

In front, on a little hill in the vast valley was spread out the Indian-red architecture of Bursley - tall chimneys and rounded ovens, schools, the new scarlet market, the crimson chapels, and rows of little red houses with amber chimney pots, and the gold angel of the Town Hall topping the whole... The sedate reddish browns and reds of the composition, all netted in flowing scarves of smoke, harmonised exquisitely with the chill blues of the chequered sky. Beauty was achieved, and none saw it.

Arnold Bennett, Clayhanger, 1910

The Conservative government pledges to take everyone with us, the frail, the elderly, the vulnerable, the poorest – we know they need protection.

David Cameron, 2010

Wednesday 5th May
2010

Round 1

Meagre in build. Mouthy in nature. One good owner and pottery trained: Josiah "Totty" Minton is bang out of sick notes and harbouring a dream of a three-bed semi with bay windows, fully-fitted carpets and enough of a garden to stretch his legs. He's had this dream for awhile though there have been other dreams. Simple ones. Pipe ones. Filthy ones. None of them ever come true. It's why he's so pissed off. Why he misses the urinal and pisses all over the floor.

He can't help it. Like they'll say they can't help him. And so he takes his piss and checks the time and finds he's ten minutes too early for his 10 o'clock appointment with the Jobcentre Plus in this arse-end of Stoke: a broad-bricked, flat-footed abscess, part glum concrete, mostly smutty glass, and home to the job-dodging and the feckless, the socially-needy and plain unlucky. It'd been another big idea from a man with no idea and built on a land that'd once been the pride of every dinner-table and the reddest on earth.

For this had been the Potteries. A once belching, smoking, grimy fug of high production and by royal design. A place that made things, did things, had things going on. Dreams? They made plenty. Some even came true. Now? It's a sorry old place, so sullen and sad. Its once proud skyline of milk-bottle kilns and smouldering stacks given up to slurry and slag after Thatcher's merry money-men robbed from the poor and gave to the rich, shutdown the pots and sold off the pits and ordered its workers to get on their bikes and pedal faster, boy, go faster.

Today, it's a place of flack and frustration, of rough futures and rusting flipcharts: Totty, if he could read, being told as he heads for a desk:



And to please sit down.

“Here?” he asks. “You want us to sit and do this here?”

“Yes,” she says. “I do.”

She is Maggie Gifford. She’s the same age as Totty (44), though she’s four stone heavier and one foot taller. As for the rest of her, she keeps her hair long and poorly conditioned, wears pearls, sensible shoes. She has a BA in Communications and a three-bed semi that she drinks a lot of wine in. Then she fights with her son. His father, her husband, had long left them for a girl who’d barely blown out the candles on her eighteenth birthday cake, and so when not asleep Jason was patrolling the streets with his hood up dealing small amounts of skunk he hid up the drainpipes round the back of the house in cling-film; his average customer not even coming up to your chest.

He’s always on her mind as he never thinks of her, but for now, Maggie Gifford sits in her allocated carpeted paddock in a swivel chair in an office too hot with windows that won’t open in front of a computer that takes ten minutes to boot up. To her left sits Richard, the last to kiss her stretch marks, the first to admit it was one big fucking mistake. To her right is Ruth, ever-so-sunny Ruth whom Maggie cannot stand. On her desk, Maggie keeps a pot of lidless biros, a mug of stone cold tea, and there’s pills in her drawer far from herbal, extra strong mints and electronic fags. She looks across at Totty, who rubs at his jaw with a hand not quite withered but then not quite

formed, and wonders what the hell to do with him.

Her computer screen tells her that he'd been first employed by Minton's from the age of sixteen. That he was laid off in 1986 and taken on by Sadlers until redundancy in early 2000. Then what? Sickness benefit 2001 - 2003. Long-term sick 2004 - 2007. Declared fit to work in 2009. In what, she did not know.

"Remind me Joshua," she says stiffly. "What have you been doing for work?"

