doan come near me. You do go back where you come from, bitch." Now she's moving. Up off the Windsor chair, and stepping into her house, quick as a squirrel.

"There, there. Mrs. Oddinot. I'm here to give you your bath, mun. See if you've taken your medication." The girl is nimble, and dances up to the door, holding it open before Mrs. Oddinot can slam the Yale lock shut.

"Oh, dear! Oh, dear! Don't touch me. I doan want it!" Pitiful distress, same as when she was a baby, and now childlike cries recrudescence after eighty years of silence. Behind her big armchair she is also trembling with real fear.

The girl mobiles for help. Patient distraught.

Two mile away, the other side of the village, and getting wet waiting for Dick the Stick to answer his door, stands Marlene Fanackapan, daughter of the Fanackapans who own the local grocery shop - profits in the dungeons since Tesco's opened in Merthyr Tydfil. She is queen of After-care, serene and always condescending.

Tinny notes cascade all over the place, uninvited and rude. Searches frantically for her mobile as if it were a ticking bomb, near exploding. "Aye?"

"She's gone off on one, Miss Fanackapan. Same old story, mun. Thinks I'm here for murder."

"Dick's not answering his door. Either he's dead, or some tup's gone and given him whisky down at 'The Workman's.' You do calm the Duchess down. I'm on my way."

Mrs. Oddinot, behind her armchair, stays crumpled, hands to her mouth, the left hand fingers adorned with an engagement ring and a wedding ring, tombstones marking events long dead. This stranger

won't go. Why? That eternal 'why'? which tortures the Alzheimer, insidious and persistent as ivy. This woman would've listened when she was the Mayor's wife, in her glory days, and big with it.

Silence now, something waiting to happen.

Above Mrs. Oddinot's quivering head ticks an old alarm clock, cockerel alert, wanting to ring early in the morning, but no one needs the reminder. The little alarm hand stays on 6.30, set by Mr. Oddinot, but he'll never hear its ring again - he hasn't been round many a year. Alzheimer's allowing, Mrs. Oddinot winds up the clock's butterfly handle until its spring creaks with the strain. She is following in her husband's silent footsteps, for with its pleasant metronomic beat she keeps faith with his soul which must be around here somewhere.

"Aeeeeeh!" She sees the woman's face peep round the chair, and screams in absolute terror.

"Now then, Mrs. Oddinot. You know I got to bath you. Every Tuesday, isn't it? Tut, tut."

"Don't come nearer. I'll, I'll . . ." There's nothing her old frame can do. She has nowhere to run, stuck in the corner of the room; this horrible woman blocking her only escape. Her confused brain is incapable of working anything out, and only ninety-year-old instincts hold primitive dominion. Grey hair strands over her face as she bows her head onto knees, and dry eyes refuse to bring tears. Even this small grace is denied.

The West Indian girl puts two hands up, universal sign of surrender. "Very well, Mrs. Odinott. You win. We'll wait for Marlene to come, see You like her, don't you?" The girl accepts her rejection, and inwardly puts it down to racism. Alzheimer knows no diplomacy. She wanders round the front of the armchair and sits in it.

Bloody cheek! Mrs. Odinott assembles her bones, and scrabbles to her rickety feet. "Go away! You don't sit in my chair!" She grabs the girl's long, flowing locks and wrenches.

The West Indian sighs, and holds on to her crowning glory, taking away the pain.

Miss Fanackapan strides in. "Oi! Now stop that, Rhiannon." Her arms encircle the emaciated waist and lift Mrs. Odinott so that she is off the ground, feet paddling in space, hands still anchored to the girl's hair.

"Let go of Judy. You know her, and you're playing up. Now stop it!"

Miss Fanackapan turns, so that either the old lady's rib cage is corkscrewed, or she lets go Judy's hair. She doesn't let go.

Judy saves Rhiannon's bisection, following her clutching hands as Miss Fanackapan waltzes in a circle.

"So help me, Rhiannon. You let go of Judy's hair or I'll have you put in a home for lunatics."

Deep down in the tangled mess of Rhiannon's brain, a siren wails. Falling into a major sulk, she releases the hair, and goes limp, rag doll-like, head, arms and torso hanging over the cradle of Miss Fanackapan's arms.

