

# LEST I SHOULD DIE BEFORE I LIVE

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In memory of Raymond Chandler

(23 July 1888 – 26 March 1959)

Who told a good story

## Lest I Should Die Before I Live

### Chapter One

The first difference you notice between a bang-up prison and an open prison are the bars. That's what first struck me on my arrival at Leyhill Open Prison in Gloucestershire. The bars in a bang-up are on the outside of the windows – to keep prisoners in. The bars in an open prison are on the inside of the windows – to keep the inmates out; out of the tobacco and pharmacy stores.

Sentenced at Plymouth Crown Court, I was transported by coach – not a wagon – with other convicts, each handcuffed to a warder, to the allocation prison at Exeter. It was November 5<sup>th</sup> and on the way up the A38, the dark passing scenery had been alight with fireworks. I was beginning to feel very sympathetic to Mr. Fawkes.

Friday evening was not the best day or time for a prisoner to arrive at H.M.P. Exeter. There was no work or activities at the weekend. So after a period in reception, being allocated with prison gear – blue and white striped shirts, grey flannel trousers, well-worn underwear, very small socks and ill-fitting black shoes without laces – and then a session with the female prison doctor who rather boringly examined my genitals for any possible venereal diseases, it meant being banged-up in a small cell until Monday morning. The cell contained just two beds, two buckets, a small table with a metal jug containing insipid water and a white towel with the prison name.

The chapel for the Church of England service on Sunday morning was crowded. Very religious, these inmates? Not really. They just wanted to get out of their cells for an hour or so.

Monday morning, I was still by myself in the cell, which suited me. About 6.30 am, a loud bell, more like a siren, sounded and all the cell doors were flung open. We were on the first balcony and we were ushered along the narrow passageway to the wash room to slop-out our buckets and for a quick wash. We were then marched down a metal flight of steps to the main association area on the ground level, where we were shoved breakfast on metal trays.

I next found myself in a crowded workroom, supervised by an instructor, with about a hundred inmates stitching mail bags. That day I managed to produce one mail bag; a real work of art. When I returned to my cell, I found I had company. A lad in his twenties, who was no stranger to the interior of H.M.P. Exeter. At forty years old, I had already realised that I was the oldest occupant, apart from some individuals on A1 Wing – known as the Dossers' Wing. These were regulars, doing sojourns of about three months. My sentence was slightly longer – four years.

Next morning I was in the mail bag room again, hopelessly fiddling with the canvas and thread, when about 10.30 am, a uniformed warder entered and called my name.

The warder was the bearer of good news. I was to be immediately transferred from the mail bag room to the library, where I was to be the number 2. This entitled me to my own single cell on the B wing on the first floor. Luxury! My predecessor had been transferred to Leyhill Open Prison in Gloucester – the mecca or so-called “University” of prisons. I hoped that I would soon be heading to Leyhill.

The No.1 in the library was an old lag. As a non-smoker, he had commenced upon his career of crime by hijacking a lorry-load of cigarettes. He had a good cell next door to the library on the ground floor.

Tuesday morning at just before 7.00 am, having slopped out and washed, I was standing on the first floor landing, waiting to be marched down to breakfast. I saw a red substance dripping down from the landing above. At first I thought it might have been tomato ketchup. It was blood. Two inmates on the floor above had had an altercation and one had tried to slit the other's throat, only partly succeeding. After that all razor blades were taken from the cells and from then onwards they were issued and taken back each morning. Shutting the stable door?

Warders are known as ‘screws’. This endearment goes back to the Victorian penal times. Inmates were punished by being forced to continuously turn a heavy handle attached to a block for hours on end. To increase the punishment, the warder would tighten the screw on the handle to make it harder to turn. Hence the name screws. This torment was endured by, among thousands of others, Oscar Wilde at the notorious Reading Jail, hence his famous Ballad of Reading Jail which he composed in exile in France after his release on 19 May 1897.

Working in the library was good. Quite civilised! One day when I returned to my cell at lunchtime, I found it in a shambles. All my personal belongings had been scattered over the bed and on the floor. I had been “turned-over” by the “burglars”. Burglars are the security warders, normally looking for drugs or cash. They didn't find anything, but they made sure that they left a mess in their disappointment.

There is a hierarchy in a prison such as that in Exeter. On A wing are the dossers, those on short sentences for petty or recurring offences. These will remain on A wing throughout their sentence. Rule 43 wing houses the “nonces”, convicted of sex offences or offences against children and these are separated from the other inmates for their own protection. There is a remand wing for those awaiting a court appearance and who have not been granted bail. These have a

bad time, being locked-up twenty-three hours a day, usually four to a cell meant for two. They are allowed the “privilege” of wearing their own clothing. There is a young offenders unit, often raided by the “riot squad”.

