

death in essex

# Death in Essex

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written around 1994.

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The following yarn was belted out, in 1994, on a Panasonic typewriter before we Monks thought about getting a computer. The first draft was accepted by the BBC and then two further episodes were commissioned.

With immaculate timing three years later the three programmes were broadcast on R4 immediately before the General Election that gave us Tony Blair.

This would be Mrs Monk's part in the downfall of John Major.

It should be noted that economic incompetence is generally blamed on the government of the day as if the government of the Day had any control over it. When Saatchi invented the iconic graphic that helped elect Margaret Thatcher there were just 1M unemployed in the UK but under Thatcher unemployment spiralled out of control to 3M.

This current government wishes to take credit for a small improvement in the unemployment figures which now stands at 2.32 million. However, to make this very modest claim they have had to redefine work to include "hard work" on low to impoverishing levels of pay with reduced job security or no job security. And they call this progress.

These are familiar Tory tales, and it has all happened before. Death in Essex was written at a time that featured, for example, the corruption of Westminster Council, led by the disgraced Dame Shirley Porter who features in Mrs Monk's tale.

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## The Green Light

*The* very first thing I learnt about the Job Club was that you don't need money for the tea machine when the green light is on. And that the green light appears only for Job Club managers for they have keys. When managers use their keys the green light appears and shines on for about a minute. Job seekers have no keys and need 15 pence.

An Indian gentleman, and a fellow job seeker drew my attention to this arrangement on my first day.

"Go! Go now! It's free now."

He pointed vaguely and at first I thought he was pointing at the toilet, but no it was that discriminating machine in the corner. He showed me the trick of hovering about the machine to exploit the last few remaining moments of the green light, the last vital moments after the managers had been dispensed with free coffee and walked away from the machine. Three weeks after my Indian friend showed me the way, I too delighted in tipping off my friends when the coast was clear. If any of my colleagues looked like they might not make it to the machine in time, we helped each other out by pressing all the buttons like demented jackpot seekers. Sometimes we got coffee

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instead of tea, or hot chocolate instead of coffee, but it was the sting that counts.

The first day of Job Club was the introduction to the induction. We were all huddled in a small room. The radiator was too hot and the windows were wide open. We sat down at an oversized industrial grey table and tried to talk. We each introduced ourselves.

We met John who moved down from Surrey a year ago. No work since. He wants to be a DJ but he has no experience and no studio. His mother gave him to a children's home when he was four years old.

Ryan worked in a bank for 20 year but automation got him laid off. He hasn't been employed for two years and claims to be willing to do anything to get off the dole.

Tom, a young one, arrived late. He pleaded a broken alarm clock and made things worse for himself by disappearing into the toilet to comb his hair. We all had him down as a waster but then we found out about his pacemaker fitted a year ago when he was just 16.

We met Bob, An executive job seeker in his mid 50's, an ex BT man, pre privatisation and the only job seeker wearing a suit, shirt and tie; although wrinkled and shiny. I boldly asked him about his attire. He said that by wearing the suit he was always available for an interview. But then he was also able to pretend he was going to work. He had been an executive personnel manager. I

now know that he is hopelessly overqualified for what is on offer or for whatever is likely to be on offer at the Job Club.

So, I quickly got to know the down and outs that would become my job club associates for the next 6 weeks. And they quickly got to know me.

We soon learnt the rules and we each signed a written pledge to abide by them.

We undertook to arrive at one and leave at four. To take one break between 2:20 and 2:40, to keep up appearances, to refrain from smoking on the steps outside Job Club, and if necessary we may use somebody else's door step. In return, postage and stamps would be free and so would be the phone. The photocopier is free also but we would have to log everything and justify every stamp and phone call. Basically it was all free but without the trust; because we were the underclass; the untouchables and the untrustables.

We formally sat around a Formica table and discussed how hard it is to find work and how important it is to have clean fingernails and clean hair when you go to an interview. Gee! I would never have thought of that.

On the second and third day we made draft CVs that no employer would want to read. We held mock interviews and hoped that the Job Club would make a difference to our lives. So far, the main difference it made to mine was

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that I would read the daily papers there, rather than at the  
Library.

*After* the induction of the first two weeks, we were left to get on with finding work.

As we checked small ads and wrote our job applications we compared stories about how poor we all were.

