

The Art Corps – Chapter Two

by Martin JP Green

It is 1994. The Gilpin Gallery has been standing for over one hundred years. In its shadow Bill Hays is parked up in a six-tonne truck and thinking about the sea. Fifty miles from the nearest coast, his thoughts are out there, his heart seeking the massive impersonal reassurance of the sea. What has brought this on? Is it the sky starting to mass like lead to the West of the sternly classical bulk of the gallery? Is it the wind frisking with the wisps of his white beard? Is it the fact that he is sixty-three years old, dog-tired and prone to bouts of narcotically potent nostalgia?

On this unusually warm and oppressive May evening he could sense a storm about to break and with a frisson of memory was transported back his life as a young man in the Merchant Navy when the elements had routinely asserted their pre-eminence over the fortunes of man. He had seen the world cracked and torn apart by tropical storms on the Indian Ocean and the feeling it had given him of utter personal insignificance had been liberating. It was this sense of liberation for which he was now feeling achingly nostalgic and, instinctively, he reached for his pipe, only to withdraw his hand from his pocket with a wince. He had promised his wife that he would give it up and the old briar lay cold and faintly acrid in his tool bag in the gallery basement. He shook his head, feeling shipwrecked, cast up on the shore of impending old age with a tired body and a mind yearning for everything that had long past. He was imprisoned, shackled to this van, to this tiresome task, to this bloody city, to the gallery which had been his life in effect for the last thirty years. And yet he was not a solitary castaway.

“What time did they say the wagon was coming?” Ted Corker, rattled and prickly, yelled from driver’s window of a smaller adjacent vehicle. He was preoccupied more with the thought of taking his shoes off and getting his feet under the tea table than anything else, including the sea. He was ex-army, in any case, as borne out by acquaintanceship with the environs of Aldershot and a tenuous grasp of basic German - the only useful by products of his two National Service postings. Bill Hays checked his watch.

“Between half three and half four. They were setting off from London at one. Should’ve been here by now. It’s gone five. Maybe you and Dennis ought to get off. I’ll manage on my own if there’s a couple of them as well. It’s only supposed to be a table piece so it shouldn’t be too lunky.”

Bill turned his face away from his colleagues and assumed a well-practised profile suggestive of stoical suffering and usually successful in thawing unrelenting dispositions. Thunder crackled on the horizon and a gusting outrider from the approaching storm cuffed the vehicles as it swept by. Dennis Brookes, sitting alongside his colleague in the smaller van, looked concerned and leaned across his mate’s lap, placing a supporting elbow in a most unwelcome location and provoking an indignant snort.

“Are you sure, Bill? Ah’ve shifted one of that sculptresser’s pieces before and it were a right cowbag! Nearly broke me back liftin’ it. Weather looks a bit iffy and all. Might need to work fast. We’ll ‘ang on, eh Ted?”

Prior to forcibly uprooting the offending elbow, Ted Corker regarded his colleague with the kind of venomous contempt that two years of National Service can engender in an otherwise benign temperament.

“Well, I’m not stopping. It’s my Secure 4U night in case you’ve forgotten and if I miss me shift I’m out of pocket.”

Bill Hays, who loathed conflict and was always ready to sacrifice personal interests in the cause of general harmony, raised a moderating hand. Remaining in tragic profile, though now resigned to the shortcomings of the attitude on one hard-bitten bastard at least, he dispensed absolution.

“Why don’t you both get off? I said half three to half four and you’ve hung on till five. Can’t say fairer than that and I’m grateful. I’m only going to give it another ten minutes in any case. After that they can take their chances.”

“There you are, Dennis! We’ll see you in the morning, Bill.”

Ted Corker fired off this valediction while simultaneously starting the van, engaging first gear and hoisting the steering wheel about. The vehicle jarred into motion and veered off, Dennis Brookes’ face just about visible through the rising dust, framed in the passenger window, his finger raised like a saint in a medieval diptych, the lips parted on the point of benediction.

Bill Hays was alone. The early evening drinkers at the nearby Earl of Altonbury and Surrey were beginning to unwind and the sound of their rising voices over the pulsating drone of the rush hour traffic was like the song of the sirens to the solitary art gallery technician.

“By Christ, I could murder a pint!” he growled, running a hand through his beard as if in search of some kind of psychological ripcord.

His stomach churned with a combination of hunger, thirst and yearning for the pipe he had forsworn, perhaps rather precipitately, to placate his wife after a warm discussion on the prospects of combining retirement with heavy smoking and steady drinking. The pipe had gone, he couldn’t pack in the drinking as well. In God’s name a man could only take so much! And he had felt no qualms in asserting this as they had squared up to each other over dinner. Margery had eyed him steadily as her husband’s passions reached a pitch surprising even the orator himself and had said simply but with ominous certitude:

“We’ll see!”

The words resonated in Bill Hays’ memory and, human nature being what it is, engendered an even more powerful yearning for the forbidden. Insidious, invisible tendrils of temptation slid from the open windows and door of the pub and insinuated their way over the road and into the cab of the van. The occupant fancied he could hear the tantalising collisions of glass, now high-pitched and tinkling with ice, now low-pitched and creamy with froth.

“Ten minutes, then they can take their chances,” Bill croaked, glancing in the rear-view mirror for some sign of affirmation and seeing instead the drawn features of St Francis of Assisi during the throes of his final ascetic privations. He allowed his hesitant eye to pass cursorily over the leathery mask with its crown of downy wisps, its crimped forehead and its sharply indented features. The latter-day St Francis scratched his beard, this time with a real sense of purpose, hoping perhaps to uproot a lump of it, anything to justify shaking a fist at the cruel forces of destiny which had exiled him to sit across the road from a boozer on a hot Spring evening waiting alone for a delivery of God knows what kind of specimen from the Arts Foundation. And now he would have to deal with it, whatever it turned out to be, without the assistance of his two regular henchmen. He cursed his own soft nature which had often made things harder for him than the situation demanded. His wife had frequently and helpfully pointed this self-sacrificial tendency out.

“You’ll be the first volunteer to carry your own coffin!”

Bill cast his mind back to a conversation of several days previously.

"It's a fantastic opportunity!" Candida Knox-Hyams, assistant keeper of the gallery, had assured him with characteristically gushing overstatement. "The piece has been on offer to galleries for ages but no-one has twigged that the Arts Foundation are literally giving it away. We can show it for a bit then maybe tour it with some other pieces from the collection and make something on the hire fee."

Candida was exultant at the prospect of making some personal career headway on the back of this acquisition.

"Have you had a look at it?" Bill had asked with a rising sense of apprehension. Why didn't anyone else want the piece? What was wrong with it? It didn't add up!

"Of course I have...well, a photograph. It looks amazing! It'll sit perfectly in Goodwin. It's described as a 'table piece' so we'll need to rig up a plinth for it. There is a small problem, though."

"Now we're getting there!" Bill mused ruefully to himself

"They have to deliver next Monday or they'll charge us for transportation and, of course, we're shut on Mondays. Now, I'd normally be on hand to open up - absolutely - but I have to be in Oxford on Monday with Julien. We're lending the Gwen John to the Ashmolean. Do you think you could arrange to be here when they arrive, William?" Candida simpered, willing, despite her politically correct creeds, to utilise time-honoured feminine modes of persuasion as the occasion demanded. Bill Hays was almost entirely immune to such tactics, but he had already done a quick circuit of his mind and found no useful excuses languishing there in need of some exercise.

"How big is it?" he enquired suspiciously.

"I don't know exactly, but a table piece can't be all that big, can it? It goes on a table, after all."

His enquiries were nettling her. Why did he always have to get so bogged down in technicalities? Couldn't he see that this was a unique opportunity *and* a freebie. Bill, in his turn was nettled by the rising tone of sarcasm in Candida's voice. He had been here before on far too many occasions and just wanted to close the dialogue with as much useful information and as little acrimony as possible.

"Can you just get an idea of the dimensions to me before Monday and we'll take it from there? Leave me a note in my pigeonhole or something. I've got to get off now. I'm parked on the disabled space and they keep giving me a ticket."

