

The Gentlemen's Outfitter by Peter Morford

The Crown is a Tudor inn, complete with exposed beams, a section of wattle and daub wall protected by glass; low doorways to the toilets, and a black-oak bar marked with ancient carved graffiti. At one end of the bar there is a high revolving chair, bolted to the floor. At that place is a brass plate sunk into the woodwork of the bar. It reads "In memory of George Birnie, a hero." But there's more to the story than the passing of a respected local trader and regular patron.

His shop was a few doors from the Crown, almost opposite my office. I'm an accountant and Sheila and I live in a flat on the second floor over our offices. Enjoying a leisurely breakfast we can watch the commuters hurrying to their jobs, happy with the thought that we can be in business by walking down-stairs stairs where my secretary will be opening the mail.

I remember when George inherited the business from his father; expanded it and opened a ladies' section for his young wife to run. On Market Days the farmers bought his thorn-proof tweeds and rugged outdoor gear while the wives could usually find what they wanted in "Lady Birnie's." For years his shops were the place to go for the whole family. As his trade prospered he asked me to audit his accounts and from that time a lasting friendship was begun

A man of regular habits was George. You always knew when it was 8.30 because that's when he would come striding up the street from his house, one mile, 15 minutes away, and let himself into his shop. At exactly 9 o'clock it was open for business. A few minutes later his wife, Jennifer, would have parked in the Riverside car-park and, as often as not, would walk into the shop with the day's first customer.

He always shut for lunch at 1 o'clock. They would go the bank then eat at The Crown. At 5.30 you would see Jennifer going to her car. George always walked home, dressed appropriately for the weather and I know that he expected his tea to be ready for him at exactly 5.50.

While George catered for the farming community his wife served their ladies. On market days the town was crowded and their shops prospered. He also owned five shops and an office building.

A few years ago a new shopping mall opened three miles out of town. The era of Next and revitalised niche stores was born. Our old High Street was in decline and, for the first time, there was always room in the car-park. Then came rumours that the weekly Market would be moved. The town was dying.

I remember a meeting in my office. George, Jennifer and I were reviewing the accounts.

"Your costs are going up and sales are down," I said, stating the obvious.

"I may have to let my assistant go. He's had an offer from Debenhams. And Lady Birnie sales have slipped even more. As you know, two of my shops are now empty and I'm having trouble finding a decent tenant. It may have to be Red Cross and Oxfam, at reduced rents."

“Never mind, cheer up George. Let’s fix a Sunday dinner at the Country Club. How about next Saturday week – in ten days time?”

”Sounds good,” he said. “We’ll meet you there. 12.30.”

“Not 12.35?”

“No – 12.30”

Just to tease him, Sheila and I set off in good time with intention of getting one drink ahead. It was barely 12.15 when we took our glasses to the lounge where we were to meet.

“He’s late,” Sheila said when it was 12.40. Five minutes later he appeared, alone. I stood up to get him a drink. “Where’s Jennifer?”

“Gone.”

“Gone where?”

He took his drink and sunk it in one, ordered another. “Left me. Here – this is what she wrote.”

“Are you sure you want me to see it?”

“Go on read it.”

The note was short and to the point. It said that after 15 years of marriage and no children she wanted one last chance to have a family of her own. She still loved him and hoped they would still be friends. Her new lover wanted her to join him in London. She would arrange to collect her things. She wanted a divorce but she would make no claim on his assets.

I handed to letter back. “I can’t blame her really,” he said. “There’s the age gap. She’s only forty, and I’m 60. I kept my dad’s *Birnie and Son* sign just in case, but it never seemed to happen.” He paused. “Ah, here’s the waiter. Let’s eat.”

At lunch we acted in the way of people keeping off the subject foremost in our minds. We talked shop, politics and the books we had been reading as if nothing traumatic had happened. Perhaps nothing had. Afterwards we all went out for a walk around the golf course and when it started to rain we hurried back to the clubhouse for tea and cakes. Later, at home, Sheila said “I wonder what will happen to the shop. He won’t want to run the Ladies’ section and he can’t justify a paid helper.”

For a few months George carried on as well as he could but I could see that he was concentrating on the menswear sales. As might be expected, when the women had no reason to visit the shop their husbands stopped coming. The shopping mall was thriving at his expense.