"Joshua, Joshua, Joshua." It sounds so middling-class in his head. "I'm already the shit on your shoe without you getting my name wrong so let's get one thing straight. My name is Josiah. As in Wedgewood and Spode, as in man and brother." And she can tell by the look on his face that he is hoping to God she won't ask him to spell it.

She mutters a brief apology then turns to the computer for help. Sees his benefits were stopped three months ago but there was still no evidence of work. She asks, "Have you not been working at all?"

Totty looks down at the floor and sees paperclips (3), elastic bands (2), a mangy tissue and biscuit crumbs. "I look after my mother," he tells her. "She's terminally pig-sick."

There is a sigh from Maggie and a smile from Totty. She wonders if he was born with that hand not quite withered but then not quite formed, what the kids used to say at school, and she checks on the computer for disability allowance, claims she is sure he has made. Totty wonders for who cleans this place, if he had the right tools on him in his box right there to fix their Hoover, sort out that far wall with its chipped paint and damp patches, and then fleetingly thinks of his kids. Joss first. Kirty second. If they know he's been packing their rucksacks again for a move they won't want to do.

Maggie clips his thoughts and asks, "What about courses Mr Minton? Interviews? CV clinics? Did you ever finish an NVQ?"

Totty shakes his head at her questions. "No-one computerises these

hands," he says, holding them up and waving. "They're skilled. They've grafted. They're what we've forgotten how to use."

"The thing is, Mr Minton, what concerns us here now..."

"I know a blue lady who ruined our lives. She championed plastic and charged us to buy. I know a blue lady who ruined our lives. And then she died."

Maggie ignores the song, his political ditty, if that's what it is, and opts for, "Mr Minton, you're not listening."

"No. You're not listening to me," and he points at the wall behind him. "What does that say?" He's gesturing towards the large Staffordshire knot that hangs from chains, its left side lower than its right, a plaque tacked on beneath it.

"What does what say?" Maggie lifts herself from the chair to look.

"That," he repeats. "I know you see it."

"You mean Industry and Prudence conquer?"

"Yes I mean industry and prudence conquer. Do you agree?"

Maggie chews on the side of her mouth and thinks about defrosting a couple of lamb chops for tea.

"Then what about that?" He's pointing again. This time with his left hand and this time she can see quite clearly that he's manacled to what looks like a toolbox with some sort of dog leash. Its contents sound heavy - he's lifting up the toolbox to show her, he wants her to take a good look - but Maggie is looking at the wall, at the coat of arms for Stoke-on-Trent.

She quotes. "It says, *vis unita fortior*. I don't know what it means. I don't know Latin."

"It means united strength is stronger," Totty tells her. "That we're all in this together."

He bangs the toolbox down on Maggie's desk. She jumps. He

grins. His fingernails, she sees, are gnawed and dark with dirt and he was mildly good-looking once, she thinks, as he flicks up the catches and peers inside, she's seen him somewhere before; perhaps in here, maybe somewhere else. He roots noisily in the box before pulling out a spanner, holding it up to the light in admiration, deciding against it: it's not the weapon he needs right now. He will save that for later. He tells her, "We used to make all the crockery in the kingdom," running his fingers along a chisel's spine. "Now we can't grow a bloody teapot for toffee." And in his right hand is a claw-hammer. Not a large one and certainly not a new one, but still, it'll do the job and it's apt, being his father's an' all, and he tightens his grip around its neck and looks at Maggie from under his eyebrows.

"Don't tell me you've never dreamt of doing this yourself," he says, as Maggie emits, from between the fingers she's clamped over her mouth, some sort of squeal, a bleat of panic, of fear, that he might well strike her. She pushes her chair away from her desk and gets up.

"Mr Minton..." she begins, but he doesn't want to know.

He asks, "Do you have any idea of how many of us are out there just dying for something to do?"

She nods. She does. She knows better than anyone. Like she knows how Richard fixes the figures, does the maths, how he can't add up for shit. How those miscalculations make them look good at this Jobcentre Plus in this arse-end of Stoke, and they like to look good because they *have* to look good, because that's what keeps them in work.