In a ‘closed’ prison there is a lot of locking and unlocking of doors – the loud slamming of doors; you sense the finality of those sounds.

Leading up to Christmas each year, some ‘dossers’ deliberately break shop windows so that they will be sent to prison for the season and have the Christmas meals. One unfortunately miss-timed it and ended up in a police cell over Christmas.

Police personnel who had been convicted and imprisoned were listed as civil servants to hide their identity as police for their protection, but other inmates soon discovered this and they were almost immediately relocated to an open prison. Most were convicted of perjury or fraud. Even in an open prison they were still ostracised by their peers, especially the perjurers, who had tried to “buy” a conviction of a defendant. There was one exception; an ex-superintendent who had committed an enormous fraud. He was revered by other inmates.

The different wings of the prison are also segregated at meal times, to make it easier to supervise the inmates. One group is especially kept away from the others, for their own protection. These are again the ‘nonces’ on Rule 43, sex offenders and child molesters.

I had been working in the library for less than a fortnight when the No.1 was also transferred to Leyhill and I became No.1. A Mr. Sutton was the warder in charge of the library. He was mature and very experienced, firm and fair. The library bought and sold newspapers to the inmates. I never fully understood how the finance was organised for this; how the prisoners paid for the papers. I thought that it could have been from their wages for their work in the prison, but these wages were exceptionally low and for most were spent on tobacco, which they rolled into cigarettes. I had been used to dealing in thousands, so such minute transactions were beyond me. I had also found it an advantage in prison to be a non-smoker and a non-drinker.

There was a remand wing at Exeter Prison, for those awaiting trial and not granted bail. These individuals are banged-up for 23 hours a day, being let out only for slopping-out and meals. Many are three or four to a crowded cell. Most of the papers were bought by remand prisoners and that is how I came to view their awful existence when Mr. Sutton and I delivered their newspapers. As soon as Mr. Sutton opened their cell doors an obnoxious 23 hour old smell drifted out.

Rumours were circulating, as they do in most places, but even more so in prisons. Why had the No.1 been transferred out so quickly? His cell alongside the library,

which I now occupied, looked out onto the outside world – that is, if you climbed onto the bed to stretch up to the high, barred excuse for a window. I also found an alarm bell near to the door of the cell. I had not seen such a thing in any other cell. This room must have been used for some other purposes before it became a cell.

Eventually I got part of the story from Mr. Sutton. Some time before midnight, Ron, the No.1 had been awakened by noise immediately outside his window. Jumping up and looking out of his window he was just in time to see an inmate climbing down the outside wall by means of a string of knotted sheets. There were three escapees. Realising and seizing the opportunity – his ticket out of Exeter – Ron had pressed the alarm bell.

The three escapees made little distance before they were caught. What had motivated Ron to alert the prison staff to the escapees? Not out of any love for the prison or its warders. Ron had now become a “grass”, someone who reports on his fellow prisoners. The lowest form of prison life. This may not necessarily endear him to the warders, but it would certainly make him a target of hate to the inmates. Ron knew, for his own safety, that he would have to move out of Exeter and his likely destination could be Leyhill. A risk which he was prepared to take.

Mr. Sutton was near to retirement. He had started in the prison service straight from school. This was unlike many of his colleagues who had entered the service following careers in the army or navy and from which they now had pensions.

In the quiet of the library, Mr. Sutton told me some stories of the old days, not all good! This had been in the days of capital punishment. If a warder wished to remain in the prison service, he had to assist in at least one execution. Fortunately for Mr. Sutton, it had only been one and he had hated it. After the noose and hood had been fixed, he had been instructed to place his hand on the condemned man’s shoulder. He recalled how he had been warned not to lean too far over else he would topple down as well.

Exeter Prison was the venue of the most extraordinary and bizarre attempted execution. That was of John “Babbacombe” Lee in the early morning of 23<sup>rd</sup> February 1885. The press later called John Lee “The man they couldn’t hang.”

On 5<sup>th</sup> February 1885, John Lee was found guilty of murder at Exeter Assizes and sentenced to hang despite protesting his innocence.

On that early morning of February 23<sup>rd</sup>, Lee was led to the gallows in Exeter Prison. He was walked to the trapdoor, the noose placed around his neck and the lever pulled to draw the bolt to release the trapdoor to drop and hang him.

The trapdoor didn't budge. The hangman pulled the lever a second time and again the trapdoor failed to open; it was stuck fast.