During the second week of Job Club I met John, a kindred spirit. He wore an earring in his left ear and looked embarrassed when I drew attention to his curly hair. He had been a care assistant for most of his working life. He was disenchanted with the pay they were offering. He told us about his impending repossession and how last night he had to hide from the TV detecting van.

I warned him that, "tonight they will be back and send you to gaol".

Bob said helpfully that they couldn't send him to gaol but they could fine him £1,000.

"What's another grand?" John bragged, "I already owe ten!"

I sensed that John was trying to impress me with his debts. I told him I no longer had a bank account. He looked surprised.



"I can't imagine owing as much money as you" someone said.

"It was easy in the 80's," I bragged.

I told him how much credit we once had, how big our house had been, where we went on holidays and all the rest. More embellished tales followed about the wild parties and the sizzling steaks al fresco, the exotic cocktails, the Habitat sofa bed and so on.

"I knew that we were poor when we couldn't afford Hagen Daz anymore," I told them.

Two weeks into the Job Club routine we met our new job club manager.



She trotted in for the first time and announced to the underclass that she was "back from holiday". I was not the first to notice her striking resemblance to the disgraced Dame Shirley Porter.

Maybe Dame Shirley would have preferred a different audience for her ostentatious holiday anecdotes but we were all she had. We listened disdainfully and felt like shit. Eventually she settled down and got on with her job which is basically to look good and act like she really cares. We never forgave her for that Winter holiday.

Our Job Club is in the centre of a working class beach town, Southend. And it has its fair share of nursing homes and cheap homes. This of course is a combination of circumstances which is bound to keep wages down below what would have been the minimum wage.

Nobody wanted those jobs. Things hit an all time low that week. The Job Centre was looking for a shop assistant to accept a wage of £1.18 an hour, and then a petrol tanker driver was also wanted for a position in Zagreb, Croatia. And let's not forget the irresistible situation at a pound an hour for a night-watchman who must have his own dog. The dog gets the interview.

We began to associate our new Job Club manager with an increase in management coercion with us to go for less than acceptable appointments. According to one of my

buddies who is staked out near her on the phone, Dame Shirley definitely had targets to meet. He heard her on the phone telling somebody that she had to get four of us out to work before next week. Unfortunately for her some of us job seekers were just not having it.

I have a BA degree but I would have settled for a typing job. Last week she encouraged me to accept a warehouse stacking job paying £7,000. I set her straight. Dame Shirley turned her back on me in disgust.

I found out before too long that the Job Club would pay my travelling expenses to go to London if I had a legitimate interview in the City. I found an interview in the Evening Standard. It was as job for a trainee broker. It sounded easy. The man on the phone did not really answer too many of my questions but he did say that I sounded just like the kind of person they were looking for. I told Dame Shirley about the interview, she made sure that it was bona fide and that I wasn't taking the day off to go to Harrods at the Job Club's expense and she was duly satisfied.

That day started out sunny, even for the end of January. I arrived at the interview exactly 10 minutes early. I felt that it was strange that about four nervous people who I took to be interviewees shared the lift up with me up to the third floor. We found ourselves in a room where there were at least 20 other desks occupied by pimply faced youths staring into phones. My contact eventually met us and directed us into a room with 4 rows of chairs

accommodating a further 15 applicants. So we the assembled hopefuls were then subjected to a Waco-like recruitment ritual and a serious talking-to by a weird 100 words per minute mouthpiece telling us how much we liked money, fancy cars, eating out, big houses and early retirement and how he was going to help us "Get it!"

We learnt that Mr. Waco Waco was quite literally a former "barrow boy" and then the grim truth that he was offering no wages, and commission only.

"I can give you the name of a man across the street who can give you £15,000 a year but you'll be on the street in a week if you don't perform", he said pointing out the window.

We had all been conned. Someone, maybe me, should have stood up and silenced the orator in mid spiel, but we sat through the whole damn thing without protest. Before we all left Wacom told us that he wouldn't be phoning us but that we would certainly be phoning him to arrange a further interview. He had to be eating corn flakes toasted with angel dust if he ever thought I'd call him back. He stood at the door and shook our hands as we filed out of the room. I took this opportunity to ask him for the phone number of the fictitious man across the street.

That lasted one hour and as we left the building, a fresh new bunch of new recruits had arrived for the next show. I made a yarn of it at the Job Club the next day. Everyone oozed concern for one of their own number.