"Poor dab. She carn help it, see. Run the bath, Judy. I'll get her clothes off." She slides the limp body into the armchair, arranges it tidy, and stands up, hands on her back, stretching.

"It was my colour, wasn't it?"

"So what? Some of them do say they doan like me 'cos I left the village and come back with qualifications, like."

"Wass that called?"

Miss Fanackapan's shoulders do a one-up. "Dunno. Say, qualificationism?"

"Doan trip off the tongue like racism."

"Run the bath, Judy."

The ragged black form of Mrs. Oddinot does a runner, escaping into her slightly squalid kitchen. "You're not getting me in there, now. Wet is what I'll be."

"Oh, damn. Now she's shut herself in, mun."

The two angels of mercy crowd to the door. "You must have your bath, Mrs. Oddinot. Dear Lord. Must keep clean, see."

"I came into the world without hot water, an' I'm going out without it as well."

Too young and honest, Judy nods. "She's got a point, hasn't she?"

"Don't back her up, mun." Miss Fanackapan presses her ear against the grimy, yellow door. Crockery is tinkling. "Hello? Mrs. Oddinot - what you doing?"

"I'm making tea."

"Ooooh, there, that sounds lovely. Can I have a cup?"

“Aye. Sugar?”

“No, ta. Just a touch of milk, though. I do like it strong.”

“Me an ‘ all.”

Bringing suicides off high buildings was never so delicate as this. Miss Fanackapan winks at her helper, and nods.

“Ready yet, Mrs. Oddinot?”

“Just getting the china out, lovely.”

“Oh, tell you what. This door’s stuck. Can’t get it open, mun.” She hovers her face very close to Judy’s and whispers: “Run that bloody bath. I’ll make sure she don’t escape.”

“There’s a thing. Someone’s locked it.” The clumpy iron key turns and Miss Fanackapan whirlwinds into the kitchen, slamming the door behind her.

The old lady jerks upright, teapot in hand, ready to pour into cups that are health hazards. “Duw. You must be thirsty, lovely girl. In a hurry, like that.” Her grey eyes focus a little more sharply. “Why, there. It’s Miss Fanackapan, isn’t it? What brings you here, then?”

Crisis falling away from her like a funeral shroud, Miss Fanackapan smiles, and flops onto an old wooden chair. “Thank God for that. You’re back. Time for your bath, Rhiannon.”

Judy rushes in, all biceps and determination.

Miss Fanackapan does a traffic controller, showing Judy the palm of her raised hand. “Whoa, girl. Rhiannon’s on her way. Isn’t that right, Rhiannon?”

“My grime! You’re time!” The old lady chimes an old joke and her bone-stretched skin creases into a crooked smile.

“Well, my great aunt Myrtle. How does she do that?” Judy has a lot to learn, but she’s good at adjusting. “There we are, then. Off to the bath for us both, hey?”

Young and old shuffle towards the open bathroom door, steam melting contours as it softly evaporates around the two coalesced shapes lost, almost, in vapour.

Miss Fanackapan watches them, disturbed by their formlessness, almost as if they were entering heaven through clouds.

“Thass the trouble with this job. It doan help you sleep at night, seeing things like that. The very young and the very old, arm in arm, heading for the same oblivion.”

She shudders. It’s the old syndrome of battle fatigue. She has to deal with too many pensioners living through afflictions which only end when they kick the bucket. King of them all is Alzheimer’s, the biggest insult to human dignity known to man.

She wonders about her old age, travelling towards her on well-oiled roller skates, and on top of those roller skates is the grim reaper, swinging arms and pumping legs at a furious rate, reaching her as fast as he can.

*Highly commended
Grandma's House
Mark Frankel*

My sister Kate was ten, almost three years older than me, but we both loved to visit Grandma's house when Grandad was alive. Grandma must have sold it soon after he died because she moved to a small cottage close to where we lived.

Grandma's house was really an estate, surrounded by a high stone wall with spikes on top. Once, when we arrived and Grandad was busy, our parents took us for a long walk around the grounds and we saw a man carrying a rifle walking along with a large dog, just inside this wall.

My father explained that Grandad had collected lots of valuable things during his travels and needed security guards to protect them.

