

Let us consider a wall

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Let us consider a wall as an autumn evening falls across a vale in the Home Counties. Crooked Wisteria climbs across the hanging red clay tiles of the upper storey. Irregular Kentish rag beneath is a backdrop to roses, a tangled bed of sweet peas and ferns springing from beside a water butt. The wall belongs to the sort of house that has a tennis court amongst rhododendrons, woods at the back and a panoramic view of the valley at the front. Tresses of white wood smoke float in the deepening dusk below.

Recessed amongst the tiles there is a bedroom window through which, drained of colour in the fading light, we can just make out a figure lying neatly at rest.

From around the corner a tortoiseshell cat makes her familiar patrol. Entering the garage she dutifully examines the webbed rodent runs behind rusty tins of paint, the edges of abandoned tools, possible scents on the cardboard boxes of old crockery amongst the collapsing wellingtons and other remnants of household life.

The end of her investigations brings her to the cosy kitchen where a soft mew and slow stare reminds Bill it could be tea time for cats. Bill is glad of the distraction. "Alright Sweetie. Let's see if there's a bit of something special for you shall we?" Bill goes through the time-honoured cat satisfying ritual. "I'll need you soon – We're going to do a dark deed." Expecting loyalty from cats is a foolish folly but Bill has had a drop of Dutch courage which let the feeling out. Let him explain:

I started working for Simon in 1976 – The drought summer – He needed a man to look after his plants while he was away. He was an amateur botanist and went to great lengths to grow foreign plants. He tried exposing tomato seeds to radioactivity. But the greenhouse is still intact so we didn't get any monster mutants! Everything was very carefully recorded in his notebooks. He wanted, no, needed, precision. An easy man to work for as he told you what he was trying to do, why it was important and how you could help him – you couldn't help but volunteer to do the best you could. He made everything seem so worthwhile and worth your best try. Can you imagine a man like me talking to plants as I watered them? Well I did 'cos "come along do your little best" is contagious.

Simon is a bachelor. It's funny but I can't imagine him having a wife. Just one of those things I suppose. Oh he liked women – One time he came back from a conference in Australia and telling me about the gorgeous girls; and perhaps I should try my luck out in a vibrant, growing country where there's plenty of 'sun and sheilas'. I'll always remember that...

...Sorry I'm supposed to be telling you about Simon. "Come on Sweetie let's look at the scrapbook. Tch-tch. Up you come you scheming seed-bed digger you – I know what you plant there you toad. There will be a short test afterwards so pay ... umm anyway" Bill takes a drop more whisky, settles the cat in the crook of one arm and takes the plunge into Simon's life.

Born 1916. Windsor, Berkshire. Father's occupation: Stockbroker. Only child. Here he is as a chubby kid on a rug with baby-grin and huge awe-filled eyes gazing at the photographer. Privileged childhood. Public school then mathematics at Oxford. Here's a studio family portrait: Simon formally dressed, aged five perhaps, model aeroplane in hand is caught looking straight at the camera. Here he is in cricketing gear; and the officer cadets. Here a confident young student in his motor car. Apparently there was a group of them that had the motto "Better cars" not faster or noisier. His hobby turned into a job at Austin motors - Austins were in Oxford. A maths graduate had to pick up practical engineering pretty quickly, which he did and soon became a thorn in the side of the established production staff as he suggested

improvements with the figures to prove his point.

Here there are two blank spaces with captions. "Judith North Yorks moors 1938", and "Judith Hampton sanatorium 1939". Judith must be a girlfriend – I don't know any more. Did the love of his life desert him for another or did he watch her die of TB? Possibly by then he was in the army and wanted to be with her? Or later felt he should have been instead of fighting the army.

'Fighting the army' is a typical 'Simon' phrase. "The reason you are in power is that you won yesterday's battle but today's battle may be different. The reason people are dying is that hospitals are staffed by people who don't know any better."

With war inevitable it was a difficult decision for him whether to stick with manufacturing, by then they were building a huge fighter plane factory, or volunteer for the army. He regretted not being able to do both but the Army with all its faults gave him the opportunity to learn how to fix them. "If I'd stayed in the factory we may have made a few more Spitfires with a bit less effort, but all I would have been doing is keeping the system going. In the army I was lucky enough to be able to bypass blockages under the smokescreen of war." He became an engineer in the Medical Corps. Here are some cheerful photographs in Tunis. This one is of Simon and some capable looking chaps relaxing in front of a three-tonner. Difficult to see now, but painted on the side is 'Major Jump's three tons of fun'. Probably his mobile workshop where he repaired and improvised. "My guys were basically motor mechanics and electricians but every one, except the cook – he was a psychopath, would study delicate medical equipment when off-duty. They'd have a private hoard of specialist parts and be known as the 'something king' or the perhaps say 'the anaesthetist's friend'. Those chaps who would quietly spend hours plagued by desert flies studying any instruction book they could get their hands on were an inspiration to me." I know Simon was their inspiration. Here's to you mate!