This latter piece of information was, in fact, a fib but one which he had made very good mileage out of since the installation of disabled access at the Gilpin earlier that year. Making for the door, he rounded on her as an important afterthought occurred to him.

"What's it called, this 'table piece'?"

Candida seemed peeved by the incision of the query and floundered for a moment.

"I'm sure we can arrange with the artist for a provisional title for exhibition purposes. I mean, it's the piece that counts, that speaks for itself, really. But it could be awkward, I suppose. School parties and the rest of it. Perhaps I should have a word with Julien."

"There's a problem with the name?" Bill intoned wearily.

Candida looked out of the office window as she answered.

"In a manner of speaking. It's called *Fuck Off Men! You Are All Useless!*"

Someone new to the Bohemian environment of the art world might have started at this disclosure, but Bill Hays had served his time and with the merest twitch of the eyebrows

acknowledged the information, turned creakily and walked through the office doorway with a slightly gouty limp.

“Should go down well with the lads,” he remarked as a sanguine parting shot.

“The artist is an internationally renowned feminist,” Candida amplified in the direction of Bill’s slipstream. She’d have a word with Julien. Julien would have a view on it. Julien had a view on everything.

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Recalling the interview with the Assistant Keeper, Bill Hays shook his head, as he had done on innumerable occasions, with the air of a seasoned campaigner on the Western Front who has lost all faith in the caprices of the securely billeted Generals. He drummed his stiff digits on the steering wheel, becoming alarmed as the understated tattoo he was beating rose in intensity to something inexplicably sonorous. A moment later the explanation offered itself as turgid blots of rain bounced down the windscreen, having already delivered a sound drubbing to the box roof of the truck.

Bill scanned the dripping wing mirror which now presented a very abstract image of the world to his rear, but saw no sign of an approaching delivery vehicle. He glanced at his watch: five fifteen. It was time to start the process of internal dialogue which we all go through when we are the point of doing something against our better judgement.

“Fancy getting them to deliver on a Monday! And what sort of size is it?” (Candida had failed to provide the requisite supplementary information)

“And what’s going on with her and Julien, that’s another thing I’d like to know! Why do both of them have to go gallivanting off to Oxford?”

Shortly after his earlier meeting with Candida, Bill had nodded to Julien Watson, the Director of the Gilpin Gallery, as they crossed on the basement stairs. Pausing to watch him enter the office he had just vacated himself (it was always worth watching Julien in action - you never knew how the simplest activity might turn out) Bill had observed the door close then drift slowly ajar and had overheard a low exchange of voices, a sharp intake of breath, a suppressed screech and something that sounded like a small bronze sculpture of a horse striking a high, scholarly forehead. He let the mystery lie. All would emerge in time. His mind returned to current preoccupations.

“Half three, they said, half three!”

His left foot was pumping the clutch pedal in frustration, his left hand applying pressure on the stick towards first gear, his right hand caressing the ignition key. The deepening deluge had snuffed out the brightness of the early evening and now the lights of the Earl of Altonbury and Surrey gleamed across the rain strafed street, offering refuge to an old salt emptied of energy but full of stories. Bill’s tongue stirred in his mouth like an alligator which has been basking in the sun for a couple of hours too long. The ignition key turned seemingly of its own volition.

“I’ll just pull out and lock the gate, then pop across for a swift half.”

Five minutes later the jaw was set, the eyes steady and the liver quaking in anticipation.

“Just a couple of pints. Can’t really call that drinking! They must’ve shunted their schedule round. They’ll be dropping in tomorrow. Bert can sort it out. I’ve had it!”

Having decided to abandon the situation as a dead loss, Bill Hays felt some of the vigour return to his limbs and, as the diesel engine was clearing its throat, he bounded down from the cab and made for the gates of the gallery service passage. The rain pummelled his

sparsely fronded scalp but his change of mood welcomed the watery ministrations even as they extended anointing fingers behind his ears and down his neck.

“A cigar would be nice. Would Margery smell it, though?”

He closed one half of the gates, deep in conspiratorial consultation with his own, highly experienced worse half. But his wife’s words of warning echoed, tolling a knell in his belfry.

“We’ll see!”

“She’ll neuter me!” he reasoned, and with a shrug dismissed any thoughts of the weed.

Scampering back to the truck like the Crimson Pirate, Bill leapt aboard, weighed anchor and cast off, heaving to only in order to pull the wrought-iron gates together behind him and slip the padlock shackle home. Once behind the wheel again, the Crimson Pirate lay in a course for the Earl of Altonbury and Surrey, a voyage which involved parking the van on the other side of Altonbury Street opposite the Gallery steps and then crossing the pavement.

But belay, there! A great white flank reared out from the gloom, blocking off the lights from the inn as it came about on the humble six-tonner, its headlights pinning the smaller vehicle down and its massive engine proclaiming mechanical superiority from every rivet. Bill Hays was outgunned. His head dropped. The Arts Foundation had arrived.

The rainwater which had soothed his brow and salved his chafing collar line now turned to icy gall and a heavy sense of injustice descended, anchoring him in his seat. His own engine ticked over but in a submissive kind of way in the presence of a clear pack leader. A male in a blue polo shirt and matching cotton trousers jumped down from the white apparition and approached the apologetically mumbling local vehicle. Said male form, which had clearly been enriched over the years by means of conscientious application of lager and chips, sidled up to Bill Hays’ van and an unprepossessing face steamed up the cab window. The eyes widened in recognition.

“Wotcher, Billy. ‘Avin’ a little kip were we?”

The harsh cockney tones echoed off the Gallery walls as if rebuffed by their northern reserve. The window between the two men lowered, removing the physical barrier, although a psychological one remained firmly in place.

“Evening, Eric,” said Bill Hays (what an effort that took!) “Good trip?”

“Complete hen’s arse! Pile up just North of Newport Pagnell. Ten-mile tailback. Bleedin’ diabolical! Bet you thought we wasn’t coming.”

“One lives in hope! Not on your own, surely?”

“Nah, got Meatballs with me. Been fartin’ for England all the way up. There’ll be another ‘ole in the ozone layer now I’ve opened the cab door. It’s ever since ‘e went veggie. Talk about gone with the wind!”

“Nasty! What brings Big Bertha up to Cliffefield? Much on?”

"Nah, just you and a collection from the Hatton."

Bill Hays felt ice forming in his veins. The obvious question, given ‘Big Bertha’s’ outsize proportions was “How big is this table piece?” Experience told him not to tempt providence by articulating his fears. He shrugged and shook himself. He’d be off in another twenty minutes - tops! With such positive thoughts he re-opened the service road gates. Meanwhile Eric and ‘Meatballs’ were lowering the huge tail-gate of the articulated truck. A case materialised in the very sturdy arms of the co-driver which could have contained a colour television of average size. That must be it. That must be the piece.

“Your table piece, Uncle Bill,” announced Eric

“Thought so. Right, gents, just show me where to sign, we’ll whip it inside then it’s over to the All and Sundry for a swift one.”

“Old your ‘orses, Billy. What about *Fuck Off, Men!*”

“Isn't that it?” the question ringing like a last plea for clemency.

The faces of the two Londoners took on the aspect of castle jailers who knew the grisly fate of an internee before he had been let into it himself. Eric crooked his forefinger and beckoned Bill Hays to the rear of the truck. There was a dull thud of thunder. Bill dragged himself into the required viewing position and looked up. His features registered blank incomprehension as he scanned the contents of the huge container truck.

“That plywood screen, Eric, I can't see past it.”

“That’s not a screen, Billy boy, that’s the back end of a crate - *your* crate!”

Bill Hays mounted the tail flap with faltering steps and Eric raised him aloft hydraulically. He stepped into the aperture of the trailer, hands clenching and unclenching, then stopped in his tracks and swallowed on nothing.

“That’s not a crate. It’s a sodding shed!” Bill croaked.

Eric and Meatballs exchanged glances rich with personal satisfaction. The response had been exactly as desired and, had they actually been castle jailers, they would at this point have been twirling their keys with glee.

“You got a forklift truck, Billy Boy?” inquired Eric who suspected that no such animal resided at the Gilpin Gallery. “That’s how we got the bastard on!”