I could see it that George was as punctual as ever, opening his doors at 9 o’clock and then taking his seat behind the counter. I could see him reading his paper, going into the back to fix himself a drink, coming back to read a book. Sometimes he would have only one or two customers in the whole day. He still changed his window display as regularly as ever but it seemed to me that he was still aiming at a literally dying clientele. He offered suits and dress shirts and ties, overcoats and trilby hats to people who now dressed in jeans and sweaters, anoraks and baseball caps worn the wrong way round.

Three months later was the end of his financial year and he was in my office for our business meeting. I had prepared the Profit and Loss – that is, Loss -Accounts. His stocks were not being replaced.

“From these figures it looks as though I should sell out and retire,” he said.

“The snag is –“

“Who’d buy a failing shop? No, I’d rather close down and find a decent tenant.”

“Your properties bring you in a tidy income,” I said.

“But for how long? I’ve still got two empty units – four if you include our shops. And there’s worse. The Blake Building Society is being taken over by the Co-op. The Blake is my oldest and steadiest tenant – my dad signed them up thirty years ago. The lease expires in six months and they’ll be gone. Know anybody who wants to hire a strong room?”

I gave him his Annual Report and told him I would file his Income Tax returns in the usual way. I gave him my Fee Account and he winced.

“It’s nearly 2 o’clock, I must get back,” he said, hurrying off in pretence that his punctuality mattered any more.

During the next few months he tried to sell his business as a going concern “With great scope for development.” No takers. He then had a closing down sale and that pulled in a few customers.

“What now?” I asked him over a pint.

“I’ll pass the goods through the trade – but I’ll keep all the things that are my size – and yours if it’s any good to you.”

Sheila and I bought what we wanted. George took down the *Birnie and Son* sign and an estate agent started to advertise the premises.

We were interested to see how George would take to retirement. After all, he was an energetic 60. He joined the Golf Club and took his punctual habits to the game. He would only tee-off at 8.30am or 3pm because, he said, he still liked his proper meal times. When he wasn’t playing golf he would take long walks. In the rain he would be trench-coated and hatted. But central to his week would always be his daily session at The Crown where a few of his old customers still gathered. He liked to be in his place by 11 o’clock.

Within a few months The Coffee Company took his shop on a seven-year lease and his bank became an Indian restaurant. Oxfam and Red Cross took his other shops at a reduced rental and the Birnie properties were again fully occupied.

“**Do you** think he’s going downhill?” Sheila asked me.

“Perhaps he is.”

“I think he’s putting on a show. He’s pretending to be busy, keeping up with his friends.”

“He’s a bit – well, sombre at times. He’ll be missing Jennifer; wondering how she’s getting on. He told me the other day that he hadn’t heard anything from her since she went to London. Perhaps she’s a busy mother of twins.”

Sheila said, “He told me that he hadn’t done anything about a divorce. Didn’t seem to be any point, he told me.”

I thought about his last words. Perhaps that summed up his present mood. Sheila said that she thought he was drinking more than before, drowning his sorrows.

“He feels redundant, having nothing to do except live on his rents and capital. He’s not a very good golfer either.”

“Let’s invite him to dinner on your birthday,” I said. “We could go to –“

“Better still, let’s have it here. It’s friendlier than a restaurant. He’ll like that.”
As usual, Sheila was right.

After a particularly good dinner we were sitting round the fire, sharing a bottle of port.

“What are you doing for Christmas, George?” I asked.

“Too far ahead.”

“It’s only three months. We’re thinking of a cruise – a couple of weeks in the Med, a look at the Pyramids – that sort of thing. Why don’t you come with us?”

“I’ll think about it.” He looked at his watch. “I’d better be off. It’s 11 o’clock and I’ve got an early start tomorrow. Thanks for a great evening,” he said, putting on his coat and heading for the door.

It was raining hard so I offered him a lift but he said he’d rather walk “To help me to settle my stomach.”

“Are you suffering from my cooking?” Sheila said with a grin.

“Whoops! Oh, I nearly forgot – I’ve got something for you,” he said. “I want you to put this envelope in your safe and only open it if anything happens to me.”

“I don’t want your Will.”

“It’s not a Will. It’s a letter. You may never need to see it – but please take it.”

I agreed. “You’re sure about the lift?”

“I’d rather walk. Keep the car for longer journeys. I’m off to Scotland in the morning.”