"Mr Minton..." Maggie tries again, and this time she adds a please.

But he's not listening. If she can't hear him then he can't hear her and he shakes the toolbox to tease her. "Don't that sound good?" and she nods in case it helps and it's the right answer, as it's right under her nose now, the toolbox, and he's asking her to choose. "You can either put me out of my misery with this hammer to my head or you can choose solidarity and we can go kick fuck out of that wall." He shakes the toolbox again and, this time, screams in her face. "Matter!" he yells. "Fucking matter! Do it! Do it with me! We're all in this

together!”

She chooses a long-handed screwdriver. Not because it's a choice, but because it's pot luck what she picks up first. She's crying and she wishes she wasn't because she's not a girl anymore, and she sniffs and she whimpers as he holds up his claw-hammer and makes to bring it down.

It was at that point that Maggie Gifford went hysterical. She battered hell out of the wall with that long-handed screwdriver until its end blunted and its rubber-grip flew off. And then she went at Richard with her bare hands. Fists actually. She punched the living daylights out of him whilst Totty, pinned to the floor by a security guard he was sure was in the class below him at school, laughed his fucking head off.

“Don't blame me,” he told the paperclips and elastic bands, the mangy tissue, and the crumbs. “Blame the blue lady in her fine shoes and pearls. Who'd got so many men on her plate she didn't know what to do. So she had them working for broth without any bread then whipped their jobs from under them and put us all to fucking bed.”

Round 2

Constance Minton pulled off a glove and rapped on the door. She wasn't expected but she wouldn't be a complete surprise either. News travelled quickly round this neck of the woods and she hoped that the man she was calling upon would be as sensitive to her situation as he'd been the last time she'd called upon him for his help.

She knocked a second time, then a third. This time the door swung open. A man with but an inch and a half on her in height, a good foot or so in girth, choppy boot polish hair and the glow of a woman finally proposed to, greeted her with a couple of headshakes, a deep sigh, and even a stifled laugh. She was no surprise if not later than expected and she was definitely pushing her luck.

He stepped aside so as to let the old woman in. Constance wiped her feet then removed her shoes, untied her headscarf and unbuttoned her coat. She hung everything up on coat-hooks and followed the man down a hallway and into his office where he directed her to sit in a mushroom leather rocker that looked and felt its price. She was yet to speak. So was he.

He was Malcolm Gandy, the head honcho of a private property enterprise that bought and sold on houses, trafficking tenants in between. He had many business cards in his back pocket – Director of Housing Services, Chief Housing Operator, Executive in Chief of Housing Operations, and, his particular favourite, Chief Executive Controller, Housing Division – as he traded under a variety of company names that he wore like days of the week underpants – MG Homes Plc, Gandy House & Home Ltd., Gandy & Gandy, Malcolm Gandy Estates.

How he acquired his properties was an equally sketchy business. He was known to have deals in place with nurses. He visited the old and the really very sick; had a weekly catch up with the council; and rumour had it there was a butterfingered copper who lost the odd file

on a man sent down. But mainly he repossessed, from the living, from the dead, often swooping before the body had gone cold. There was never a brick left unturned or a deal not made and just to ensure he was never far away from scratching at a lacklustre pulse, he lived amongst his tenants, slap-bang in the rut, cock of all he surveyed, and with a ringside view of how folk kept his houses in trim.

Today, Malcolm Gandy was jam-packed into bespoke navy tailoring that pinched the skin under his armpits. His shoes shone. His eyes glinted. His fingers tapped on the desk. Neither he nor Constance wished to speak first.

Constance was no stranger to the place though she much preferred it in its former life, when it'd been Gandy's mother's house. A ratty mid-terrace with windows no bigger than thumbnails, Elsa Gandy had been left it by a gravel-voiced spinster aunt and had occupied it alone for the last two years of her life; the unfortunate timing of slowly-blinding cataracts meaning she never saw what she'd finally come to call her own. It'd broken Gandy's heart to watch her fumbling about its rooms, blind to the beauty of ownership.