Lee was returned to his cell and staff tested the mechanism. It was working perfectly. Lee was returned to the scaffold and positioned with the noose around his neck and the hangman, John Berry, pulled the lever for the third time. The trapdoor again refused to budge.

The governor of the prison is supposed to have said: "Enough is enough." The Home Secretary was contacted. He authorised a delay to the execution. After a Parliamentary debate, the sentence was commuted to life imprisonment. John Lee served 22 years in prison and was released in 1907. He eventually moved to America where he died of a heart attack on 19<sup>th</sup> March 1945 at the age of 80. Lee's cell was now unoccupied and on my paper round, I caught a quick glimpse of it. As the "condemned" cell, it remains empty.

I had arrived at Exeter Prison on the evening of November 5<sup>th</sup>. I was impatient to be transferred to Leyhill Open Prison. Two fellow inmates who worked in the library had been transferred there and I was hoping that I would be the next. Not so. A "junior" in the library was transferred there, for what I thought was ahead of me. Were they deliberately keeping me in Exeter to run the library?

It was now late December. Christmas Day arrived. We had a special traditional lunch of turkey and trimmings. In prison, lunch was the main meal of the day. As the library was closed on Christmas day, I spent most of it in my cell. The warders were considerate to me. They left my cell door open most of the day and I was even invited into their staff room, which was next door, for a coffee. Through the evening I was joined by the prison cat, who apparently regarded my cell as being his domain, and he was my sole company on Christmas evening. When my cell door was about to be shut and locked and lights turned off, he swiftly departed, presumably to the staff room. I spent about an hour or so reading a book by means of the outside floodlights and then fell asleep. Thus ended my first Christmas Day as a 'guest of Her Majesty', though I doubt if she had any knowledge of my existence.

New Year's Eve arrived, as it does at the end of each year. One of the screws told me to stay awake and listen at midnight on New Year's Eve. Sure enough, as midnight approached, there was a crescendo of noise – the inmates banging on their window bars with cutlery and whatever other implements available. The warders told me that this was a prison tradition each year and, as New Year's Eve does not hold so much interest for me as Christmas, this was the only spark of interest on an otherwise boring day. I was not sure if my fellow prisoners were welcoming in the new year or saying good riddance to the old one and ending another year off their "bird".

The second week of the new year brought good news. On January 20<sup>th</sup>, I was to be transferred to Leyhill. This was the coveted Category D open prison in rural Gloucester, converted from a war-time R.A.F. hospital camp and divided into twelve "wards". To the "college" inmates in a category A prison, this was the ultimate "university".

On my final evening in the bang-up prison, standing on my bed in my dark cell after lights-out and looking over Exeter through the bars of my cell window, I thought how it took a lot of lights to make a city.

On the morning of January 20<sup>th</sup>, I, together with my meagre possessions, commenced on my journey to Leyhill. Taken handcuffed in a coach from Exeter to the large Horsfield Prison in Bristol and into the allocation area there. The place seemed huge. Standing amidst hundreds of others, one tried to identify individuals likely to be also Leyhill bound. Maybe middle-aged and wearing suits. Eventually about five of us had our handcuffs removed and were ushered into a coach to start the more pleasant journey, just a short drive, to Leyhill near the town of Wotton-on-the-Edge and the start of another adventure.

H.M.P. Leyhill is an open prison, D category and is near to the town of Wotton-under-Edge. As our coach approached the entrance, we could see that there were no walls and no wire fences, just a high country hedge. During the second German war, it had been a military hospital, for the R.A.F., I believe. The reception was like that of a country club and our coach parked in the car park. It was then that I noticed that there were only two small buildings with bars at their windows and that these bars were inside rather than outside. We went through the usual routine of changing back into prison gear.

Following this, we were taken along a long, open corridor and allocated our accommodation. This accommodation at Leyhill consists of twelve pre-fab buildings, still known as wards from their hospital usage. There were no cells, just little cubby-holes with a bed, a shelf and a curtain instead of a door. The windows were without bars and could be opened by the inmate.

I found that to be a non-smoker and non-drinker was a big advantage in prison. The smokers were for ever searching floors and pathways for discarded fag ends for scraps of tobacco for rolling minute cigs. Not enjoying life within was an inmate who prided in being a founder member of Alcoholics Unanimous!

I had fallen foul of Judge Good who obviously thought of himself as a modern day Judge Jeffries. However, it is no good succumbing to bitterness; it only burns your stomach and does not impact on the perpetrator. I once read somewhere that the past can only hurt you if you let it.

Good was not at all good to me.

## Chapter Two

So what was it that influenced me, until then an honest person, to become a very dishonest one? It wasn't any false pursuit of pleasure. It was more a form of escapism – a means to escape the so-called rat race. It was also a mistaken belief that I could take control of my life and the way that I wanted to live it.