I picked myself up and started all over again. Ten weeks later Mr. BT and I feel like lifers on death row. He and I were the longest serving members of the Job Club meaning that we amongst our peers have failed to get work. Most of the new recruits have been bullied by the Dame Shirley into taking badly paid jobs. The younger job seekers have been easily exploited. We watched them depart one by one and head off for burger flipping careers and watched other sad faces replace them. This was all getting a bit much for Mr BT and occasionally he would let us know just how he felt, not sparing the expletives, particularly after a liquid lunch.

"What we need" he'd blurted out, "is a fucking union." Someone had pointed out a Daily Express article about the willingness of the jobless who are happy to work for their daily dole. Illustrating the story was a smiling Ken and Bryan who were what the express called "volunteers". Ken and Bruce had offered themselves as examples to we picky job seekers who were holding out for a more meaningful job and let's face it, more wages. Ken and Bryan it seems were happy to accept the extra £10 on offer for the 40 hour extra working week cleaning up the community and as the Daily Express reminds us with a prominent by-line,

"It has done wonders for their self-esteem." Ken and Bryan are smiling about their jobs and we are wondering what kind of self esteem you get from the kind of

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community work that petty criminals are sentenced to by the courts.

We job clubbers might just have pitied the poor buggers if they were not forcing down the value of real labour. Mr. BT had not yet found his union for the unemployed but he had found a couple of black-legs.

We tried thereafter to keep the Daily Express out of Mr. BT's reach.

*One* day I struck gold. Having spent 8 weeks in the Job Club, digging through want ads, reviving my CV for the umpteenth time, and pretending to be pleasant, I had a response to a Supply Teaching application I made from an ad in the local paper. I hadn't taught since the days of Crosby, Stills and Hash and had long decided that a career in teaching was not for me. But since I had the credentials and needed a job I felt that it was time to dust off my degree.

I rang up the Head Teacher to arrange an interview but he had no time for formalities for he was a desperate man. He needed an English teacher and I was his girl. I was to start the next day at 8 a.m.

In the job club, all my buddies seemed to be happy that I had finally got work. I told them that we would celebrate when I got my first pay cheque.

Dame Shirley had the nerve to suggest how I should dress for school, and with affected jocularly she said, "Don't dress like you normally do. Hahahah." She was not put off by my blank stare and wondered how I managed to get a job looking as I do.

"Wouldn't you feel better wearing clothes like mine?" She seemed to imply.

I cut her dead by letting her know I didn't like the kind of clothes she was wearing and she huffed off like a sick chiwawa.

I was offered a box of Milk Tray by the proceeds of a



frantic whip-round by my buddies including the few reluctant smokers who would rather have spent their money on fags.

We didn't have the money to go to the pub after Job Club but we did go down to the beach front to watch a few fishermen waiting for the Big One. I wondered if they were unemployed. The fishermen shaded themselves from the sun under the giant "No Fishing" signs helpfully provided by Southend Council. We decided they must be



unemployed and that night they would eat flounder as I would contemplate my new job.

A panic took hold of me and I couldn't sleep. Beowulf kept me awake. I knew it was important but I couldn't remember why. And how had things changed since I last taught and is it "John Major and me" or "John Major and I," and since I had only taught in an American school; were these British Comprehensives as terrifying as I have heard and should I pack the riot gear.

That feted morning I ensured I washed off the night's sweat before getting suitably dressed. I hyped myself up with as much coffee as I could drink compensating for the lack of sleep. I set off into the unknown driving to work for the first time in 8 months. I drove through the school gates and the hole in my exhaust turned a few heads. I parked and walked up the steps to the most imposing building. I remember from teaching a long time ago there was never a toilet when you needed one. I was ten minutes early and things seemed remarkably quiet. There was nobody about; no sign of life, no kids. Had I found the wrong school.

I wandered into the cream and green corridor which was lined with pictures of assembled old boys and girls. All of a sudden a bell rang and at the end of the corridor the two swing doors flung open and a cacophonous swarm of uniformed green kids wearing much matching green sweaters raced through the corridor like killer bees. They were loose and coming in my direction. They came at me:

buzzing, swarming, scurrying along the corridor to wherever in the hell they were all going from wherever in the hell they were all coming from and I was definitely in their way. They were like fighting salmon against the stream, against me. The old boys and girls cheered the race from the walls which flexed and buckled under the strain. It was a stampede in a cinematic western and I was the poor rattlesnake caught in the middle. I was mixing my metaphors and I was an English teacher.