There were smartly-uniformed staff in attendance in those far off days when it was always summer, and sitting here now at my window, watching the bleak winter snow whirl dizzily outside, I can vividly recall the sounds and scents of that time. The smell of new-mown grass mingling with the fragrance of flowers. The clink of teacups accompanied by soft laughter, drifting across from the terrace.

I suppose it was named 'Tree Tops' because of its tall trees. You could see them from miles away and when we drove through the open gates, its name was etched in gold letters on a black marble plaque fixed to one of the stone pillars.

All the way up to the house along the crunching drive, you would hear the exciting sounds of activity. Our grandparents usually had guests staying with them and we'd often see them walking around the gardens, the brightly-coloured dresses of the ladies flickering like butterflies between the trees.

As soon as Grandad spotted us he'd always try to hurry us away before Grandma saw us, but he was never quite quick enough.

"Tea in half an hour, Gerald. Don't be late," she'd call in that headmistress voice of hers, and although Grandad never turned his head to acknowledge he'd heard, he always got us back on time. Grandma was barely half his size, but I think he was really a little bit afraid of her. Maybe that was why it was called Grandma's house – rather than Grandad's?

I remember one particularly hot July day when my father and I were alone in the sitting room. He was reading a newspaper and I was watching the activity outside. It was the day of the annual fête and chattering people were scattered on the smooth lawns.

Although the windows were wide open, the white net curtains hung motionless and I slowly became aware of the sickly odour of the floor polish.

My father told me to lean out of the window and take deep breaths and for the first time, I found myself resenting the bustle outside.

"Why are there always so many people here, Daddy?"

I remember my father hesitated for so long before replying that at first I thought he hadn't heard me, and I was just about to repeat the question when he said: "Your grandparents have lived here a long time. I suppose they are very popular."

I knew Grandad had been quite an important man in the diplomatic service and that he and Grandma had spent much of their married life in South Africa. When he became ill, they had returned to this country and he had taken early retirement. Although we were never told what his illness actually was, assumed it was some rare tropical disease because children weren't allowed to visit him at the hospital.

He made a good recovery, though, and it was soon after he left hospital that he and Grandma went to live at the big house.

Those early days were the best. As soon as we got out of the car he'd be standing by the entrance, watching for us. He was a big man with a tanned face, wild white hair and an untamable moustache. With his arms flung wide, he'd hug us both at the same time before dragging us away to whatever new adventure he had planned for us.

Once, we arrived later than usual because we had to collect Grandma from a small, nearby cottage.

When we eventually arrived at the house, Grandad was standing with a group of the gardeners, waving his hands about. I thought he seemed angry about something and wondered why the men were smiling, but my father assured me that was simply Grandad's way of giving them their instructions for the day.

As soon as Grandad saw us he came hurrying over. "Come along you two," he said, ignoring our parents - and Grandma. "I've got something special for you to see today. We're going to visit the conservatory."

"You'll be late for tea," called Grandma, but he simply waved a hand in the air as he ushered us away.

One of the gardeners guided us along a secret path behind the trees, and I remember the frantic flap of pigeon's wings as we disturbed their quiet solitude. It was so stuffy in the glass-walled building I could hardly breathe, but Grandad showed us the wonderful orchids they were able to grow there because of the hot, moist temperature. He knew the name of each one and his face beamed with pleasure as he pointed them out to us. But I think Kate and I were more interested in the beautifully-coloured butterflies, that fluttered around our heads.

The giddiness came upon me suddenly, but when I tried to tell Kate, the words came out as gibberish no matter how many times I tried.

Her eyes widened and she grabbed me by the shoulders and shook me. She was shouting something; I could see her mouth moving, but I couldn't hear anything.

I awoke to find I was lying on cool white sheets in a bedroom, with my mother dabbing my face with a wet cloth.

"My poor, poor dear. Are you feeling better, now?" she said.

"What - what happened?"

"You fainted. It was very naughty of Grandad to take you into that stuffy orchid house."

I sat up so abruptly my head whirled.

"Is he angry with me?" For one awful moment I thought I might never be allowed to join Grandad's

expeditions again.

“Don’t be silly. It wasn’t your fault.”

It was soon after that, I started getting the headaches. They weren’t too bad at first but later, when the fainting started again and I would sometimes wake up in strange places, not knowing how I had got there, I stopped attending school.

