

STORY

1st

Who's to know?

Kevin Williams smarted from the visit of his landlord, who reminded him of Uriah Heep.

'I'm sorry, Mr. Williams, but what can I do?' he had said, rubbing his hands in what looked like glee. 'Maintenance costs go up, so your rent goes up. It's the way of things. What can I do?'

And where, thought Kevin, is this maintenance of which you speak? His flat was damp and squalid. Taps dripped, wallpaper peeled. But it was a roof over his head, and so he said nothing. Kevin needed to hold on to what he had, his job seeker's allowance, his £20 of savings in the Post Office, his battered old violin.

As he made a cup of tea, Kevin's eye fell on a consumer survey that had arrived unsolicited in the post. That would distract his despondency. Someone, however faceless, valued his opinion. Today however, in wild abandon, he lied. He ticked boxes to say he had three cats, smoked a pipe, read the Guardian regularly, took holidays abroad twice a year and had an income in excess of £50,000. Who, he thought, is to know? It might have been so if things had worked out.

The experience thrilled him extraordinarily. It was as if a glimmer of light had sneaked into the turgid gloom that surrounded his life. Surprised, he went for a walk in the graveyard over the road to savour the moment, and the cogs in his brain ground into motion. That survey, that little survey, had given him back his dreams. He thought big. He remembered books he had read. He schemed.

Over the next few weeks, as free samples of cat food and vouchers for tobacco plopped onto his mat, he practised in little ways. He found an electricity bill sitting in a box someone had put out for waste-paper recycling. Using it as a

reference, he acquired a new library card. With it he borrowed a book on a certain South American state and never returned it.

Some days later, he was stopped in the street by what seemed to be an Indian gentleman who persistently told him how much better Talk-Talk's broadband and phone service was than the BT that Kevin claimed he had. So Kevin signed everything the man thrust at him, putting down his last boss's name and address—the one who a year ago had told him out of the blue that he was “surplus to requirements” and to be out of the building in ten minutes. He felt a lot better after that.

Then on the 26th May, 2010, Kevin Williams vanished.

So did Robin Curwen. Robin Curwen had died at six weeks of age in 1978, at about the time Kevin was born. During April 2010, he strangely came back to life, applied for quite a few credit cards, exacted maximum funds from them, and disappeared again.

At the same time, one Ben Apsley, who tragically suffered a cot death also in 1978, sprang back into existence too, and, furnished with Robin Curwen's funds, took off permanently for somewhere mysterious and exotic in South America. Had you seen them together, which of course you never would, you would have sworn Ben Apsley and Kevin Williams were identical twins.

Our Kevin had sprung the old trick of obtaining from Somerset House the birth certificates of babies born at about the same time as him who died in infancy. With them, he opened bank accounts, received credit cards, applied for a passport, and the children lived again. Who was to know? Who, when it came to it, suffered from the deceit, apart from the odd bank? And who cared about the banks after everything that had happened?

Kevin, now Ben, felt no guilt. He enjoyed a few weeks of supping marguerites on sun-soaked verandas. Then a passing mosquito gave him a present of yellow fever, which, alas, finished him off. It had been a step too far to lie about immunisations and inoculations before travelling, and Kevin/Ben had never been a robust individual.

But this the mosquito, who bore no malice towards Kevin as far as we can tell, wasn't to know.

Oliver Barton

2nd Text not available

3rd

Who's to Know?

The big, black car made its way slowly up the hill that led into the centre of the village. It was an old Austin 16, a car that was very popular at that time, the 1950's. In speed and appearance it resembled a hearse on its way to a cemetery, and the stern, straight-backed lady who sat in the back seat was as still and as motionless as a corpse in its coffin. But despite her stillness, she looked dignified, and she sat there like a queen, ignoring the prying faces of the curious villagers. The car came to a halt outside the village's only shop, and she stepped carefully out and climbed the half-dozen steps to the door. This was a weekly journey, and as far as we know, Mari, the shopkeeper, was the only person ever to speak to her. Even with Mari it was a very limited conversation – just enough to give her order and obtain the goods she required.

While she was thus engaged, Sam, the car's driver and owner, would sit on the wall opposite the shop, and enjoy a pipeful of tobacco. He was also a man of few words, but would reply cheerfully to anyone who greeted him. He would cast an occasional glance towards the shop door, and when the lady emerged, he would extinguish his pipe and return to the car. The goods were carefully placed on the rear seat, and she would sit next to them. Then the car would return slowly to the lonely cottage of Tÿ Nant, some three miles away.