But then as I had quickly reported the stampede, it was all over. The walls sprang back to life and the old boys and girls regained their composure and a soft breeze ensued. There were no hellos and there were no goodbyes.

I looked for the Head Teacher. He said he would meet me in the corridor when I arrived but no sign. Perhaps he had been swept away by the steers.

I sought refuge in the Visitors Toilet: the one with the skirt on the door. They're just kids I kept telling myself and I do have a BA. I slapped some water on my face and decided to look for a teacher-type person for help. Eventually a weary lady rescued me and introduced herself as Chris. She guided me gently to the staff room where there were many worn out sofas and signboards with flapping pages on every wall. Chris told me that I would be taking Mrs. Jerkins' classes today. She did not mention coffee which I desperately needed but did say she was going my way and that she would drop me off. I

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was led off passing the playground to my class: a pre fab shelter.

They were waiting for me.

I was introduced to the thirty blank faces who were staring at me like a scene out of Village of the Damned. I pulled myself together and said, "Thank you Chris."

As she left the class she whispered to me, Please don't call me Chris in front of the children. Just Mrs. Black.

So I broke a rule with the very first words I uttered. Oh My God.

Left alone.

Seeking Reassurance

*Again* I faced the class and saw thirty pairs of yellow eyes.

I decided to give my name and get things started. The kids stared some more.

I asked them what they were reading. They said they were reading "Spring and Port Wine," which I gathered was on the national curriculum and no one seemed to like it. Since I hadn't heard of it, I had no opinion.

Once they realised I was not familiar with the book they started to tell me about it. This seemed like a constructive exercise and once I got them reading aloud I got my first taste of the depressing tale of council house living with a string of complaining characters who spoke mysterious talk of shillings, pence and kippers.

I found myself agreeing with the class; it was an extremely dull read.

At the end of the lesson I looked at the pile of books gathered up by a helpful young man and considered burning them.

I checked my pulse.

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I was still alive.

A different class arrived and once again the staring started.

I introduced myself.

A kid who had a circle of what looked like lipstick around his mouth whispered, "Miss, you an American?"

"Hey, who's a bright boy then?"

"Have you ever seen a basketball game?"

"Sure," I said,

"Was it the Lakers?"

His eyes were getting as big as plates.

"No it was the Mount Airy Bulldogs".

They were my small town basketball team from Maryland and the kid was not impressed. He inhaled defeatedly.

Another kid called Scott presented me with a "monitoring paper."

"What you want me to do with this?" I asked.

He told me I was to watch him during class, record his behaviour during the lesson. I gave him a menacing look and wondered what crime he had committed. Had he poisoned his regular teacher? I took this job seriously and even when addressing some other kid, it was Scott who got my evil eye.

With this class the subject for discussion was the Tower of London and I soon discovered they were to go on a field trip to the monument. I asked them if I could go.

They said in unison, "No miss."

And they didn't seem to care whether I went or not.

"Crap!" I said. Another mistake.

I watched their eyes bulge out as my naughty word sent a wave of giggles around the room.

Halfway through discussing the ravens at the tower, all of a sudden ten kids waved their funny little blue books at me. What should I do with them? They told me I was supposed to correct their books as their real teacher does. I did as I was told and decided to correct their books. As I started, my eyes were open to a whole new kind of English language. Misspelt words, run-on sentences, no punctuation and no sense. These kids had invented gobbledygook for the millennium and I was depressed.

Thank God, the bell rang. I checked my pulse. Scott was the last to leave. He wanted me to sign his paper.

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"What should I put down? "



Excellent", Miss".

I wrote, "The kid is OK."

At lunchtime I took a long walk and gathered my thoughts. They were not very good thoughts. I fantasised that I would abandon my task and go home to blissful unemployment. I felt inadequate and I felt alone. I even longed for the companionship of the job club, of all places. It was 12:30 already and I hadn't picked up a newspaper. And I had no idea of what was on TV.

I bought a cold sausage roll and ate it in a telephone box where I rang home, half expecting myself to answer. I sought reassurance from myself but there was nobody at home.

I pulled myself together and headed back to the school. For goodness sake I was thinking. It's only 7 hours of my life. A day in supply teaching won't kill me, or would it?

My next class turned out worse than I feared. They were older and meaner and I was of no consequence to them. To pass the time of day they were throwing each other against the room. My entrance did not phase them one bit.