There were no more visits to Grandma’s house after that and one day, when I asked my mother when we were going to see Granddad again, she told me he had died...

My father worked for the government, too, and I remember it was the day before my eighth birthday that he came home early and told us that he had been posted to Lusaka in Zambia.

It sounded so grand and even now I can vividly recall my disappointment on learning I wouldn’t be going with them. My mother explained that because I’d missed lots of lessons I would have to stay behind for a while. I would attend a special school where they helped you to catch up.

My mother joined him soon afterwards with Kate and I determined to work really hard at my new school to catch up so that I could join them in Lusaka. But somehow it never quite happened. I seemed to take longer to recover from the headaches despite the medication and electrical treatments, so I kept missing my lessons.

I hadn’t realised they would be away such a long time. My mother used to visit me twice a year and Kate came once although I hardly recognised her. She looked so grown-up.

And then, one day, I was called into the headmaster’s office and sat down in front of his big desk. Dr Kessler was a cheerful, white-haired man with a deep, booming voice that sometimes made the windows rattle. He reminded me a bit of Granddad although he had a small, pointed beard and his moustache was always neatly trimmed.

“Well Hugo, I’ve got some marvellous news for you.”

He leaned forward and his blue eyes twinkled. “Have you any idea what it might be?”

I shook my head, wondering if it was about my birthday party. I’d been told I would be eighteen soon and the school always celebrated birthdays and you received lots of presents.

But Dr Kessler shook his head. “Much, much better than that. Your parents are coming to take you to a new school, today. What do you think of that?”

He leaned back in his black, padded chair and beamed at me across the desk, but although I tried hard to look pleased, I couldn’t help saying, “But I like it here; why do I have to leave?”

“Why? Because you’ve done so well. You’re ready to move on to a bigger establishment where they’ll teach you lots of new things.”

“But what about all my friends here?”

“You can come and visit them whenever you like - and you never know; some of them could be joining you at the new school soon.”

He stood up and pressed the buzzer on his desk and the door opened and Matron came in.

“Better get young Hugo ready for his parents, Matron. I’m sure he wants to look his best for them.”

He came around the desk and took my hand, shaking it vigorously up and down.

“I wish you the very best of luck, Hugo. Your parents are delighted with your progress here and I’m sure you’ll be a credit to them at your new school, too.”

I was sitting in the front hall wearing my new grey suit when the shiny black car drew up outside. The first thing I noticed was that Daddy’s hair was going grey. It looked very distinguished against his tanned face and I was so excited at seeing him again even though he looked so very stern.

The school porter loaded all my belongings into the boot and Daddy hugged me so hard I could hardly breathe and then I got into the back of the car with Mummy and waved to Dr Kessler as we drove away.

“Why do I have to change schools?” I said, when Mummy finally let go of me. She looked very beautiful in a silky, flowered dress, although her eyes were red and sore-looking, as if she’d been crying. From happiness, I suppose. Grown-ups sometimes did that.

“Because you’ll be eighteen soon and almost a young man. That means you have to go to a school for older boys and girls like yourself.”

I wondered if any of my close friends would be going there and wanted to ask Mummy, but she kept dabbing her eyes with a handkerchief and then fumbling in her handbag for something she couldn’t seem to be able to find and I didn’t like to disturb her.

Daddy was concentrating on his driving and didn’t say anything, so I decided it was better not to try talk to him. I just looked out of the window...

How sharply etched in the mind are the poignant shadows of one’s youth.

I remember we were silent for a long time as through the rear window I watched first the school and then the familiar scenery, fade into the distance until they were mere memories, locked away in the closet of my mind.

We drove for a long time and I must have fallen asleep because the next thing I remember is that we were passing through gates that looked strangely familiar.

I sat bolt upright then and waited, hardly able to control my rising excitement, until we rounded the final bend of the crunchy drive and I recognised Grandma’s house.

*Commended
Interview
Don Nixon*

After all these years, I've never got used to the smell.

After a night in the cells, most clients reek of it, that sickly mix of raw sweat, industrial disinfectant and fear which in the old nicks seeps into the cracks in the plaster and the Victorian brickwork. More than a whiff of corruption too, though if I'm honest, probably I carry a bit of that in with me.

That morning I'd come to see Bernie Davis.

"See what you can get out of him," the Chief Inspector said. "The little bastard won't say a word till he's seen you."