I had become very deluded with my employers. I was now working for my fourth managing director. The first two had been very strong, the third weak and was eventually dismissed and the fourth, the current one, was very weak. Strong managers are usually profit maximisers, whilst weak managers are cost minimisers. The former normally advance the business; the latter go around in ever decreasing circles until there is nothing left to cut.

The bottom line is that I wanted to get out of the organisation and what I should have done was to obtain alternative employment and resign, which in my position meant that I had to give three months' notice. Instead I took a different route.

Maybe I should go back to the beginning, although I am not sure when the beginning was. I think back to a very sunny and hot 1977 in Riva at the northern tip of Lake Garda in that part of Northern Italy, which together with the Dolomites, was part of Austria until the end of the First German War. Hence the place names are in both Italian and German.

Six o'clock on a Sunday morning. It is the promising start of what will be a golden dawn. There is still a blue mist and the shallow waves are glistening on Lake Garda. Riva is a resort for wealthy Germans and their white sailed yachts are floating onto the lake. Such a tranquil and peaceful setting and I was absorbed in watching it for more than an hour. It contrasted so sharply with my life – my existence – in higher retail management. I wanted to stay there for ever and not return to England.

I had stayed at the Hotel Emma in Merano (Meran), driven down the Brenner Pass and the Dolomites, calling at Vipotina on the way, to the Hotel Riva, managed by the brother of the manager of the Hotel Emma.

I had planned to stay a week in Riva. I hired a speedboat and sailed, or rather powered, on Lake Garda past Limone with its lemons and berthed at Malcesine where I enjoyed the best pizza ever. The next evening I strolled along the northern point of the lake to a waterside bar. Before the Euro the currency was lira, 2,400 to the pound sterling. The waitress was from what was then still Yugoslavia. She was blonde and tall, silhouetted attractively against the blue of the lake.

The next evening, I was sitting outside the bar, alone at a waterside table, a large birra alla spina waiting patiently in front of me. A man came and sat at an

adjoining table. It was not until he spoke that I knew that he was English; accent maybe east London. His voice made me think of the Little Driver pub in Mile End, going towards Bow. I used to take a girlfriend there; couldn't remember her name now.

The next day the same man was standing by the lake, seemingly admiring it. It was 5.00 pm and all was fine and reasonably calm, but you need to be back in the hotel by 9.00 pm, for after that a storm can blow north up the lake. When it reaches the tip of the lake between the hills, it is compressed into this narrow point of the lake and becomes very powerful.

"Where are you from?" he asked.

"Plymouth, originally Pinner. You?"

"East Ham.... Now Exeter."

"That so?"

"Mm. This is the place to come to. Away from all the trials of life.... Running a business."

"Yes," I agreed. "What kind of business?"

"My company manufactures paper bags for retailers," he replied.

"Really! I'm a senior manager in a chain of department stores. We stopped using papers bags some time ago. All plastic now."

"That's my problem," he replied. "We don't have the facilities to manufacture plastic bags. Stores aren't buying paper anymore. Our customer base is narrowing and we'll soon be facing cash-flow difficulties. Don't want to get into overdraft problems. Never get out of them. What's your probs?"

"Sales in an increasingly competitive market. Gross margins. Net profits. Increasing costs for department stores. The only costs that we can control are personnel costs and stock levels. And we can only control those to a certain extent. Diminishing stock turn as sales become more difficult. Lower margins to maintain sales. When I'm forty I want to get out of this rat race. Having to try to convince the Board every Monday evening."

"That's one problem I don't have," he said. "I am the Board." He rose to his feet, finished his drink, stretched his arms and gave a final glance at the lake. "I'm getting back to the hotel to pack. Moving on tomorrow... to Lake Como." He smiled, more like a grin. "Funny how two complete strangers reveal to each other their business probs. Must be the lakeside air. Here's my card." He opened his wallet and passed me his card.

"We won't be buying paper bags again," I insisted. "Plastic forever now."

"You never know," he replied. "Even in business, things still go around in circles. Maybe they'll run out of plastic."

He gave a final nod and departed. I expected that that would be the last time that I would ever see him again. And so it was..... until about six months later.

It was a Sunday lunchtime on a sunny Spring day. Heather in bloom. Sheep dozing in the middle of the road, ponies wandering across the heath, a solitary cow chewing the cud. I was in my favourite Dartmoor pub, the Dartmoor at Merivale. They do a very good Sunday lunch there which I was enjoying with my solitary Bass's Special. I was wearing a sports jacket which I had not worn for some time and I was fumbling in the pockets for my diary when I found a business card. It was the one given to me by the man in Riva. I stuffed it back into the pocket. The next day I would put it into a box which rested on the shelf behind my office desk. It would remain there with about thirty others in my "outsider" box, cards which I expected not to be of any use, but you never know. I vaguely remembered that the card belonged to Robert Green, Steadfast Paper Bag Company in a Street in Exeter, not far from Siddall Street.