Bill was mesmerised, gawping at the monstrosity confronting him, trawling through his considerable mental archive in an attempt to locate any experience with a crate of comparable dimensions. No, this had to be the biggest! The rain mocked him, spitting in his ear and ganging up in his beard.

“No, we've only got a pallet truck. Wouldn’t do it. Not big enough. Need to think of something else,” he rambled forlornly.

He was lost. He thought of Candida and under his sodden and faintly odiferous tweeds the blood began to run hot and brew steam from the crevices. A bloody table piece! He shook his head, seeming to have come to a decision of sorts.

“Look, lads, I can't see us getting this one in between us. We’d never get it through the lift doors round the back to start with and that means the only other way is straight up the Gallery steps and through the front door. What say you bring it back tomorrow on your way South and we’ll get the full team on it?”

“No can do, Uncle William. We’ve got a right bundle to pick up in Newcastle. This bastard has to come off or we're stuffed.”

Bill closed his eyes resignedly, took the bit between his teeth and hacked on to alternative tactics with the adroitness of the seasoned tactician.

“How about unpacking it? We could take the piece in unpacked and stow the crate in the garage round the back?”

Eric scowled but had to concede, albeit resentfully, the possibilities the proposal offered. His instincts were not asleep, however, and he was soon able to lay hands on a spanner to throw into the works.

“Could give it a go, can’t get it wet, though. Artist’s strict instructions.”

Bill would not be deflected.

“We’ve got polythene and blankets.”

Meatballs in the meantime was up in the truck gently kicking the huge crate in an apparent attempt to keep it in submission and deter it from sprouting any further awkward angles or protrusions

“Let’s get a look at it at least,” suggested Bill in a tone which denoted the passing of desperation and the assertion of resigned fatalism. Once again, Eric and Meatballs exchanged glances, this time indicating that they might as well do as suggested but wouldn’t make a habit of it. Ten minutes later the final screw in the front panel was loosened.

“It went in this way, through the front, like. You’d need a crane to drop it in through the top.”

Eric supplied this information while scrutinising the grizzled and drawn features of the local man. He was almost ecstatically fulfilled to see him wince and then (Oh Heaven!) shudder convulsively. Finally, with Eric on one side and his solid co-driver on the other, the front panel of the crate was lifted clear in an awed hush appropriate to the opening of some curse-laden sarcophagus of antiquity. Bill Hays’ jaw sagged in disbelief as he beheld the contents. He had been hoping against hope and indeed experience that the piece would be much smaller than its huge cuboid chrysalis. But the creature which revealed itself was not of a shrinking or diminutive species.

“This cannot be!” Bill declaimed as if from the summit of Mount Sinai. But “be” it could, apparently. *Fuck Off Men, You Are All Useless* was a car.

It was no difficult task for the elderly man to identify with artefact of the crushed male figure clawing upwards vainly from beneath the chassis, the head a mat of raddled furze, although the effect it wrought on him was not perhaps one anticipated by the artist. How to get it all indoors without wrecking it was pretty high on the list of imperatives.

“How the hell can you call that a table piece? She said it was a table piece!” Bill ranted till even Eric sensed a dilution of his own sadistic pleasure. The Londoner seemed nonplussed initially, then cogitative and finally smugly self-assured.

“I think I know what’s ‘appened, Billy boy. Take a gander at this.”

He held out the Arts Foundation consignment note of which Candida had been sent a copy.

“Camille de Montparnasse,” it read, “Fuck Off Men, You Are All Useless/Table Piece.”

“You thought it was just one thing, didn’t you?” Eric wheezed, his glee barely repressed. “But it’s two!” (How he resisted the urge to add “Yippee!” is difficult to conceive.) The sarcasm was lost on Bill who was busy imagining the sensation of Candida’s thin white neck in his tightening grip.

“Where’s Dennis and Ted?” the hitherto silent Meatballs queried. “Thought they’d be in on this job.”

Bill still had sufficient self-respect to recognise the necessity of covering up the fact that he had sent his assistants home early. He could imagine the reaction the information would elicit from the satirical Eric.

“They’re off on a trip. Urgent collection from Cardiff. Last minute job for Julien. You know the score.”

A well-rehearsed series of tuts and disparaging grunts emanated from all present in ritualistic token of despair at the unworldliness of curators in general. Bill knew which buttons to press.

“Well, without bodies, Mr Hays, we’re not going to get this chuff into the gallery, not even with Meatballs at the back of it, jet thrusters full on!”

Satisfied that he had handed the problem squarely to the recipient, Eric drew a pack of cigarettes from his trouser pocket. Bill Hays stared at him as he lit one, becoming strangely still and intent, like a predatory beast about to pounce.

“Give me one of those!” he commanded with the icy authority of one possessed. Starting back slightly, Eric obeyed without hesitation, wondering at his own uncharacteristic compliance.

“Thought you was a pipe merchant, Billy!” chaffed Eric but not without some uneasiness. Bill Hays had a certain forbidding aura about him, a sense of menace. He was summoning a strength from deep within, something that had known the full force of the elements, that had understood the utter triviality of existence, that had felt life teeter at the edge of the precipice, that had shrugged with indifference in the face of it all. He lit the cigarette and drew. It was the kind of drag that Tamburlaine the Great might have drawn when he realised it was all up as regards conquering everything in sight. Mesmerised by the transformation in the old man, the Arts Foundation drivers stared at him, waiting for him to breathe out again. They waited and waited. How long could he keep it in? Surely he would pass out! At last Bill Hays exhaled with a deep, visceral sigh and, gasping, the watchers witnessed the air come out clear from his lungs.

“Christ, Bill, where did you learn to do that?” queried the awestruck Eric, dizzy even with witnessing the feat. Bill’s eyes had glazed over, his hand was trembling slightly but his expression was one of serenity.

“Eh? Oh, Merchant Navy,” he replied from the midst of a nicotine induced reverie.

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It is the nature of a reverie to offer the subject some respite from the importunities of time. But time clattered back on to the agenda in the form of a blue box-van drawing up alongside the three philosophers, the eager face of Dennis Brookes framed in the windscreen, blinking between the strokes of the wipers. Bill experienced a triple-pronged reaction at this juncture, firstly surprise, then gratitude and some relief at the extra pair of hands, then a spasm of anxiety with the recollection of his recent bogus explanation for Dennis’s absence. In the wake of his success with Eric in the field of hypnotic ordnance, he tried to muster the power again and send a telepathic salvo in Dennis’s direction as he climbed down from the cab. Had he been in a position to articulate it, it would have run something like this.

“For Christ’s sake, Dennis, keep your mouth shut for once in your life and don’t drop me in it!”

It was Eric, however, who took the verbal initiative.

“Dennis, my son! We was just talkin’ about you. What you done with Ted? Murdered ‘im at last? How was Cardiff?”

“Eh?”

Dennis was not customarily at a loss for words but this, even from a Londoner, was pretty difficult to get hold of. Eric persisted with his line of enquiry.

“Just back from the valleys aren’t we? You must ‘ave broken the land speed record on the M5!”

“What the effin’ ‘ell are you on about, Eric?”

Bill intervened hastily at this point

“Dennis! Didn’t expect to see you again tonight. Pleased though, yes indeed!”

He clapped his colleague on the shoulder rather over emphatically, simultaneously massaging him away from his cockney inquisitor and towards the looming work of art. They stood side by side and beheld it, Dennis for the first time. He was suitably stirred.

“Jeezus! Now that *is* a cowbag! What in the name of Christ are we supposed to do with it? It’ll never go in the lift! How do we get it off the waggon! It’s an Allegro, in’t it? Used to ‘ave one o’ them. Bit ‘eavy to steer. What the bloody ‘ell was Eric going on about Cardiff for?”

“He’s under a lot of stress - that sculpture and all. What a handful!” Bill explained. And then Meatballs has been a bit on the windy side all the way up. Can’t blame the lads. Londoners, of course!”

With the final observation, Bill had pressed the critically apt button and, had Dennis been a cockerel, the feathers on his neck would now have been rising with territorial self-assertion.

“Aye! Londoners! Chuffs!” he growled.