He pointed down the corridor.

"You know the way."

He shook his head and grinned.

"I don't know how you do it Mr. Dean. You come in here in your fancy clothes and your posh accent and they can't wait to cough the lot. You should be lecturing at the police academy."

I like Burton. He runs a tighter ship than Captain Bligh. No whiff of any Political Correctness nonsense in his nick. He and I go back a long way and over the years have developed a mutually profitable arrangement. As far as I'm concerned, client confidentiality with toe rags like Bernie is a moveable feast.

Bernie was a sight. The old paper suit they'd given him was too big and a large bruise was beginning to bloom above his left eye. It had clearly been a rough night. I noticed the cuts on his hands. He'd obviously put up a fight.

"I tried to `phone you Mr. Dean," Bernie whined accusingly. "Told `em I wouldn't say a dickie till I had my brief with me."

I shrugged. What was new?

"I was away last night. But you could have always asked for someone else, you know."

"No. You're my brief. I told `em. Won't have anyone else. You're the best. Got me off easy last time."

It was true. Burton had slipped me some information about bungled forensic evidence and I'd

crucified the prosecution. The publicity had done wonders for the firm and now I am on fat retainers from some of the biggest villains in the Midlands. Bernie was hardly a big fish but I'd known him when I was just out of Articles. It's like sex. You never forget your first.

"I trust you Mr. Dean. You'll get me out of this. You're a bloody legend. You know what they call you inside? The `prisoners` friend`."

I smiled. I'd a soft spot for old Bernie. He always reminds me of what I might have

become. We both came from an inner ring council estate but I was lucky. I could pass exams and soon realised that I needed to get rid of my Midlands vowels. As my Nan used to say, "If you can't beat `em, join `em." So I took elocution lessons from a teacher who fancied my youthful arse and never looked back. Now in the bar mess you can't tell me from the public school Oxbridge types who ponce around sucking up to the circuit judges. But I have the advantage. I know how the Bernies of this world think and since the new regulations allowing solicitors to plead in Crown Courts, I'm cleaning up. My nan would have been proud of me.

"So what's it this time Bernie?"

Between the bars of the high window a spider was repairing its broken web. I watched as it spun its slender thread from side to side. The web glistened in the early morning sun.

Bernie's lower lip quivered.

"They're saying I killed somebody," he whispered.

I kept my expression bland. It doesn't do to let clients see your reactions. But murder! It was well outside Bernie's league. He'd come down in the world since I'd last seen him. Then he'd been the muscle for top totty girls the local czar had shipped in from Eastern Europe. But probably he'd sampled the goods once too often and now he was only a small time grafter working on the lower fringes of the flesh market, keeping an eye on a few older toms who gave cheap blowjobs in alleys and the backs of punters's cars. His main job was to collect the money and dole out the packets of crack and grass to keep the girls working and smack them around a bit when they got out of line.

"It was only supposed to be a quick in and out. Just a one off," he whispered quickly. "A night job with no harm done. I'd nothing to do with that woman."

"Slow down. Now what night job? What woman?"

He paused.

Most of my clients always like to hold something back at first. Think it keeps them in control. I waited.

"So?"

He hesitated and nervously fingered a knee that poked through the tear in the paper trousers.

"Look Bernie, you know I can't help you if you don't tell me everything."

I did the frown which usually pushes a reluctant witness in the box. He finally nodded.

“It was Billy’s idea. You know, the pretty boy they call Billy the Kid. You defended him once. That time the city councillor got himself roughed up down the Canal Basin. Bloody hypocrite. Spouting off about moral values and screwing every working lad on the towpath.”

I nodded. I remembered. Billy was gay eye candy with his cowboy hat, skintight jeans and dead eyes. He was still in his physical prime. He hadn’t yet got the raddled rent boy look.

“Billy says he fancies you, you know.”

He sniggered to see if I’d react.

“Says all them wigs and gowns turn him on.”

“The job.” I brought him back to the point.

“Billy drives a taxi now. I met him down the pub yesterday afternoon and he told me there was this posh bird who has him drive her to theatres and restaurants on a regular basis. She’s loaded. Lives in a classy place outside the city. Packed with antiques and all kinds of gear.”

“So you planned to turn it over?”