A few months later, on a rainy July day, I was sitting in my office, trying to decide what to report to the Board that evening on the problem of the declining profits. My phone rang. It was Robert Green. It was some moments before I remembered who he was.

I had been careful not to give him my business card when we met in Riva. So how did he find me?

"There are just two department store chains in Plymouth," he explained. "I asked who was responsible for buying plastic bags. The first said this was done at national office in London. The second gave me your name."

He waited for a moment, then continued "How about joining me for lunch? I have a proposition to make to you."

"I'm still not buying paper bags and I don't do lunch. As they say: there's no such thing as a free lunch," I replied. Then added: "Plastic is one of the world's greatest inventions. Think of all the trees it has saved. And when they complain about plastic on our beaches, that's not left there by holidaymakers. That's from the common practice of ships dumping all their rubbish overboard. That's why most of the rubbish found on our beaches has foreign language on it."

"I'm not selling bags. I've got something greater to discuss with you. There must be a 50% chance that it will appeal to you. No commitment if you don't approve

of it. So about dinner? You've got nothing to lose and maybe something to gain. Tomorrow evening. You pick the venue."

We didn't go to the Merrivale; I only take special people there. Instead we went to the Roborough Arms on the outskirts of Plymouth leading to the moors. By the way, my name is Rupert Bradley; actually it's James Rupert Bradley, but when I was young, I decided that Rupert sounded more posh.

The Roborough Arms does a fantastic steak and kidney pie, just like the long gone Grapes in Derring Street where the Tremeloes used to rehearse. Robert had gone for a rump steak, medium rare. "I sell paper bags to stores," my companion was saying: "You buy plastic bags for stores. To cut it finer, I sell bags to stores, you buy bags for stores. I'm forty-two, you're coming up to forty. We're getting too old to stay in this rat race. I wanna get out of my business, you wanna get out of yours. This could be our last opportunity."

"What opportunity? What are you suggesting?"

"Fake invoices, or rather semi-fake invoices."

"How?"

"You order a consignment of bags from. I send them to you, but only half the order, but I charge for all the order. You authorise my invoice to be paid in full for all the consignment for which you have only received half. I receive payment for all the amount for which I have only supplied half and then split the difference with you 50 – 50."

"Sounds very risky," I replied. "I could be done for fraud, and how do I know that you will split the difference?"

"Because we will need more than one invoice and you won't sanction others if I don't. Maybe it is risky for you – everything's risky - but you could argue that your warehouseman told you that there had been a delivery and you assumed it was for the full delivery. Just carelessness or negligence on your part, whereas I could be done for fraud for supplying false invoices. My risk is therefore greater. The alternative is that I supply five separate deliveries and charge for six. That's more difficult to spot. To minimise risk there are, I believe, three factors. Don't be greedy. Don't be complacent. Don't be impatient."

"Accountants are not very bright, they're methodical," Robert continued. "They like a routine. They don't like exceptions; anything against the routine; things that stand out. I recommend the second approach. A series of six invoices with five deliveries. These invoices will then become acceptable, a part of the routine, to the accountants and their bought ledger section. All six invoices identical.

Rolling over repeat orders. If questioned or discovered, the extra payment will be regarded as a genuine mistake.”

After another large glass of Chilean Merlot, we shook hands.

The first delivery of bags arrived the following month, followed by an invoice for just over £5,000, but only about £2,500 worth had been delivered. We were ignoring one of the three “safety factors”, don’t be impatient and had opted for the first of the two alternatives. I authorised payment of the invoice. But, and a big but! My senior warehouseman queried the fact that we had received a delivery of paper bags when now we only used plastic ones. I told him that we would return them to the sender on a debit note and that we would receive a credit for them, as there had obviously been a mistake. I completed a debit note for them and their total cost, but this was on a debit note that I did not process through the system. Not what I would have liked, but there seemed to be no choice. Then the warehouse provided me with a better alternative. He complained, as he often did, about the amount of work involved in returning all these packs of paper bags. So I sort of pretended to give in and told him that we would keep and use the paper bags on this one occasion and that I would contact the supplier and stop it happening again. This pleased him very much.

That evening, I phoned Robert Green from home and told him the problem. This seemed to be the end of our little adventure into fraud. Robert would receive a cheque for £5,000 for £2,500 worth of bags and he would send me his personal cheque for £1,250 and that would be the end of our little partnership in crime. And then I had an idea. Why send any bags at all; just send the invoices.