Having diverted his colleague’s attention from the potential source of embarrassment Bill felt able to pursue a more routine line of dialogue.

“What brings you back, in any case? The way Ted set off I thought I’d be lucky to see either of you again this side of Christmas!”

“We went to his place first. ‘E’d got to get changed. I said I’d take the van back to Eccleswood. When I got there and Margery said you ‘and’t turned up yet. She didn’t look too ‘appy neither.”

Bill winced at this disclosure, correctly interpreting the imaginings of his wife and feeling both wounded and virtuous in the knowledge of his innocence - as only a seasoned offender can feel. Dennis watched the clouds pass across his colleague’s visage then proceeded with his narrative.

“Anyway, ah reckoned things might ‘ave gone a bit pear shaped at this end so back I come!”

Bill Hays regarded his colleague of - what? it must be almost twenty years - with something approaching genuine affection. True, they’d had their differences over that time, who wouldn’t have? Some towering arguments in fact. But they’d always sorted things out. And had Dennis ever let him down? Never! He could be a complete pain in the arse but he was solid. He was a rock.

“Dennis, lad...” (Dennis Brookes was, in fact, sixty-one years old) “Dennis, lad, it does me a power of good to see you but what difference it’ll make I can’t honestly say. You’ve been at this game for a good while. How are we going to shift that sod out of there and into Goodwin without a miracle?”

As ever, Dennis was ready with a positive contribution.

“It’ll ‘ave to come out of its crate for starters. We’ll need to rig up some kind of ramp and shove it up the steps. We could do it, the four of us.....mebbe.”

The two local men eyed their counterparts from the Smoke with cautious mistrust. Eric and Meatballs were slouching watchfully like two schoolboys who have contrived successfully to dodge games day. Bill adopted a cajoling tone.

“We reckon we should wheel it off the truck and try to shunt it up the steps. Have to get some boards to lay down. There’s a stack in the garage. Are you feeling up to it, Eric?”

“You do what you like, mate! There’s nothing about installing it in this note ‘ere. Just deliverin’ it.”

Bill shook his head in a fair imitation of indulgent good humour.

“We can’t accept delivery of it out here, Eric. It’s not covered by our insurance until it’s inside the gallery. Until then it’s your responsibility. Now, me and Dennis fancy going across to the All and Sundry for a couple while you sort it out.”

Bill was weary of bearing the brunt of the responsibility and twice as weary of Eric’s incessant derision. He felt it was time to square things up a bit and the bluff worked. Eric bridled in panic.

“ ‘Ang on, ‘ang on! What about this rain? I told you we can’t get it wet!”

Excellent! He had bitten. Bill grasped the rod.

“Dennis, take my keys and nip up to the workroom and grab those blankets we’ve used to wrap *The Stones of Silence* up in. There should be some polythene knocking about as well. Bring whatever there is and anything else you think might come in handy.”

Dennis Brookes was off like a retriever. Minutes later he emerged from behind the gallery - unrecognisable under a huge cocoon of grey blankets, bubble-wrap and polythene sheeting, lurching blindly into the yard and clamouring for directions. Bill obliged.

“This way, right a bit, left a bit. Whoa there! Yes, should be enough there to wrap it, just about.”

“No point goin’ ‘alf measures!” Dennis observed sagaciously.

Bill winked at the gawping Eric and Meatballs. Dennis was giving his demonstration of ‘Northern Man at Work’ a spectacle designed specifically to inspire awe in effete southerners but which, more often than not, drew blank incomprehension and occasionally ridicule.

“C’mon, you lot,” the little man exhorted from beneath his wadding. “Let’s get lively. There’s some ties on me van. We can truss up the jalopy.”

He tossed the formidable bundle of packing on top of the crate with a spectacular running jump.

“We’ll ‘ave to get it out of the crate to wrap it,” Eric observed. “And if we get it out of the crate there’s only one place to put it - out ‘ere. And out ‘ere it’ll get wet.”

Bill raised his face to the heavens better to read the meteorological signs. The huge pregnant clouds appeared to be circling above them as if waiting for the critical moment to place their next substantial deposit.

“I don’t suppose we can push the crate further back into the van and get the car out inside the truck? No? Didn’t think so! Well maybe we can ease it out a bit at a time and cover each bit as it comes out.”

Dennis Brookes was unimpressed.

“Messy! It’d be better to get ties all around the bugger...you know... criss cross it. This wind’ll lift any shoddy wrapping, I can just see it!”

So could Bill Hays. Damn! The precursors of the imminent heavy shower started to tap on the brim of the ancient trilby he had just donned. Should they wait? An echo of laughter wafted over from the All and Sundry. Bill Hays’ entrails churned.

“What if we rig up a canopy?”

His mind was racing. They’d need more bodies to support it, of course. He descried a muddle of gangling students unravelling themselves from the pub and recognised one of them

as an art student who had been posing nude for the Gilpin's monthly life classes. Without a word to his companions in indecision he sped over the road.

"Knew 'e couldn't resist for long," Dennis commented, miming the act of imbibing deeply for the benefit of the other two onlookers. "Sad, really. Margery'll murder 'im!"

But he had misjudged his leader. Within minutes Bill was among them again with six students in tow, hair smeared around their faces in the downpour, shoulders hunched against the elements. But they were young, they were laughing and, above all, they were handy.

"This is Rachel," he said, gesturing imprecisely. "And these are Rachel's friends. They're going to provide our canopy!"

"What you got in mind, William?" inquired Eric who was eyeing the slender Rachel in a very precise kind of way.

"Dennis, you know that tarp in the garage, the one those archaeologists left last year after that dig they did. Go and get it, will you? Oh, and can you take the blankets and polythene back to the workroom. We're not going to need them now."

Dennis looked at Bill with an expression which rolled away twenty years of genial co-working. Northern Man put his bundle back together Southern style (which is to say at an extremely leisurely pace) and waddled back towards the gallery with several withering glances back over his shoulder. Meanwhile, Bill Hays unfolded his plan.

"I suggest these fine young people file either side of the tail-flap holding the tarpaulin aloft while we drag the car out of the crate. Once we've lowered it to the ground, we'll line it up to the steps and shove it up some planks that Dennis's going to get out of the garage. If we time it right, we can run it up the ramp with the canopy running right on up with it. We'll only get one good go at it. After that we'll be too knackered."

"Can't we just drop the tarp on the bloody car and all shove?" speculated Eric, noticeably less concerned about the well-being of the object in his care now he had been enlisted to help shift it. Bill Hays shook his head.

"No, it'll get muck all over it. Aren't you and Meatballs up to pushing then? Maybe Rachel and her friends could shove instead if you're feeling fragile."

The barb lodged in Eric's ego and he jutted out his jaw, chest and any other masculine protuberances he could muster at such short notice.

"Nah!" he rejoindered gutturally. "Just thinkin' of you two old geezers!"

"We'll do, Eric, we'll do!"

Bill was gaining momentum and confidence now. He could see a way through, although it was a way fraught with potential hazards. Could the four of them get the car up the twelve steps? At least they would be insured if anything went amiss. The kids wouldn't and that would be problematic if any of them were damaged due to an excess of enthusiasm. No, it had to be between the four of them alone. Dennis returned with the tarpaulin which was rolled up like a huge, loosely wrapped cigar.

"We'll need some eight-foot planks and all, Dennis. Four should do it."

Bill knew he was pushing his luck, but the years had taught him how far it could be pushed and how to lubricate the process.

"Need the benefit of your wisdom too, old son! How should we go about getting the motor out of its packing? There's no room to get in and shove and I don't fancy the idea of taking the crate to bits."

Bill Hays waited expectantly for his long serving comrade to cogitate and come up with the answer he could have supplied instantly himself. Dennis raised a finger and his lips

parted as if a bubble were forming in his mouth. The finger was lowered, raised half way, lowered again then raised, straightened and pointed with conviction at the object under consideration.