To get their attention I got hold of the largest book I could find, which happened to be a Black's Encyclopaedia, and slammed it down on the desk from a great height. This had no effect. Were they some deaf or what? I had been told that this would be an easy lesson. All I had to do was turn on the video and the class would watch Romeo and Juliet whilst I let my lunch digest and watch my cuticles grow. I knew that order would have



been restored if I could only find the play button. As I fumbled I knew the kids were enjoying my discomfort.

They knew how to work the video but they weren't telling. But then one kid took pity on me and got the thing going and like magic, order was restored. I settled down to relax but alas in no time at all Romeo and Juliet got down to some heavy petting provoking a chorus of giggles and worse.

When I was a kid I hated watching any serious kissing on TV in front of my family. I would look out at the corner of my eye at my father who would be looking out of the corner of his eye at my mother who would run to the kitchen to fetch cake. Everybody was embarrassed. When the kids starting yelling things like "Romeo's a tosser" and "Juliet, get your kit off!" alarms bells started ringing.

I looked out of the window for relief. There were pigeons everywhere making pigeon shit and a few white doves making dove shit. At that moment I wished I could fly.

Suddenly and before the film had ended the kids got up and ran for the door. Then the bell rang. My confidence withered, but I wasn't complaining because now it was all over. I found the off button on the video and waved goodbye to the pigeons. My seven hours had come to an end and I made my way to see the head of the English Department. I had to tell her the sad news that I had decided to quit. I found her office, her room laden with books and a very tired looking lady who acknowledged

me with a simple nod. Since we hadn't been introduced I explained to her that I had been supply teaching in the Portakabin. She offered me her name, Mrs. Jones.

"Can you give us a few more days?" she said. She was begging me to come back!

By way of saying no I extrapolated about the lack of discipline, the bad spelling, the abuse I had taken and the sheer futility of the exercise and how it wasn't my cup of tea, and how I was just not cut out for it. She nodded once again, she offered sympathy, signed and told me in passing that I would be paid for my day's work in due course.

"How much?" I enquired.

"Between £80 and £100. Sorry it didn't work out," she said, turning her back on me and tidying her things as if the matter was settled.

"All right!" I said. "Maybe I will help you out for a few more days, since you are in a bind." She smiled. We decided that we should meet with the head of the school and let him know what was agreed.

We made our way along the corridor to a room where he was taking a class. Mrs Jones opened the door to his classroom unannounced. Simultaneously a small boy came hurtling toward me horizontally like a smart bomb. For some reason he had propelled himself at the door and

since Mrs. Jones had inconveniently moved his target, the door, by opening it; I took the full force of the missile in the belly.

Other boy bombs were making their way to other targets and at the front of the room stood the embarrassed, red-veined face of the Head Teacher. He looked like he could use a drink. He cleared his throat and as a way of making an example of the kid who ran into me, he made them all wait in the hall in a queue.

He thanked me for agreeing to return for a few more days. But I was already sorry. In a strange pathetic way I missed the camaraderie of the Job Club. At the Job Club, somebody would talk to me. At this school I had been reduced to talking to pigeons and doves and seeking refuge in an empty phone box down the road.

The Silent Fart

*I* completed my first day of gainful employment in eight months, my first day's teaching in twenty years and my first day's teaching at a British comprehensive school.

I needed a good night's sleep.



Suitably refreshed I braced myself for another day.

My teaching career had taken off.

The early bell rang once again and I stepped back flat against the corridor wall and confidently avoided the inevitable stampede of kids. I made my way to class and

there was a swagger in my walk. Passing teachers acknowledged me.

Unlike the first day a familiar bunch of kids were assembled..... and waiting..... for me.

I began by taking the register. A new task. The class seemed amused by my American accent as I called out their names one by one. They were actually quiet for once.

Since I had their attention I thought I would dress up the dull task by making up a yarn.

"I had this dream last night", I said.

They all looked up attentively.

"Yeah, I was a salmon trying to swim upstream against the flow and alongside me were all these other salmon and they were all wearing green sweaters just like your school uniform."

All the while I noticed what appeared to be a note being passed around. I confiscated the paper and tore it up. I walked away from the miscreant's desk, adjusted the glasses on my nose, returned to my desk and began instructing them on an assignment for their work the next day.

A little girl, Tabitha, spoke up uninvited. "Miss, Miss".  
"Not now, I'm talking."

She was imploring me and actually stood up. "Miss, miss!"