“Tackling the Munros?” I asked.

“No. Going to the Burrell Gallery. Thanks again.”

We watched him march down the hill to the bridge.

A few days later we received a picture postcard from Glasgow. In the message space he had written “You should see this place. It’s magnificent. Best collection of Impressionists. Back Wednesday- GB”

A few days later Sheila and I were in The Crown. Jack, the barman served us our drinks. He asked, “Where’s your friend George – haven’t seen him for three weeks? If you see him first, tell him we’ve kept his chair warm for him.”

It must have been another month before we saw him again, going into The Crown. It was 10.30, raining hard enough to challenge his smart trench coat. A sudden gust snatched his umbrella from his hands and he had to chase it. He did not look amused.

“Let’s see how he’s getting on,” Sheila said, leading the way.

“I stayed an extra few weeks,” he said. “Didn’t seem much point in hurrying back. And when I do – look at the weather – it’s worse than Scotland.”

“We got your card – where else did you go?”

“I stayed in my hotel. The weather you see....” His voice tailed off.

There didn’t seem much else to say. We finished our drinks and went back to my office.

“The man’s in the dumps.”

“Missing his business,” I added.

“This weather’s enough to send you round the bend,” Sheila said. “Have you seen the river?”

“I’ve just heard the weather report. We’re in for another soaking.”

For the next two days it rained almost ceaselessly and the shops down the hill by the river were being sandbagged. From my office I could see the water running into the Riverside car park. By lunchtime I knew it was getting serious. Sheila and I went down to the bridge.

The river level was now nearly ten feet above normal, a brown frothing torrent, carrying a mess of branches and rubbish. Then we saw the car, low in the water, spinning in the surge. The man on the top of the car struggled to pull his child after him. He must have seen the bridge, and realised that if he stayed where he was he’d hit it at 15 mph. Helplessly we watched him pull a small boy onto the roof before the car spun round and hit the bridge and they both were in the water, racing under the arch.

We crossed to the downside of the bridge just in time to see them being driven to the wider part of the river where the water was calmer. Then I saw another man was in the water, seemingly trying to reach them. He was towing a life ring as he swam towards the man and child. For a moment I lost sight of them all and then to my relief, I saw them bob up again. They were a hundred metres away now. A few of us chased down the footpath to see if we could help but the water was moving faster than we could run and they disappeared round the bend.

I only heard later that the child and his father were safe. There was no news about the rescuer.

Three days later that the local news reported that a body had been found four miles downstream and that it had been identified as being that of “George Birnie, well-known business man.” There followed an interview with Don Parsons, the man he saved. The landlord of The Crown said that Mr Birnie was his regular customer and deserved a medal.

I switched the television off.

“We’d better get the letter from the safe,” Sheila said.

I read it through. It was very brief.

“Well?”

“You read it,” I said.

“I’m sorry to involve you in my troubles but as an old and close friend I think you should know. Since I retired and have been living alone it seemed that I took up more space than I should. My father died of cancer at an early age. I’ve lived longer than he did but, unfortunately, I too have an inoperable tumour. As you know, I have no family and existing only for myself has become a bit of a bore. By now you will know what I’ve done.

I thank you for your friendship over the years.

Sheila, ever practical, voiced our thoughts. “So George delayed his own suicide to save two lives.”

“And then, being a determined sort of chap, carried on with the job.”

“That’s heroic,” she said. “What shall we do with the letter?”

“Put it back in the safe.”

Sweet Auburn, by Peter Morford

A visitor seeing Auburn for the first time would see it as a bit of authentic English history.

Come to Auburn and enjoy its Englishness. Take a seat under one of the protected oaks and admire the 800 year old church with its faded sign inviting you to support their repairs fund. There's a Tudor pub, a cafe calling itself "The Old Smithy", and the cottages have wild life gardens and hanging baskets. Gnarled Wisterias reach the thatched roofs. All in all, you might think it's an idyllic place to live.

Opposite the church is Mr Seth's farm gate. Mr Seth is a relic of his own ancestry. His farm, or rather small-holding, is just productive for his ageing family's needs. They have a cow for her fresh un-adulterated milk. They eat their sheep and wear their wool, home-spun by Mrs Seth. They have just enough land to produce all the fruit and vegetables they need. The pigsty and hen-run provide the rest of their diet. He nurses his old Ferguson tractor because it's his only vehicle and is cheap to run on red diesel. They even have a little surplus to sell to the just-surviving village shop.