“We’ll need a rope, two, mebbe, to spread the drag. We tie ‘em to the bumper watchin’ out for that bloke’s ‘ead, and we tug it out. Them chock’s’ll ‘ave to come away and that cross battenin’. The ‘andbrake’ll ‘ave to come off. If we get the tail-flap up....pull the cowbag on to it, stop it....quick, mind. ‘Ave to be quick else it’ll drop off the end. Might just be enough clearance, then lower the flap and roll ‘er off.”

It had been stated more or less as Bill had anticipated but there was the suspicion of a flaw in the line of logic.

“Is the tail lift broad enough to take the car longwise? I don't see how we could get it on sideways. There’s no damn room to spin it round in the back of the waggon!”

Eric eyed the lowered flap and then the still encased Austin Allegro.

“There’ll not be a lot in it. It’s our widest tail-flap. We’ve ‘ad some right gear on this, that right, Meat?”

Meatballs nodded, quoting chapter and verse.

“Telephone box, jet engine, cannon. Shifted an ‘ippo for London Zoo once!”

“Bit like movin’ the relatives for our Meat, eh, son?”

Meatballs pulled a face and grunted grudging appreciation of the witticism. Eric was clearly still enjoying himself although the rain was beginning to permeate his garments at angular points. Bill, whose angular points were by now saturated, voiced further misgivings.

“How do we get the handbrake off if we can’t get into the motor?”

Dennis took this almost personally.

“Bastard! ‘Adn’t thought of that!”

Eric mediated.

“No worries there, mate. It ain’t got no brakes. Artist took ‘em out to put in ‘er own car! Thing is, with strippin’ out the brakes, the motor went adrift when they were puttin’ it in the crate and rolled over Meatball’s foot. No damage to man or machine, though! Once we got it inside the case we just chocked it up in neutral and put them battens across it.”

This was unusually useful and non-vitriolic material from Eric. Nevertheless, Bill was irked by what he saw as excessive zeal on the part of the packers.

“Why did they have to put it in a crate at all?”

Eric supplied the answer in the requisite satirical accent.

“ ‘Cos it's a Work of Hart, ain’t it!”

Bill shook his head in the face of intractable Fate.

“Right then, we go ahead as planned. Denis - ropes from the garage! Eric and Meatballs -chocks and battens away!”

The three of them fell to while Dennis Brookes scuttled off again to the ‘garage’ at the rear of the Gallery. It was called a garage for historical reasons and was actually more of a glory-hole, full of crates, timber, packing, picture frames, plinths, showcases, trolleys, ladders, barrows, boxes and the like, all the paraphernalia needed to support the practical requirements of running an art gallery, all the rammel that was either too bulky or too grubby to bring inside. Dennis and Ted spent a good deal of their time in there although neither man was especially bulky. The two Gallery vans actually resided elsewhere at the out store known

as Eccleswood. Bill and Margery had a tenancy on the ground floor of the 'studio', as the old house was euphemistically titled.

By the time Dennis returned to the loading area the chocks under the car wheels were out of the way. Tossing a rope to Bill and to Eric, he revolved like a dutiful worker bee and made once more for the garage repeating "four eight-foot planks" to himself in case he forgot. Meanwhile the ropes were tied to the car bumper by hands expert in the manufacture of knots although, it must be said, the ones crafted by Bill Hays had a few extra loops and plaits to them that only an old salt could have wrought. Once secured, they trailed the cords parallel out of the back of the truck and over the lowered tail-flap.

"Up with the flap then, Meatballs!" commanded Bill

Meatballs no sooner heard than obeyed and up went the flap, lifting the trailing ropes with it. With a jarring clunk, the tail flap came level with the floorboards of the trailer. Eric and Bill looked at one another. Dennis, already partially exhausted, re-materialised with the final two planks and laid them down looking from Eric to Bill as if to say, "It's about time some other bastard did a bit 'o work!" but keeping his counsel, for the time being at least.

"The flap doesn't look long enough to take the car to me," Bill observed glumly.

"Any other ideas, then?" Eric challenged, hands on hips.

"No. We'd best give it a go, but watch it! If it looks like it's going to go over the edge we'll need to barge it back on again - or jump out of the way. Can we balance out the years a bit first, though? Eric, you come on this rope with me. Dennis, you go on that one with Meatballs."

The foursome rearranged themselves as prescribed.

"Bloody 'ell, no more smokin', lads! We've a gasworks brewin' over 'ere!" Dennis gasped, fanning his hands at Meatballs who stuck his chin out and farted assertively, much to the amusement of the male students who had started to feel a bit restive. Bill Hays addressed the troops.

"Are we happy, then?"

He looked at each man in turn and saw a subtle setting of the frame which only someone accustomed to this kind of work could have spotted. They gave no further sign other than a squaring of the jaw, but he knew by their calm silence that they were ready. Each man knew his business. It wasn't just that they had to shift a very heavy object without hurting themselves, they had to do the job without putting a single mark on it. Their professional pride as well as their knees and backs were on the line.

"Canopy up, Rachel!" Bill commanded, and miraculously six poles were raised aloft, three on each side of the tail-flap, lifting the tarpaulin off it and into the air.

"Nice touch, Billy!" said Dennis who had been rooting for planks when gallery cleaner's mops each had a nail hammered into the end of the handle and then inserted in holes at regular intervals along the edges of the tarpaulin. The six students stood like standard-bearers and looked to their tribune for orders. He obliged.

"Stand firm, stout youths!" he decreed although the epithet "stout" may have been somewhat misapplied. Still, they did their best impersonation of standing firm stoutly even though such efforts were continually hampered by the gusting wind, the effects of several hours' steady imbibing and an average body weight of around nine and a half stones. The rain drummed angrily on the improvised canopy and started to gather ominously in the sagging central portion. All eyes turned to Bill Hays, who remained perfectly still for five seconds. Then he breathed deeply.

“OK, this is it! Take the strain!”

With controlled effort, the four men applied main force, drawing the ropes taut and feeling the weight of the car in their hands and arms. They started to pull in unison. Resentfully, the front end of the car emerged from the crate and a heavy glob of rain landed on the bonnet with a musical thunk.

“Rachel, get the canopy further back if you can!” Bill pleaded.

The students shuffled up closer to the truck looking nervously at one another and restraining a commonly felt impulse to cut and run. Bladders were also beginning to take the strain. Hand over hand, the four men drew the customised vehicle out of its specially adapted garage. The front wheels dropped onto the floorboards of the truck and the vehicle lurched forward suddenly.

“EASY!” Bill shrieked, slackening his length of rope. The others did likewise and the forward momentum was checked. Deep breaths were taken all round. The students murmured, realising that this might turn out to be something worth postponing kebabs for after all.

“OK, let’s try it again,” the grizzled foreman suggested, tautening his rope anew and riveting his attention on the emerging artefact. Would the tail-flap be long enough to take the wheelbase? Hands resumed their rhythmic alternations on the ropes and *Fuck Off Men, You Are All Useless!* was eased out on to the tail-flap, the front wheels edging nearer and nearer to its rearmost edge. They were now only inches away from dropping off the back, the head of the unfortunate, crushed symbol of the male sex hanging in the air over the edge about four feet off the ground. Bill Hays felt correspondingly edgy. The tail-flap groaned at its hinges, clearly pushed to the extreme of its load bearing capacity.

“Steady now! Right! All stop! Dennis, can you see what kind of clearance there is at the back? Are the back wheels out on to the flap?”

Dennis Brookes checked that Meatballs had things in hand before scuttling up to the back of the truck and the hinge of the tail-flap.

“Aye...just about. But the boot isn't out yet. It's still inside. If we drop the tail now it'll catch the back bumper and tip the body up. Can we get it any further out at your end?”

Eric responded in the negative.

“No chance. We’ve got our shoulders up to the front end now just to keep it from falling off the tail flap.”

Bill Hays was not best pleased with this analysis.

“Roll her back in! Roll her back in! Sod it!”

Dennis Brookes looked anxiously at his senior colleague, conscious of how near to the edge he was these days as he drew agonisingly slowly closer to retirement.

“Ne’er mind, Bill, ne’er mind! ‘Ere’s a notion. Ah was watchin’ that formula one racin’ last Saturday. Can’t stand it meself but the lad laps it up. Any road, ah couldn’t ‘elp noticin’ them mechanics getting’ the motors out of the waggons they brought ‘em in. They lay these runners up to the back of the waggon and rolled the bugger down. ‘Ow about givin’ it a go with them gangplanks left over from that scaffoldin’ job on the gallery?”