Sam was a retired lorry driver, who came originally from North Wales. He was on one of his frequent journeys to Cardiganshire when he had first noticed Tÿ Nant. He had stopped in a lay-by to rest and had noticed the remote, whitewashed cottage across the valley. He thought to himself that this would be the kind of place he would like to retire to when his working days were over. Several times afterwards he would stop at the same lay-by, and the little cottage became more attractive to him with each visit. When

retirement day eventually came, Sam decided to make some enquiries locally, and he was delighted to learn that the place had been uninhabited for many years. Further enquiries led him to the owner – a local farmer who used the surrounding land for grazing, but who had no interest in the cottage itself. Sam's offer was too good to refuse and the bargain was struck. Very soon afterwards the cottage became the property of Sam Evans. Naturally, in a place that had been empty and neglected for so long, much tidying and cleaning were required, but Sam tackled this work with enthusiasm, and the cottage soon became a cosy, comfortable home.

Although he was not the most sociable of men, Sam became a familiar figure in the village. However, he much preferred his lonely existence in his remote cottage. It came as a surprise therefore when rumour spread through the village that there was a woman living with Sam at Tŷ Nant. Some believed that the over-active imaginations of some of the villagers were responsible for the rumours. But others swore that they had seen from afar a lady doing various chores outside the little cottage.

All the arguments were laid to rest one Friday afternoon when Sam's car stopped in front of the shop, and a lady dressed entirely in black, stepped out. If tongues had been wagging previously, they wagged ten times harder after witnessing this spectacle! Who was she? Where had she come from? What was her relationship with Sam? Only Mari, the shopkeeper, could shed any light on the matter and satisfy the curiosity of the women of the village. Mari said that the lady had introduced herself as 'Miss Jackson'. She could not speak Welsh and she spoke English with a foreign accent. As to what accent exactly, Mari couldn't elaborate. To her, a foreign accent was a foreign accent, and as far as she was concerned, she could have come from any country under the sun! Then people began to theorise. The Second World War had not long ago ended, and some said that she was a Polish lady who was unable to return to her native country for some reason. Several Polish families had recently settled in the area and had bought or rented houses or smallholdings. These were modest, highly respected people, who were more than willing to be of assistance to others. Others suggested that she was German, and that she had come to the area to hide from someone and to be as inconspicuous as possible. After all, strong anti-German feelings still persisted in some quarters. But the truth was that no one really knew anything about her.

Then people started to query her role at Tŷ Nant. If her real name was Miss Jackson, then it was unlikely that she was married to Sam. When one busybody questioned Sam about her, she was told abruptly that she was his housekeeper. Those of a more vulgar disposition hinted that she was Sam's mistress – someone to keep him company in his lonely bed, and to warm him during the cold winter nights.

Whatever her background and role, it didn't look as if the villagers would ever get to know the truth about her. Although he called at Tŷ Nant daily with two pints of milk, Jac Llaeth would never see her around the place, and Sam would be the one to give him payment every Saturday morning. Wil Postman's experience was similar. People were always glad to see him when he called on his rounds, and were keen to question him about any local gossip. But at Tŷ Nant, if Sam wasn't around, Wil knew that knocking on the door was futile, and he would leave any letters or parcels in a suitable box placed in the porch.

Eventually the rumours and innuendos died down, and the weekly visits of the black car became a part of village life. Miss Jackson and Sam became accepted for what they were and were left alone to live a quiet life at Tŷ Nant.

Then, after many years, the news spread through the village that Sam Tŷ Nant had died. On the day of his funeral in the local cemetery, only a handful were present – some villagers, together with a few strangers, possibly relatives. Miss Jackson was there, wearing the same black outfit that she wore for her weekly shopping trip. She spoke to no one. Following the funeral, no refreshment was provided, as was the usual custom, and after the internment everyone went his own way. The lonely figure of Miss Jackson was seen walking along the road that led from the village to Tŷ Nant.

And that was the last time she was seen in the area. Jac Llaeth left his usual two pints in the porch of Tŷ Nant on the following Monday, but when he went there on Tuesday, Monday's milk was still there. When the same thing happened again on Wednesday, Jac thought that he had better mention the fact to Bill Rees, the local policeman, in case something had happened to her.

When Bill Rees managed to gain entry by pushing open the back door, he found that everything was tidy and in order. But there was no sign of Miss Jackson, and as he wandered from room to room, there was no sign that a woman had ever lived there. No clothes, no shoes – nothing. Miss Jackson had vanished off the face of the earth as suddenly as she had arrived. Who was she? Where was she from? Who's to know!

John Meurig Edwards