"allright already Tabitha. What is your problem? It better be good..."

"Miss," she cried out. "You're wearing my glasses."

I took them off and passed them to her.

"So, I am...just trying them out."

My glasses had been on the top of my head the whole time and they all laughed uncontrollably.

Maybe they were having too much fun but then the bell rang and I sent them on their merry way.

I had a few bad eggs the second day but on the whole and with due consideration to the promised remuneration, I was a lot happier than on my first day.

At registration on my third day little front row Marie asked if I had had any more dreams. I warmed to the challenge.

"Come to think of it I do." I told her with exaggerated passion. I addressed the whole class. "I was going on this school trip to France. We were all lined up for the ferry. There were Jane, Bob, Peter and me. The bus trip

was bouncy. We sang a lot and tried out our French on each other. When we got to the hypermarket we bought cheese and baguettes and a few bottles of ginger beer. The coach driver took us to this nice steamy spot and we all sat on the grassy bank of a wide river. It was a lovely day, you know, peaceful and quiet, but all of a sudden out of nowhere came this canoe fully laden with Red Indians all dressed up in feathered head dresses and would you believe it, they were all wearing green sweaters, just like yours"

The kids liked my dreams but I was beginning to wonder if I would be able to keep this up.

On day four I was master of the school and queen of the corridor. I knew where to go and how to get there. I had overcome my terror of the kids and was wise to the mischief makers. In my last class I had a class of adolescent boys. The encyclopedia had been dropped and the noise level was an acceptable level of decibels. I began the class with confidence. But before I could get going; three kids surrounded me and asked permission to go to the toilet. I was wise to this trick and said, "No, No, No!" You go to the loo before the class or after but not now. Back to your seat." They scattered like rabbits.

Barely perceptible to the sedentary teacher who sits in front of the class all day is the silent fart. But when circumnavigating the class to find out what the kids are up to, you might never quite know when the secret

weapon would be employed as it was on this occasion. I looked suspiciously at the three conspirators but had no way of nailing the offender. I tackled the dilemma in my mind. I considered the awful consequences of a boy being caught short in front of my very eyes. Surely not all three of them were at cracking point.

But then I was overcome by a desperate appeal by one of the boys who got out of his seat and ran toward me holding his private parts."

"Miss, miss, if you don't let me go to the toilet I will burst my bladder." So I gave in and let him go and to be sure of avoiding any future charge of cruelty, I let his other two mates join him. I caved in and they all knew it. But if they thought I was going soft they had another thought coming.

I needed to make an example so I singled out a particularly nasty little boy. He stood out because he was scruffy which may not have been his fault but also because he never stopped showing off. It was always his exercise book that went missing or his pen that dropped and rolled on the floor until it hit the skirting board below the chalkboard. It was him that demanded more than his share of my attention. He pushed my buttons.

Little front row Marie offered me the benefit of her wisdom and experience. "Don't bother with him, miss. Even the real teacher has given up on him".



I called the boy into my anteroom and slammed the door shut. The slamming of the door may have been enough to terrorise him but I was taking no chances and followed this with a long cold stare straight into his miscreant eyes.

Dramatically I crouched down to his level and hissed, "If you don't care about yourself, who in hell will?"

Had I overdone it? Would he burst into tears? I looked at the pathetic kid and thought I would too if I didn't keep a cool head. I softened my tone and told him sympathetically how life is too short to be such an unfunny clown.

We rejoined the class and they knew I meant business.

Remarkably, the scruffy boy began to participate in the lesson. He discussed the book in hand and surprised the whole class and me with his knowledge of it. He even managed to tuck his shirt in. When the bell rang, he turned and faced me, waved and smiled.

I had been looking for a job.

This was the moment that I decided to become a teacher.

## The Burger Flipper

*Before* long I fulfilled my first short-term teaching assignment, and took no time putting myself about for more of the same. But then I faced another obstacle: it seemed that my American teaching degree was not altogether recognised in Britain, and to show that they meant business, they cut my first and only pay cheque by half.

So I found myself back at the Job Club where I was treated by my pals like a returning warrior.

Back on the Southend heartbeat, I got used to being verbally addressed as "Miss" whenever I came across one of my former students working in McDonalds.

Occasionally a parent would be standing by and I would thank them for the temporary loan of their child. I enjoyed these frequent street encounters; a wave of the hand or a sidewise glance.