The Gilpin had recently undergone roof repairs and the scaffolders had left materials on site that Bill Hays, always on the scrounge, had been swift to sequester and stash away. His comrades stroked chins, scratched ribs, eased over aspiring underpants and surreptitiously released excess wind as the suggestion took on a life outside its instigator.

“Could work,” Eric concluded. “It’d be the quickest way, risky though, what with no brakes. Need to stop it from runnin’ away down the planks.”

Bill was keen to implement a plan involving a speedy outcome even though it carried a risk element, one which could be contained, though, with luck.

“Two of us could push, then we’d need two at the front to ease it down the planks. Then something under the planks to take the weight, otherwise they’ll just split.”

“Plinths and crates?” Dennis proposed. “We’ve got enough in the garage. All sorts ‘o sizes.”

This was true and also a bit of a sidelong jibe at Bill who never threw anything away even though storage space was at a premium. Redundant crates and plinths of every conceivable size were piled high in the garage as well as scaffolding planks. Well, this was why! A sturdy assortment of objects set at an incline could provide a ramp for the ten-foot gangplanks Dennis was commissioned to transfer from the garage on the back of his van. Technical challenge number one addressed. Challenge two was not long in coming.

“What about keeping the front wheels in line? We’ll need someone inside to steer.”

Eric’s observation was exasperating because it was clearly just.

“What about ‘er?”

Dennis indicated Rachel, slenderest of the girls present. It was an appropriate choice in that her contribution to the payload would be negligible. Bill addressed her with a discernible croon in his voice.

“Can you drive, Rachel?”

“Yes....but I think I might be a bit over the limit!”

“I wouldn’t let that worry you for now, duck!”

Once the plan had been universally accepted its implementation was swift. An apprehensive female face peered through a misted-up windscreen, two ten-foot planks resting on a ramp of hastily assembled crates and plinths stood lined up the width of the car wheels apart, one end of each in the truck, the other on the gravel of the service road. Dennis and Bill, by virtue of their years, were installed within the truck ready to apply shoulders; Eric and Meatballs without, to accept bumper and potential bulk. Bill set things in motion.

“All ready? Right then!”

The Austin Allegro rolled towards the waiting plank ends. As the front tyres touched everything came to a stop. Dennis applied further pressure but to no effect. He craned his neck out to one side of the car.

“What’s up?”

“Front tyres is butted up against the plank ends. Won’t budge!” Eric replied.

“Can you, you know, sort of lift it over?” Bill ventured.

“Did I ‘ear you right then, Bill? You did say “lift” didn’t you?”

Eric turned to his mate, no doubt to share a few rolls of the eyeballs, but was horrified to see Meatballs in the act of power-lifting the front end of the car, his hands gripping the bumper like a bar. Instinctively Eric followed suit and, while there was no discernible elevation, the impact of their efforts was just sufficient to allow the front tyres to surmount the jutting plank ends. With further pressure from Dennis and Bill at the rear the car settled on the down-sloping planks then suddenly rolled out of the older men’s grasp and pitched downwards into the younger men’s sole care. Eric gave way and crumpled on to the grounded tail-flap putting all the pressure on to Meatballs’ side and, as if in an attempt to slip out if his

tenuous grasp, the front wheels skewed towards where Eric had been standing. With a squeak, Rachel felt the steering wheel spin out of her clutches as the front wheels slipped off the planks which crunched against the underside of the car (but, miraculously, not the human facsimile attached to it.) Even with some very stout crates supporting them, the bowing lengths of wood creaked ominously under the weight.

“For fuck’s sake, don’t drop it!” screeched Eric from below, seeing his own fate prefigured in the grisly mannequin above him. Catastrophe was averted as, in their turn, the rear wheels came up against the same plank ends that had impeded the front ones and, though they had a stab at mounting them off their own bat, ultimately capitulated, the car coming to a precarious halt with Meatballs bearing the brunt of its weight at the front end. The planks and Meatballs groaned in bass harmony. The words of the latter came forth in a breathless staccato.

“Eric-you-wazzock! Get-up-off-your-arse-and-help-me-shove-this-bastard-back-up!”

Eric was stung into positive action and, once Bill and Dennis lent assistance, the ‘sculpture’ was soon back in the van with four disconsolate figures seated in front of it blocking the way out just in case it got any ideas, and a retinue of canopy bearers standing mutely by in tactful observance of the obsequies. The rain fell steadily and around them the city centre shifted into evening gear, the post-work drinkers at the pub across the road gradually giving way to bona fide night owls to whom the place was a preliminary watering hole. Bill Hays was inconsolable.

“Well, it beats me! What’s to be done now?”

“Why don’t you push the car back into the truck and chock it up again, lay the planks plus a few more up the gallery steps to the top, bring the tail-flap up, back the truck up to the steps till the flap touches the planks, then you can wheel the car straight on to them without having to drop the flap at all.”

This analysis had been delivered in a thin Scottish monotone by one of the females among the student contingent. Silence ensued as surprise washed away and left a residue of general, rather grudging approbation. It seemed to add up.

“What are you studying, young lady?” asked Bill, clearly impressed.

“Medicine. But my dad’s a truck-driver in Alloa.”

“Well, if you pick up as much at college as you have off your dad I reckon we can look forward to one or two miracle cures in the next few years. What’s your name? Kirsty? Right lads! You heard Kirsty. Let’s get to it!”

And so, as proposed, the crates and plinths were cleared out of the way, the piece was made secure, the truck taken about and its rear end lined up to the imposing gallery steps. The exercise assumed rather a ritualistic character as the canopy brought up the rear throughout the manoeuvring process, the students trotting backwards and forwards like train-bearers behind a royal personage, just in case any maverick garrisons of rain attempted a sneaky incursion. Meanwhile Bill and Dennis were laying planks down on the steps at what they estimated to be the appropriate distance apart and all the way up to the top. Eric put the truck into reverse gear and the sounds of evening in the City were augmented by the robotic tones of the its reversing siren.

“Come on, come on, come on. Left ‘and, left ‘and, straighten ‘er up. Come on.”

Dennis Brookes was in his element directing the truck, keeping himself clearly in line with the driver’s wing mirror and signalling like airport ground crew.

"Whoa! That's it!" he declared as the edge of the tail-flap kissed the supine planks, the canopy and its panting bearers in close attendance on the gallery steps. The handbrake was applied with a conclusive hiss from the air valves.

"Mister, when can we put these poles down? My arms are going dead," one of the young men piped up from the ranks.

"I've got rain all down my sleeves," another added.

Bill Hays considered this question for a moment from his position on the steps, standing between the planks in the proposed path of the vehicle and almost under cover of the canopy held before him. He addressed the two students directly in front of him.

"If you two lower the end of your mop handles on to the steps it should take the strain off. You four at the back can lift yours up on to the tail-flap. Try to keep them upright, mind, it's still pelting it down!"

Bill Hays watched the two leading standard bearers lower their staves on to the step before him. He looked back as the four to the rear raised theirs and placed the bases on the slightly higher tail-flap. Raising his eyes still further he noted with dismay the accumulation of rainwater in the sagging belly of the tarpaulin spewing up towards him and had just enough time to modify his expression from one of panic to philosophical resignation as two gallons of rainwater cascaded over his hitherto reasonably dry trousers. Eric was transfixed with glee.

"Bad luck there, Bill. Didn't get any on the motor, did we?"

"No, just my strides," Bill responded in such measured tones that one might assume it had been planned all along.

"I need a piss," complained one of the male students whose imagination had obviously been fired by the sight of Bill Hays drenched trousers.

"Not be long, son. Come on gents, all aboard!" Bill decreed, dismissive of personal discomfort.

Within a minute the wheel chocks were away again and each of the professionals had hold of an appropriate portion of the car's superstructure, Bill himself with an arm through the driver's window keeping the steering wheel steady.