So on a monthly basis, Robert would send an invoice for £5,000 worth of bags, but no actual bags. This continued for six months and between us we netted £30,000, split £15,000 to each of us, plus the original £1,250 each from the first invoice. And with no bags being delivered, there was no problem from my warehouseman disputing a delivery of paper instead of plastic bags. But we committed one more of the three major mistakes mentioned by Robert. We became complacent and overlooked the fact that Robert was still invoicing paper instead of plastic bags.

Then a junior clerk in the accounts department queried the fact that we were paying invoices for paper bags when we didn’t use paper bags. He got promotion for that and I got four years.

### Chapter Three

The Plymouth Crown Court is in the Great Square in the City Centre. It is post-war and started as a magistrates court. It is situated alongside the Victorian guildhall which survived the German blitz which destroyed the old centre of the Three Towns of Plymouth, Stonehouse and Devonport. Plymouth became a city in 1928, announced by the then Prince of Wales in his visit there.

I arrived early as my case was due to be tried at 10.00 am. The foyer of the court was a hive of activity, people dashing in all directions like swarming bees; looking for their court, looking for other people, shaking hands –solicitors, solicitors' clerks, barristers in their stupid and pompous array of black gowns and dusty wigs, to give them an appearance of importance. The older and more grimy the outdated Georgian headgear, the more senior its wearer.

I had been arrested in April with the trial due for November 5<sup>th</sup>, the course of English law and justice being slow and cumbersome. Having spent one day being interrogated by a police detective sergeant, I spent a night in a police cell without shoes and laces, before spending another day of interrogation and being released on police bail. A police car (and driver) gave me a lift home.

I was supplied with a solicitor – not on legal aid – which cost me £1,000. Apart from having me interviewed by a psychologist and arranging a barrister for me, he did nothing. £1,000 not well spent.

One of my main problems, which seemed to be mounting, was that £35,000 had been fraudulently taken from my company and I had only £16,250 of this; the other half having gone to Robert who had scarpered, with the police doing little to trace him as they seemed content to have me in their grip. Robert has never been found to this day.

I had not deposited my share of the fraud into my own bank account, but into four fictitious bank accounts which I had set up with a high street bank, giving false names and addresses. I was surprised how easy it was then to set up these bank accounts. I understand that this bank has prevented this practice now by insisting on proof of identity and address – shutting the stable door. I realised that bankers tended to regard the money you deposit with them as being their money and I formed the opinion that some bankers were – well greedy and loved accepting money.

My appointed barrister was not, of course, a QC. I was obviously not sufficiently important. He said very little in court, leaving things open for the prosecuting barrister. It was obvious that my man was scared of the judge, a very senior and dominating figure. It occurred to me that it was wrong for judges to be appointed from barristers, the latter being more concerned with their careers than with their

clients' welfare. There should be a training college for potential judges from all walks of life, who do not have dual ambitions in court.

I had pleaded guilty, as the result was obvious, but this did not help me. The big problem for me was that though the police had recovered all my share of the stolen money that I had banked as I had completely co-operated, they could not trace Robert or where he had concealed his £16,250. I was therefore being held responsible for the full amount. The kindly judge therefore ordered a criminal bankruptcy order against me for the money taken by Robert.

I was forming the opinion that the police and prosecutors were taking the view (which suited their purposes) that Robert Wood did not exist and that I had concealed the missing money somewhere, despite having a witness that had identified his existence, which was obvious as there were the invoices from his paper bag company to support this.

## Chapter Four

Leyhill was like a holiday camp. Well, not really. Residents could not come and go as they wished, although a few did each year, but they were soon caught and returned to a closed prison. The only one that was not recaptured was a Sicilian for whom a helicopter landed in one of the many prison fields and transported him to Mafia land. There are about three thousand prisoners who pass through Leyhill each year of whom only less than a dozen attempt to leave prematurely. The security, although built on trust, is very secure. With just a very few exceptions, all the inmates wish to complete their 'bird' and depart legally. In his address to us new arrivals, the governor pointed out that the M5 was just across the way.

I was allocated to Ward 4. On either side of the entrance to each ward there are two rooms – yes, rooms. These are for 'lifers' who have spent decades in secure prisons and are now being exposed to some freedom in preparation for their release. Most of these have 'outside' jobs during the week. One in my ward was training as a chef in a local hotel.