“Said he was going to drive her to the ballet last night. She trusts him and he said that when he called to pick her up last night, he’d turn the alarm off.”

“She lives alone then?”

“There’s a bloke who comes round for the occasional shag, Billy says, but she’s a widow. Most of the time she’s on her own. The alarm was off like Billy said and inside was a bloody palace. I’d only brought one holdall, but I could’ve filled ten. I tell you

Mr. Dean, I was flying.”

He leaned back. For a moment he was back in that Aladdin’s cave of treasures, the dingy interview room forgotten.

“There was whisky on the sideboard. I poured myself one and went upstairs.

I went in the big bedroom. That’s where they usually keep the important stuff.”

He stopped. I noticed his hands were shaking. I nodded and put on the encouraging sympathetic face I use to lull hostile witnesses into a false sense of security. I hid a yawn coming on.

“And ?”

“She was there Mr. Dean. Lying across the bed. But I swear I never touched her.”

He breathed heavily and his eyes were wide as he relived the scene.

“Her dressing gown was open. She was starkers. I could see everything.”

His tone was strangely prudish considering the amount of flesh he'd ridden shotgun for in his time.

"Go on," I prompted.

"The cord of her dressing gown was round her neck. It was knotted tight. It was horrible Mr Dean."

His fingers crushed the cigarette he was holding. He picked at the strands of tobacco sticking to his wet lower lip. I passed him another and waited while he lit it. His hand was trembling as he held the match.

"Did you touch her?"

"No way Mr. Dean. But she was dead all right."

"Did you take the holdall?"

"Hadn't the chance. I was half way down the stairs when there was a bloody great hammering on the front door. I looked through the window and there's a police car in the drive, its lights all flashing. One of the coppers saw me at the window and they broke down the door. I couldn't move. I was shit scared I tell you."

He fingered the bruise on the side of his face.

"The bastards had a go. And when they got me back here, Burton set his gorillas on me.

I'm scared Mr. Dean. They're going to fit me up. That Burton's a right bastard."

His voice shook. I patted his shoulder.

"Well I'm here now. Look I'll go and talk to Burton. They'll bring the Kid in. But will he back up your story that it was only meant to be a burglary?"

Bernie snorted.

"When Billy sees what they've done to me, he'll sing like a bird."

"But you'll still have to face the burglary charge. I can't do anything about that. You could be looking at a five at least, though you might get the last two years in an Open if you behave yourself. Get yourself a job in the library. Most of the prisons are overcrowded nowadays so if you play your cards right it you might be soon up for parole."

"I can stand that Mr. Dean. Just get 'em to drop the murder. I'm looking at life there."

I nodded.

"Burton might just go for it if you give him Billy. We could argue Billy was setting you up.

And Burton's got a thing about gays. According to him, flogging's too good for them."

I left him and walked down the corridor. From somewhere, I heard a youth shouting for his mother. A door slammed and there was silence. Yes, Billy would tell them whatever they wanted to hear

when they got him in here. He'd be babbling before they got him into the interview room.

But of course they'll never get him in here. I smiled and looked at my watch. By

now Billy should be leaving Barcelona airport and getting a taxi to take him to my villa up in the hills. Bernie was right. Billy did fancy me. What Bernie didn't know was that for the moment I fancied Billy. I'm lucky. I swing both ways. My young Brad Pitt lookalike had remembered his lines well. He'd been a quick study.

The stupid woman was becoming a nuisance and was on the brink of finding out what had happened to the securities I was holding for her. In fact they'd paid for the villa. She was used to me coming to the house. I had a key. I was the 'occasional shag'. What a chore it was too! She'd been waiting for me in the bedroom. All I had to do was hide in the garden till

Bernie came and then phone the police. It was all too easy. With Billy gone, Burton will jump at pinning it on Bernie. And the clear up in less than twenty four hours will certainly mean he gets good press coverage. Burton's ambitious. He'll go for it. And by the time I've done the deprived background mitigation spiel at the trial, I'll have the bleeding hearts lot at the 'Guardian' queuing up for quotes. Good publicity for the business.

Of course the thing with Billy won't last long. They never do. There's a deep old well at the back of the property. He'll never make it back.

I'll visit Bernie occasionally though. After all, I've my reputation to consider as the 'Prisoners' Friend'.