Following Bill's habitual (and inexplicable) count of "one, two, six", braced shoulders powered by straining thighs propelled the car towards the waiting planks. As the front tyres touched the timber, the head of the mannequin came up against a step, a wisp of fake hair trailing on the shining wet stone. There wasn't a lot in it, an inch maybe, but enough to ensure that if they proceeded, there would be a scalping in the offing. Bill Hays almost choked with anger and frustration.

"You bastard!"

"What's up?" asked Dennis who was unsighted but feared the worst.

"We can't shove it up the ramp. The angle's too sharp. We'd scrape that figure off the bottom before we got the back wheels down on to the planks. There's not much in it but there doesn't need to be."

Meatballs was starting to get wet and hungry, a combination of states which tend to foster creativity in certain slothful, ursine intellects. He frowned and folded his arms, then unfolded them again with a purposeful air.

"Eric, give me them keys. What say I pull the waggon forward an inch at a time till the back wheels of the car are on the tail flap and the front wheels are on the planks, then we lower the flap real slowly till the back wheels drop on the planks without scraping that thing

underneath on the steps? We'll need to stop the motor sliding back as it tilts up. No brakes, remember."

"We could rig up a sling or summat," Dennis suggested, taken with the notion. "You know, like an 'ammock at the back end. There's them black stage curtains in the garage. I'll get one!"

He scuttled off again, returning with a bundled up mass of black material. The others regarded him quizzically as he unfolded and refolded it into its full length but half width and, double thickness. Tossing one end over behind the back bumper of the car to Eric, he elucidated.

"You and Meatballs wrap a corner each round your 'ands, good and tight. Me and Bill'll do the same on this side, see?" he demonstrated "then we cradle the back end in it like a nappy so when the flap drops we've got it steady."

"Very good, Dennis, but who's going to drive the truck forwards if Meatballs is on nappy duty?" Bill enquired with unnecessary asperity.

"Bollocks! 'And't thought of that, Bill!"

A reedy Scottish voiced piped up for the second time that evening.

"I will, if you like."

Rachel added support.

"She can, you know. I've seen Kirsty drive her dad's. She's brilliant!"

Bill Hays was dubious. He consulted his beard, as he was wont to do, and the grain of the bristles was not propitious.

"Kirsty isn't insured and, besides, this needs to be a real precision job. Half an inch too far and that bloody car drops off the tail with us hanging on to it. We can't risk it, petal."

Bill sensed immediately that he might have made a faux pas with the application of the archaic term of endearment. Kirsty jutted out her chin.

"I've got an HGV class one, which is more than you've got I bet," - it was - "and I'm covered to drive my dad's truck which you could get this effort into the back of with room to spare. Me and my mates have just about had it listening to you lot dither and take the piss out of each other. Either you let me handle the truck or we're history. Right, guys?"

Perhaps Camille de Montparnasse had put it more succinctly in her title for the troublesome work of art, but the gist was the same. A hum of assent rose from soggy souls still glumly attached to their poles. Eric was the first ditherer to voice an opinion, and it was unexpectedly positive

"She's only got to shift it about six foot. If she puts it in neutral it'll roll off anyway. Just needs to keep a foot over the brake and an ear out for us shoutin' "when" and we'll have cracked it."

Bill looked at Kirsty and was startled to see her wearing an expression astonishingly like his wife's when she had uttered the fateful words "We'll see!" There was something implacable about it and he conceded defeat without demur.

"All right - but for Christ's sake don't anyone tell Julien about this or my pension is up the spout!"

Kirsty leapt enthusiastically up into the cab of the truck with, it must be admitted, well-practised flair, catching the keys tossed to her by Eric and starting the motor almost before she had the time to sit down. With a clunk, reverse was disengaged, the brake lights lit up as a foot was applied to the pedal and, to complete the fluid sequence of events, the hissing

air valves signalled the release of the handbrake. The testosterone levels of the four male drivers dropped to a point just above dangerously low. Bill, whose testosterone had hovered around this point for several years already, was the first to find his voice. He addressed the remaining students.

“Can you five manage the canopy between you? Good! No need to budge just yet, just hold it steady as the truck pulls away. We’ll keep the car where it is with this sling...I hope!”

The sling was applied to the back end of the car like the outsize black nappy as described by Dennis Brookes with the four men gripping it, two at each end.

“I reckon we should all be wearin’ a nappy,” quipped Eric, but his mouth was dry and his voice cracked. He looked in Bill’s direction for an answering grimace, but Bill was communing with his inner self again and bracing his hams in anticipation of more painful exertion.

“Righto, Kirsty!” he hollered, falsetto. “Let her slip away an inch at a time!”

The air brakes bit and were released with sharp hisses as the driver managed the pedal. The tail-flap inched away from the steps. The black sling held the vehicle stationary as the back wheels turned on the slowly departing tail flap, the front wheels remained static on the planks. The canopy meanwhile maintained its protective function as the rain continued to fall.

Inches turned into feet as the truck inched away from the Gallery steps. There was now clear air under the centre of the car chassis. The back wheels were edging towards the drop and Bill was trying to judge exactly the right moment to call a halt. Three feet, three and a half, four.....

“Whoa! That’ll do, Kirsty!” the cry came.

The student craned to get a view in the side mirror and, as she did so, her foot slipped off the brake pedal, the truck lurched forward a foot and, with a collective screech of horror, the four art handlers saw the back wheels roll out over the abyss. The plucky driver grabbed the handbrake with reflex dexterity and the truck wheels bit the tarmac just as the back end of the car was about to drop, instead getting its wheels wedged between the edge of the tail-flap and the ramp. Taking a deep breath, the resourceful medical student engaged reverse gear and edged the huge vehicle back towards the Gallery by the requisite twelve inches and the rear wheels of the car were eased back up on to the surface of the tail flap. Checking that all the controls were stable and secured, Kirsty clambered to the ground, scampered back to the delivery end and bit her lower lip.

“Sorry about that slip. Any damage done?”

She was surprised to note how much the four men seemed to have aged since she last spoke with them and how distant their expressions were.

“No, love,” croaked Bill Hays as if from afar. “That was fine....just fine.”

Kirsty was keen to conclude proceedings.

“Shall I lower the tail-flap now?”

Bill checked her impetuosity.

“We’ll just have a quick fag, eh, Eric? Everything looks steady enough to leave alone for a minute.”

The two smokers lit up while their colleagues checked the underside of the car and weighed up the angles necessary to achieve a clean transfer. Dennis did not look entirely content.

“Back end might catch when we drop the tail, Bill,” he opined. “ ‘Ave to watch for that.”

Bill eyed him with vexation although his disposition was unrelated to the remark. He had simply failed to reach the same pitch of ecstasy with his second cigarette as he had with his first. Disillusioned, he cast the stub half-finished into a puddle.

“Understood, Dennis. If we keep a good grip on the sling we might keep it from scratching. Kirsty, you lower the tail. We’ll take the strain and keep the car from lurching backwards.”

The nappy handlers wrapped fabric tightly round their hands again while Kirsty located the tail lift controls inside the trailer and pressed the appropriate button, setting the flap into downward motion. As it descended, the vehicle tilted back and the front wheels, obeying the pull of gravity, began to turn anticlockwise back down the planks. Bill Hays gasped and squealed internally.

“Keep it up! Keep it up!” he barked.

The four sturdies heaved on the fabric which creaked as the cohesion of the fibre gave out. The weight was truly appalling.

“ ‘Ah’m losin’ it!” Dennis confessed with a kind of panic-stricken despondency. “Me back’s goin’!”

His sometimes comical features were contorted into a grotesque mask. Bill was speechless, almost expiring with his exertions, aged limbs pressed way beyond their capacity. Eric, on the other hand, was cursing in terms so imaginative and colourful that one of the observing students, a comparative philologist, was making mental notes.

“The exhaust’s catchin’!” groaned Meatballs, who alone retained an appearance of control aside from the veins at the side of his forehead, which looked perilously close to exploding. “We’ll have to lift it!”

“Lift it?” squawked Eric. “We can barely ‘old it still as it is!”