There is a committee of inmates which meets once a week to discuss ideas, issues and problems for which a report is submitted to the governor. Each ward has a representative on this committee. Very democratic! I was appointed to the committee as a representative of the Catholic Association. I was also the secretary and representative of the Rambling Association. Rambling Association and we did! Mr. Black, the warder who ran the rambling association, took us to Bristol Zoo, where Rosie the elephant once reigned supreme, and a couple of visits to the Westonbirt Arboretum. The Catholic Association had a visit to Prinknash Abbey. I also became a member of LADS (Leyhill Amateur Dramatic Society) and co-starred in an old Brian Rix Whitehall farce.

My first few weeks at Leyhill were taken up by a computer course on which I learnt and passed tests in word-processing and web sites. When that was completed, I was transferred to the nursery gardens where I worked in the celery poly tunnels for a month or so. Next came a course on printing in the print shop. The best was to come. The farm manager needed a secretary and a fellow inmate recommended me and I spent the rest of my time in the farm office and wandering around the farm for which I was given a special pass. We had 700 acres of farm land. During this time, I was offered an outside job, but I declined because my weekends were taken up with being the sacristan for the Catholic church on Sundays and the rest of the weekend playing golf on the prison's mini golf course. Also I couldn't be bothered with the routine of changing in and out of your civilian clothes which you had to wear when on an outside job. There is something comforting about the security of being in an open prison.

After sixteen months spent briefly in Exeter Prison and the rest in Leyhill, I was released on parole. An ex-prisoner collected me in his car from the reception at

Leyhill and transported me home where I was greeted by a probation officer who would supervise my parole.

I was employed for a few months in a book shop in Bristol and then spent a couple of years with a public relations firm in Chipping Sodbury. I will now skip to what is really the final stage of my life's adventure.

I got the Bakerloo to Charing Cross and strolled along the Strand and Fleet Street, my two favourite thoroughfares in the West End. In the Fleet I passed several pubs until I reached my favourite, the Crown and Sugarloaf in Brides Lane. Ladroski was sitting in the far corner, as he always did, his pint of Old Brewery in front of him. There was a man sitting with him. I knew of Ladroski and that he almost always sat alone, preferring it that way. As he used to say: "I am alone, but not lonely." I knew that he had been a private detective, but was now retired.

By the time I reached the bar, Natalie had my large glass of Chilean Merlot ready. "Who is the guy with Ladroski?" I asked her.

"That's Marcias," she replied. "Do you know him?"

"No," I said.

"You don't want to. There's an organisation known as the Blue Brigade. Described as an anti-terrorist organisation. Marcias is a big shot with them. He's a man to keep well away from. Strange company for Ladroski to keep."

I looked at Marcias. Studied him. A nondescript sort of man. If you were asked to describe him you would find it very difficult. He didn't seem to have anything to distinguish him. I didn't realise it then, but I was about to commence on my next adventure. Perhaps I would live before I die.

## Chapter Five

I was glad to be back in London with a job in public relations in a firm in Fetter Lane. By the time I paid my next visit to the Crown and Sugarloaf, Ladroski was dead. He had suffered a fatal heart attack whilst passing the Cheshire Cheese. Perhaps he should have gone in.

There are three Cheshire Cheese pubs in the West End. This one, the most famous, is the one in Fleet Street, the one, if you read Boswell, the good doctor did not visit, despite his picture above the fireplace there. He and Boswell favoured the Mitre in Fleet Street, now the site of a bank with a blue plaque commemorating the Mitre.

In the Crown and Sugarloaf my Merlot was waiting at the bar. There was no smile from Natalie. "He wants to speak to you." She nodded to the far corner. It seemed empty without Ladroski – the dead man's table. But it wasn't empty. He was there – Marcias. "Better humour him," Natalie advised. "He can turn nasty."

"So can I," I replied. But I went to join him, anyway.

I was curious. You know what they say about curiosity. It killed the cat, but satisfaction brought it back to life.

I announced myself as Rupert Bradley. He didn't announce himself, apparently assuming that I already knew who he was, which I did. "You are James Rupert Bradly," he corrected. "You shouldn't discard James. It's the only name with two apostles."

"Why are you so interested in me?" I demanded.

"I have a proposition for you."

"The last proposition I had landed me in jail."

"This one won't. Quite the opposite. It may seem like jail at times, maybe even worse, but it won't be. However, it will not be as comfortable as Leyhill."

"What are you talking about? I checked on you. I found you on Wipipedia. You've been dead for several years. When you were young, you were known in some circles as the Kid."

Marcias smiled, well maybe his excuse for a smile. "Yes," he said quietly. "Yes, in the bad old days they called me the kid. I read that I had departed this life. Shouldn't believe all you read in the papers. With acknowledgement to Mr. Twain, my obituary was a little premature, but I like being presumed dead. It takes the stress out of living. And," he smiled a bit more and took a sip of whisky.