"Mother," he had whispered, as she'd struggled to make him tea. "This is what *you* possess," and Elsa would wave him away with a flick of the sugar spoon and tell him that in her world, people were what mattered, not possessions.

"I don't know what you think you're doing putting me in here all on my own," Elsa had moaned, her fingers scarred with the cuts, splices, and splinters of a woman finding her way. "I was perfectly fine where I was. I knew that place like the back of my hand."

"But it wasn't yours mother," Gandy had insisted. "It belonged to somebody else."

"Of course it was *mine*," Elsa had retorted. "And then like every other house in this world, it becomes someone else's. You *pass on* Malcolm, not stockpile like you do," and she'd scuttled away from him, her stubbed fingertips caressing the walls as she had felt her way back to her chair.

Constance and Elsa had not liked each other, the pair of them renowned for their bickering and backbiting and yet most likely to be seen linking arms as they hopped from one pot bank to the next when worn down foremen could stand their squabbles no longer. And yet in Elsa's last months, Constance had become her most regular visitor. Not out of concern, but because at their age they couldn't afford to be picky about mates. They'd found that they'd still got a little stuff in common: they'd both had husbands not lovers, took two sugars in their tea. Both enjoyed crosswords, cleaning, and Countdown, and both had been raised in the two-up two-down terraces that had once housed potters and miners, tilers and steelworkers, brothers and sisters all piled in one room; a case of sleeping where you fell, eating what you were given, you turned up your wages on a Friday and your mother went up the bingo with it. Because family kept you alive in those days, both would agree. Not science and aspirin.

"You've got to listen to a house," Elsa had once told her son Malcolm, still unsure why he'd forced her to give up her home for a house she was lost in. "It'll soon tell you when it's tired of its contents."

But Constance had known alright. "It's not *your* house to rent out Malcolm. It belongs to the state."

"I don't know what you're talking about, Connie," Gandy, then twenty years younger, had replied.

"Yes you do," Constance had insisted. "Move Elsa out, lure some poor bugger in and charge double what the council would. It's daylight swindling, Malcolm. My tongue could run away with me. You could go to jail."

"And like I said," Gandy had replied with his competent grin. "I've no idea what you're talking about."

Gandy now studied Constance from behind his desk. Here she was again, ill and old and pretending to be neither with something to say

that she wouldn't say; that even if he promised to do what she was really here to ask, she'd never just come out with it. He knew that's why she'd dressed smart for the occasion, had powdered her face, was wearing rouge.

"Connie," he said. "This has got to stop," and though Constance replied, "It will, it will," Gandy was unconvinced.

"Let's not forget, Malcolm, you'd be in jail if it wasn't for me and Totty."

Gandy yawned. It was a boring business. "I owe him nothing," he told her. "And it was thirty-two years ago Connie. No-one else saw what Totty thinks he did."

"But you sold the family-silver and then the bloody family," and Constance folded her arms and re-crossed her legs. "You owe us Malcolm Gandy. You owe *me*."

"Don't be nauseating," Gandy replied. "We all started out the same way. Pits, pots, we've all had the same chances."

"And we were all told that if you couldn't afford it you shouldn't have it."

"If we all followed that ethos Connie, this country would be on its arse."

"But loans buy greed Malcolm, and it's because of your bloody greed that most of us round here *are* on our arse."

"Come on Connie," he said. "There's no law on how many houses you can own."

"Well there bloody should be," she retorted. "No-one needs this much money, Malcolm, and no-one can possibly live in that many houses. You can't take a ruck of bricks with you and shrouds don't come with purses."

"I bought them fair and square," he shouted, holding up three fingers to emphasise his impatience. "Three months you've been in

there, Connie. Three months.”

And he was right. For the past three months, Constance and her family had been squatting opposite what had become known as the Derelict Mile, land owned by a bankrupt subsidiary of Malcolm Gandy Estates. Why? Well, go back five years, and Malcolm Gandy Residential Ltd had bought four little terraces all in row on Bennett Road; houses so rundown and ramshackle that they’d only be worth anything if he knocked them down and started again. So he did.