At this point, with a terminal wheeze, Dennis let go of his portion of the sling leaving Meatballs again with the full weight at his side. Even for someone of his considerable proportions this sudden jolt was a severe shock and he screamed silently through clenched teeth, but held on. The flap was now only inches from the ground and the exhaust pipe was beginning to grind into its steel surface. Meatballs summoned other worldly powers.

“LIFT!” he commanded.

Eric and Bill had lesser powers at their disposal but, by a miracle of timing and technique, managed to synchronise a jerk which lifted the exhaust a millimetre clear as the tail-flap arrived at ground level.

“I’m going,” sighed Bill

“Me too,” Eric chimed, almost nostalgically as if from a great distance or a long way in the future. They both let go leaving Meatballs with a redundant, trailing nappy end.

A strange reign of peace was born out of this abdication. In slow motion hands floated free of the black fabric which seemed to unfurl and billow as if underwater. They looked down to where they fully expected to see the rear end of the car crunch into the tail-flap and slide off the ramp altogether but a pair of hands at either side darted into view and slid a small but stout timber crate behind each rear tyre, clean as a whistle, just as they touched the planks. The wheels had a stab at surmounting these hastily improvised obstacles but capitulated and came to rest perfectly square on the planks. Rachel and Kirsty stood grinning with their arms folded.

“Ah’ll be buggered!” Dennis Brookes gasped.

A round of ironic cheers arose from the ranks of the four remaining standard bearers - all male.

“That was bloody quick thinking!” murmured Bill Hays, appreciatively “Risky though, very...”

He attempted a tone of reproach but his gratitude was so immense that it came out all fatherly and affectionate. With the crate coup, Kirsty felt she had regained the high moral ground following her near catastrophe at the wheel of the truck and had her hands on her hips and a jaunty grin on her face. Bill gaped incredulously at the stationary artefact while his protégée scrutinised him critically.

“You were just going to let it go, weren’t you?”

Bill’s paternal surge ebbed suddenly.

“It was a calculated release,” he lied in a back scrabbling bid to restore his and his team’s compromised professional credibility. Eric’s derisive snort did little to aid the remedial work and Bill was wounded by it.

“What do you suggest next, Eric? You’ve hardly been a font of wisdom so far!”

“Push it up the planks, I suppose. Don’t fancy it above ‘alf, though.”

“ ‘Ah’m shagged, Bill. Ah can’t do no more.”

Dennis was shaking his head in shame, contrition and utter exhaustion. Bill, two years his senior, looked up the improvised ramp which seemed to stretch like a ski-jump up towards the gallery portals. He was not energised by the spectacle.

“Why don’t you just drive it up?” suggested Rachel ingenuously.

For a moment everybody listened to the rain, waiting for a derisive dismissal of the suggestion - but none came.

“Is the engine still in it, Eric?” Bill ventured.

“It bloody well feels like it, wouldn’t you say?” Eric snorted.

In a trice the bonnet was up and expert hands were probing its secrets. In a brace of trices, a can of petrol materialised and a box of ancient auto keys from the garage.

“This ‘un fits!” whooped Dennis triumphantly “It must be one of me old spares!”

He got in, turned it and the engine fired first time. Reaching instinctively for the handbrake he was startled to feel the handle shoot back in his grip. Then surprise gave way to embarrassment.

“No brakes. Forgot.”

He stepped out leaving the engine running.

“You takin’ ‘er up, Bill?”

All eyes turned squarely on the senior pro. Seniority didn’t feel like it had much going for it just at that moment. Once more that evening Bill Hays’ fingers scoured his beard and his eyes, like those of a calf being taken away from its mother, looked yearningly across towards the All and Sundry. A shadow passed over his face and rearranged the features into something ominously gothic. A rumble of thunder added extra atmospherics.

“I would do murder for a pint right now!”

The words were charged with disturbing intensity. Everybody present took a step backwards and eyed the elderly gent with caution.

“No drinkin’ and drivin’, Billy!” Eric quipped nervously.

This jolted Bill from his momentary inertia and he pushed Dennis aside and got into the driver’s seat.

“Eric and Dennis, you two get behind and push as soon as I get it going. I don’t know how it’ll take this angle from a standing start. Rachel, as soon as I start to move up the steps I want the canopy to follow, so can we have all six of you on it and keep up for Christ’s sake. We’ve got this far without getting the bugger wet!”

Slowly he turned to face Meatballs.

“Meatballs, I need you inside the Gallery.”

“What for? I can push better than them two!”

“I know that, but, you see, we’ve got no brakes. When I get to the top of the steps I might be going at a fair tilt. I need you inside to...er...to catch me.”

Bill waited for the words to sink in. They sank as deep as they could into that dark well of consciousness and “Fair enough, Bill!” came bubbling back to the surface.

Five minutes later the huge double doors of the Art Gallery were standing open, celestial light flooding out into the evening gloom. Upturned eyes blinked expectantly into the rays which were magnified by reflections from manifold smooth, wet sandstone surfaces. Meatballs lumbered up the steps and disappeared into the light like Moses on the mount. From his cockpit, Bill Hays checked the condition of his troops. Eric and Dennis were to the rear, braced and ready to provide extra propulsion; the students were on their marks, knees bent, eyes to the front, poles angled slightly forward. A lone voice rang out from the echoing vault above.

“Ready!”

It was followed by what sounded suspiciously like a nervous fart, but no one paid any heed, being fully focused on the task. The engine revved, first gear bit and the front wheels span on the wet planks. With a unified effort, Eric and Dennis applied their shoulders and the car moved, hesitantly at first, then, warming to the task, shot forwards up the ramp. Panicking slightly, the students scrambled up with it, some stumbling, some succeeding in maintaining a modicum of control. But they kept up. Bill Hays’ eyes were riveted on the yawning aperture above him. He drilled the throttle and the car flew out of the ministering hands of Eric and Dennis and away from under the long-serving canopy, which collapsed on to a heap of panting bodies. Realising that he may have overcooked it, Bill shut one eye and placed his soul in the care of his Maker. The car cleared the ramp and with a thump landed in the entrance lobby of the Gallery. Braced in readiness like a sumo wrestler, Meatballs just had time to recall the getaway scene from *The Italian Job* before the vehicle took him full in the guts.

“OOF!” he remarked, absorbing the impetus and feeling himself propelled across the polished wooden floor.

With an unspeakable squelch of flesh and gastric vapours the assemblage came to rest against the innermost wall of the foyer.

“Got it!” Meatballs wheezed, winded but none the worse.

Bill Hays’ forehead was resting on the steering wheel. His eyes were shut. His overriding fear was that he had committed manslaughter, but the stout Londoner was a living proof of the virtues of vegetarianism and, easing himself out of the sandwich in which he had found himself playing the role of non-vegetarian filling, he approached the driver’s window.

“Nice drivin’, Mr Hays! Bit ‘eavy on the throttle, maybe.”

“Nice catch, Meatballs! Is everything OK? You? the piece?”

“Not a scratch on either of us!” he replied, rubbing his midriff.

Still trembling, the senior technician of the Gilpin Gallery extricated himself from the car and leaned heavily against the wall of the foyer next to a bust by Sir Francis Chantrey which, to its credit, was looking discreetly the other way. Dennis Brookes brought up the rear with a bedraggled entourage. He picked up a piece of paper from the reception desk and studied it for several seconds.

“There's a note for you ‘ere, Bill.”

He handed it to his master who eyed it suspiciously. One had to beware of handwritten notes left in art galleries. They usually meant the scribe hadn’t got the gumption to tackle you face to face. This one was marked ‘URGENT’. Worse still! He unfolded it and read

“Dear William, last minute change of plan! Can you take the Camille de Montparnasse piece up to Eccleswood and store it there for a week or so? I’ve got the painters coming into Goodwin tomorrow morning. Hope this is OK. Candida.”

Fifteen minutes later he placed the last shredded fragment of this billet-doux into the ashtray in front of him in the Earl of Altonbury and Surrey. There was no way *Fuck Off Men, You Are All Useless* was stirring an inch. Taking a deep draught of bitter he shuddered as nerve endings recognised the friendly infusion. His eyes glazed over and he sighed. The score marks of care melted from his face. Bill Hays was thinking about the sea.

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