Sometimes, more for sport, Mr Seth will shoot a few pigeons or rabbits. Recently he shot a drone which had been annoying him. So be not misled by the apparent tranquillity!

The 18th century rectory was built for a large family, but now the widowed vicar lives in just three rooms, leaving the rest to nature. Before the house could fall down through neglect, the Church Commissioners found a retired hedge fund manager who was helicopters on the back lawn used to London prices and knew a bargain when he saw one. "For the price of my flat in Canary Wharf I can live in the country," he told his accountant.

The new owner extended it and generally concealed all the original features. He built a four-car garage for their son's Lamborghini, his wife's purple Range Rover and the orange Humvee he's always wanted for himself. A pair of Harley-Davidsons had their own space. He replaced the low garden wall with railings and a security gate. And now what do we see? An extended old vicarage, renamed Hedgefund House. It is protected by powered iron gates and conspicuous security devices. When they have a party the favoured guests land their.

The neighbours objected to the noise. But the Hedges have their problems too. Unpleasant country smells waft over from the Seth's farm. A tycoon needs his rest without the disturbance of those strident bells counting out the quarters. Mr Hedge, in the spirit of being a decent chap, got himself onto the Parish Council, the better to make his protests. Old Seth turned up at the PC meetings to fight his case. "Get they foreigners out," became the slogan of Sweet Auburn, loveliest village of the plain.

MUTATION by Peter Morford

Bill Duggan hates his job, especially today. His boss has told him that once again, he's been passed over for promotion. When he got back to his office Myra, his secretary, said she wanted a transfer. Apparently that whizz-kid Frazer had poached her. The bastard.

So there he was, standing and sweating on the crowded train. His stomach hurt and he regretted choosing chicken tika sandwich for lunch. He phoned home to tell Molly that he'd be an hour late because the train's going slow on buckled lines. After the sweltered journey it was almost cool for his five-minute walk home. He smelt the curry before he put his key in his door. He kissed Molly briefly and went upstairs to change.

The table was laid. Molly was singing in the kitchen.

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“**Had** a good day, darling?”

It was time for a fib. “Pretty good,” he said, as cheerfully as he could. He took a deep swig of his wine, hoping it will settle his stomach.

Later; “Aren't you hungry Darling?”

“I had a big lunch – client, you know.” Fib number two. He forked a mouthful and complimented her on the chicken curry. Fib three. He said he'd take coffee to the den and check his messages,

In his email and there was a message from the NHS. Or more accurately, a question. “Do you, Mr Duggan, ever feel distressed at work, or wonder why you run your life the way you do? Click here.”

He clicked. Cut to a cheerful tv-personality type of man. “I'm Dr Kennedy and I invite you to take part in an experiment which could change your life for ever. Download the app and follow the instructions when you want to go ahead.”

Thinking it must be all right if it was from the NHS, Duggan tapped *accept*. Dr Kennedy is back.

“New discoveries in genetic engineering are helping millions of folk like you to improve their lives, earn more, be healthier and more successful. If you're interested, press *GO* or, if you'd rather wait until the coast is clear, click *later*.” Bill clicks *later* because Molly is coming into the room. “I see you're busy,” she says.

“It can wait, I'll deal with it in the morning.”

She said, “Panorama's just starting,” He closed his computer. Perhaps he'll have a bit of peace on the 7.35.

What, you will ask, is this all about? I'll tell you. First, it's nothing to do with the NHS. It's a crafty sales effort from the land of quacks and snake-oil salesmen. When Bill opens his laptop in the morning he will be invited to download an address label and send a saliva sample in a phial which he can buy at the pharmacy. Dr Kennedy will run a DNA test. What will he learn? “We'll have your full genome record. William. It may be that your current depression (how does he know about that? Bill wonders) is genetic. We may find genetic defects which may get worse in the future. If we do, we can fix them. From your saliva sample we will know and take action. You, Mr Duggan, will have your genetic code modified. It will be a mutation of your genes which will benefit you NOW. Please

acknowledge your interest by tapping on the *NOW* box.” Bill taps and, on arrival at Victoria Station hurries to Boots for the little phial. He will print out the address label at the office and post it off. He has nothing to lose.

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Yet.

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