However, he apparently ran out of money just before his diggers knocked on the door of No. 10. Dereliction, Gandy told the council surveyor investigating the Bennett Road demolition, was a costly business. Perhaps more costly than building completely new. He would go under if he demolished any further.

And so the residents on the other side of Bennett Road were forced to look out to a partly-boarded not quite flattened row of houses until eventually, numbers 1 to 13 were acquired by some other holding company with sly links to MG Homes.

Gandy reminded Constance yet again of the situation. “You’ve had plenty of notice Connie. Five years notice in fact, and plenty of options too.” But Constance was busying herself with a long brown envelope wearing the council’s logo, Housing Services, first class stamp.

“There’s always an enemy within,” she said, pushing the envelope towards him. It contained yet another final notice on the winding up of their tenancy agreement at 13 Bennett Road. “Though why you think you’ve got to own everything round here is quite beyond me. You’re like a spoilt child.” She pointed at the unopened letter. “Joss has his mocks at Christmas. He and Kirty walk to school together. They have friends, friends that’ll stop remembering them. Then there’ll be bus fares, early mornings, dark nights, and me; stuck in some old folk’s bungalow up Smallthorne. I don’t know anyone up Smallthorne, Malcolm, and what if there’s no bus stop?”

Gandy sighed heavily. “Joss will walk his exams with his eyes closed,” he began. “I’ve offered to pay for taxis to school for Kirty and

Smallthorne, Connie, is not the end of the world.”

“Then there’s this business of social services snooping,” Constance pressed on. “I mean we all know Lux. Never a motive always a whim, but now she’s just being bloody nasty.”

“I’ve no interest in gossip, Connie,” Gandy interrupted. “I leave that to the amusement of you women.”

Constance sneered. A perpetual muck-spreader, able to dredge up more dirt from under a fingernail than anyone else Constance knew, Lux Faithful (oh the irony!), being Joss and Kirty’s mother, had lost custody of them three years back and yet continued to needle social services to investigate how they slept at night. In Lux’s words: “My son’s fifteen, my daughter has just turned seven, and they should not be sleeping on camp-beds in the middle of the front fucking room.”

“Please don’t do this,” Constance asked Gandy. “You have all the other houses. Every single one of them. You don’t need ours. Not really. Not yet. What would your father say if he knew what you were doing to us?”

Gandy glared. “You know better than anyone that I *never* looked up to that shit excuse for a man.” He got up from his chair and sent it careering across the room. “He did nothing but hold me back. ‘Don’t get ahead of yourself son. Remember who you are’.” He made a puking sound. “He was fucking nothing and he gave me even less. They’d still be sitting on the street with their suitcases if it wasn’t for me.”

“And if it wasn’t for us, Malcolm, you’d have nothing to show for it either,” Constance sniffed. “You’ll never be better than us, however much you try to forget who you were. But if you’ve an ounce of decency left, you’ll stop all these letters, tell Lux to go home, and give my Totty some regular work.” She paused. Looked down at her hands. “He needs to work Malcolm, you know he needs to work. He needs to think he’s still got a side to fight on.”

“You know exactly what he needs to do,” Gandy reminded her. “Because where is he Connie? Why isn’t *he* here? Where is he right

now?"

"Then wait," Constance demanded, biting her lip. "For the sake of Joss and Kirty. It's my right to die in the house that I was born in."

Gandy rolled his eyes. "Connie," he said flatly. "You're squatting in my property and I want my property back. I know you mean well but the deadline is still next Friday. You've both been offered good homes. Don't prolong this out of principle. It wasn't paradise then. It was a fucking dirt bowl."

She shook her head defiantly. "Then you really will have my death on your hands. And you will Malcolm. I'll make sure it's seen as all your fault," and with her hand clamped over her runaway-mouth for effect, she turned and fled his office knowing that it'd been a battle well-staged and fought.