He told me "Young men in an operating theatre need all the help they can get – and that helps the other young men who are lying on the tables." I asked him if he watched the operations and he said yes. "But I thought about it, and although I would come away thinking of possible improvements to tools and techniques – even calculating 'lives per hour' – I couldn't imagine doing the surgeon's job. You see when a mechanic is looking at something that's broken he's always got the option to salvage the useful bits and fill in a write-off chitty."

This is a funny photograph. Simon is alone in the driving seat of a filthy American army jeep, wearing a US-style helmet with one of those light-cum-reflectors that doctors sometimes wear on their foreheads fixed on it. "How is it?" He'd say "That Italian wine tastes of sun-baked vineyards when all I remember is being covered in freezing mud?" The go-ahead, technologically advanced Americans just loved him. I think he was a bit ashamed later at how easily he changed sides. Anyhow, that's how, after the war he designed hospital equipment in the states. Here is a glossy publicity photo of Simon in an immaculate business suit in front of a cabinet with gas bottles, tubes and dials.

This is interesting: Here is a full page advertisement of him with a dozen electronic components in his open palm - "My job is to make people better at making people better." After the headline it goes on: "Today the Meditex corporation sells state of the art equipment to more than 50 countries around the world. You all know the details – just check the Meditex catalogue everyone uses. But the money-saving, time-saving, life-saving devices to go in *tomorrow's* catalogue haven't been perfected yet - so that's why I need *your* help. I have brilliant scientists who don't do ops on babies. I have alchemist metallurgists who don't replace hips. I have engineers that don't watch people die. Please let me send them to you – call Free on etc. etc. – Your call could save lives." I believe every word of that is his.

That way he got to know all the progressive surgeons in the West. He also had some difficult dealings with inspired innovators from behind the Iron Curtain. I remember after visits to the Eastern Bloc in the 80s – in his business an international reputation lasts you well past normal retirement age – he would come back depressed. He'd try to explain: "Some of those guys are brilliant. They've reduced everything to the bare essentials. I know I have the know-how and technology to help them further but they can't afford it, and perhaps I wouldn't be allowed to sell the computer stuff anyway. I have seen what it's like on the other side – they have dreams, nightmares and alcohol. At least in the West we have a fix. The price may not be cheap but while we have fixes it we have hope." He didn't need to work by then of course: Royalties on inventions, and a long and successful business career, but making the world a little bit better was all he knew. Here is a menu in Russian and English for the XII neo-natal world congress dated 6th February 1995. On it is sketched a hand with a rings on the fingers with attachments: A miniature light, a spring clip, a magnifying glass and a drill.

About then he came back from a conference sad and unsettled. I guess that his generation had faded away and he didn't fit in with changed ideas. Having worked for him for nearly 20 years I got round to asking him if he'd finally retired. I got a very weary "Yes I suppose so". "We all have to stop playing when the whistle goes" I said. Quite quickly he brightened up, if I'd been a woman he'd have kissed me! "You're making me better. Well done". I suppose when you spend so much time with a fixer you get used to thinking about fixing things. Now the patient had come to my hospital I had to find a cure. "What will you do? Gardening? Or some hobby that you had to give up long ago?" To see him drift into a coma of mellow contemplation is a picture which I will always remember.

"Bill, you have done me a great favour today and I am now going to ask for another. If I should be suffering from something incurable I'd like to share a last drink with you when there are no more corks to be drawn. In the back of the bottom drawer of the filing cabinet is a tobacco tin marked 'Ta ta for tears' – it's what nursie used to say when I'd fallen or been scared. 'Ta ta for tears' and the brave young man would get a little older. In that tin you'll find a phial to be mixed into a glass of brandy." The remaining photos show Simon with constructions and contraptions in the garden and greenhouse.

Thank you for listening. I should have done this before but there's a difficult thing I have to do before it is too late. "Off you get Sweetie - I know it's not fair – Come on time to go. Let's hope this won't take long."

A goblet and a tumbler are warming on a tray by the Aga. Bill goes to the study to discover the Ta Ta for Tears tin. For a moment he is afraid that he wouldn't be able to find it – but here it is. Back in the kitchen he finds there are no instructions for opening a glass ampoule! Gardening gloves might be best... With a lot of sweat the neck is broken surprisingly easily and cleanly. He pours the tiny amount of bright fluid into the goblet making sure of the last drop then carefully puts the empty ampoule aside for later disposal. A slug of brandy for Simon and a drop of whisky for himself complete the preparations. He switches on the hall light and carefully carries the tray upstairs.

By the odd ear swivel and occasional curious look, the cat gradually changes from a study in cosy meditation into a sleuth. Eventually she decides to attend to the mysteries of the night outside. Later Bill returns, draws the curtains, pours a generous measure then sits at the table to start a lonely vigil. He considers the fact that there are three empty impressions and two unused phials nestling in the cotton wool lining of the tobacco tin.