But let's face it, what I needed was a teaching job and as I know now, schools are more inclined to reduce the number of teachers and increase the size of classes. Once more beaten down, feeling rejected. Down and out in Essex, unable to work, my alarm clock, redundant.

And this ungodly fear that I would never work again, ever more the real prospect as each day at the Job Club passed by.

Most of my original colleagues had found jobs in Quick Save and B&Q, but all had grander ambitions, ultimately compromised. They sold out to the devil and jumped into the deep blue sea, beyond.

But no shortage of soul mates at the job club, die-hards were still there, from the day before the day before my short employment. Mr BT was around and I was glad about that. I liked his spit and fire and my new friends proved equally inspirational.

I soon got down to the Job Club gossip; notably the scandal of Job Clubs being paid bonuses for jobseekeres being sent out to work for just one day.

"How much?" Al wanted to know.

"I thought they were a charity," Derek said.

"They have charitable status", opined Bob disdainfully, "but that is not the same thing."

"Bastards!" said Derek.

One of the young Tory jobseekers tried to interject a counter argument.

"How do you think they pay for all this?" he said, looking around meaningfully.

We all joined in by spontaneously and meaningfully, looking around at our sparse environment.

With great timing, who should enter but Dame Shirley Porter with her silk skirt clinging to her thighs like wet seaweed. Her white stilettos clicking out a beat that none of us would ever follow. We looked at her with renewed contempt. We were the die-hards: proud that we had resisted the temptations of burger flipping careers.

Her power dressing disguised the sheer pointlessness of her mission. She was the biggest burger flipper of them all. Her raw material the soft meat of men and women whom she tossed over a slow grill, cheap meals that look good but taste like junk.

That afternoon no one had the stomach for any more job searching.

Al, Derek and I looked out of the first floor window and watched the world go by and passers by walked below with purpose down on the street, as we wondered who amongst them had a job. Most of the shops were boarded up, and we wondered where they were going.

Al surprised us by announcing his new initiative.

"Have you heard about the new French funeral parlours?" he said. "Funerals on the cheap, that kind of thing?"

"Go on, I'm listening." said one.

"Well, obviously funerals cost too much money."

"Not for the dead," said Derek.

"People expect to be ripped off, but then they have other things on their mind."

"Like the old man snuffed it," said Derek.

"So what we do is take away the worry. We take care of the death certificate, for example."

"How do you do that?" I said.

"You take it around to the registrar, on your bike like." said Al.

"Excuse me Al, I can understand your reluctance to come out with it. But what you appear to be proposing is that we become... Funeral Directors?"

"Well, yes, but with a difference."

Al was thinking on his feet.

"Go on!" said Derek.

"We would have a human face. We would be different. People would trust us. No shiny shoes and white socks. No smarmy manners, no rip-off and definitely no black".

"No black?" said Derek.

"No black," said Al.

"What colour did you have in mind Al?" I said.

"A colour that says you can trust us. We will put your old man away like a dream... Pink."

Al slowly pointed to a boarded up hairdressers across the street complete with pink shop front.

"Our new premises." he said.

We all joined in the fantasy of the undertaking dream.

"Look" I observed. "It even has a ready made sign. Open 9 to 5.!"

"I'll be happy with those hours, how about you Derek?"

"OK by me but it also says open seven days a week?"

"Never mind, we'll have to repaint the sign anyway with our new business name."

We all fixed our eyes on the failed hairdressers' premises and we each wanted to be the first to come up with a suitable name.

"I've got it" said Derek.

"SAD Funerals."

"Sad Funerals?"

We were not impressed. Derek explained, "S for Sarah, A for Al and D for Derek."

Ingenious!

"I'm warming to the idea Derek. But, do you think the actual punter will get your drift?"

And so it went on for most of the afternoon. We were there to get a job but for a short time we indulged in our own fantasies. Quietly, we got back to the papers and on with more job searches and enterprising schemes.

Just a few moments of paper rustling and then we resumed our usual meditations.

It was Alf who broke the silence.

"DIE" he said.

"Die?" I said.

death in essex

"DIE!" said Alf. ..

"Death In Essex, get it? Death in Essex, get it?"

"Yes, I get it" said I.

"I'm thinking, I'm going home."



I did head home; I passed the beach front and watched unhappy people enjoying themselves. The tide was out; the mud was in. I looked at Southend and gazed at the longest pleasure pier in the world.

I bought a ticket and then walked on water for the mile and a quarter until the end.

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