"I also checked on you. Four years, was it, at Oscott College? Then all those years wasted in retail management when finally it seemed you couldn't punch your way out of a paper bag." He emphasised those last few words. "Then some years in public relations. The enforced interval between them. What did that four years become? Sixteen months with exemplary behaviour, then sixteen months on parole. You did well to come back and find your way in PR. But you're bored again; in fact to put it bluntly, you're fed up right now."

I was shocked. I thought I had done well to check on him, but he was well ahead of me. He obviously knew my life story; but how and why? I was feeling very irritated and annoyed.

Then he looked me straight in the face. The smile had gone – together with the whisky.

"Why did you leave Oscott?" His voice was just above a whisper.

"I met a girl."

"So much for your vocation. It couldn't have been strong."

"I was young then and she was exceptional. I've been with at least four girls since then, one of which I was engaged to, but none like her."

"What became of her?"

"The last time I heard from her, years ago now, she was married to a guy called Malcolm in Milford Haven."

Marcias shrugged. "You know Mile End and Bow." It was a statement, not a question. "You know the Catholic church in Bow."

"Our Lady and St. Catherine of Siena," I volunteered.

There is another Catholic church in Bow. Quire nearby. St. Callistus. Do you know it?"

"No. Never heard of it."

"Few people have. It's very run down. Neglected, almost abandoned, but it has a loyal following, congregation. A few Asians, mainly blacks, a few white, mainly eastern European, Polish. Very holy, devout. It has an old parish priest whose been dying for years – putting it off until a successor is found. The diocese has not been very interested, hoping that he will die and they can close the church which seems to be a burden on them. But I have spoken to the Cardinal

Archbishop and told him that this cannot be allowed to happen. It would betray the poor, but devout congregation there."

"So why are you telling me this. I'm more interested in pubs than churches now."

"Simple reason." There was no smile now, but Natalie had brought another whiskey and a Merlot. Unusual that. Normally you had to go to the bar. "I want you to be the old priest's successor."

## Chapter Six

I was shocked, surprised, annoyed, confused. After I regained my breath and my composure, I replied: "I can't be a priest. I only did four years at Oscott. It takes seven years to be a priest, five or six to be a deacon. And no order or bishop will consider me, having had a custodial sentence."

"The cardinal archbishop will accept you. He's desperate. None of his priests want to go to St. Callistus."

I stared at Marcias. What was this man? What was his power? Who told the cardinal what should be done and even had Natalie serving at the table.

"And," Marcias continued. "It can be done in less than seven years. There is a precedent. You lived in Plymouth so you must know of Buckfast Abbey. Well, in 1938 the abbot, fearing a German invasion, obtained from the Bishop of Plymouth the dispensation for his four novices to be ordained before they had completed their studies. They were ordained a year early. And Hitler was prevented from invading."

He sipped his whisky; I gulped my Merlot.

The cardinal has agreed that you spend another year at Oscott – I've booked your place – and then another year as deacon – sort of acting curate – with Father Athanasius at St. Callistus. Then when he dies, you will be parish priest there and then you will have to earn your bread like never before."

That's how it happened. I spent another year at St. Mary's College, Oscott in Chester Road, Sutton Coldfield, the Roman Catholic Seminary of the Archdiocese of Birmingham and where I had previously spent four years before I encountered Sandra. Founded on 31 May 1838, the College was designed by Augustus Pugin (Palace of Westminster) and Joseph Potter. Then I arrived at the dilapidated St. Callistus church to be greeted warmly and with relief by Father Anthanasius. Although I did go to the Crown and Sugarloaf for one last time, I never saw Marcias again. Perhaps he was a ghost after all.

## Chapter Seven

The requiem for Father Athanasius was held in Westminster Cathedral which was packed with most of the priests of the archdiocese of Westminster and many from Birmingham and elsewhere and hundreds of lay people. I had a very low profile at the back of the cathedral, near to the holy water fonts.

I was ordained in the beautiful church of Corpus Christie in Maiden Lane alongside Covent Garden. It was a quiet affair with just a few of the regulars there present and a couple of priests. I was ordained by Bishop White, an auxiliary bishop of Westminster. I was very apprehensive at first, but the bishop, who had looked very severe, kindly put me at my ease and the ceremony progressed beautifully with me being nervous only when laying prostrate upon the sanctuary floor. I had entered this church as a deacon, I left as a fully-fledged priest. Miracle!

So I had found myself in the unbelievable role of parish priest at St. Callistus parish church in Bow in the archdiocese of Westminster. There was a parish committee with a secretary, but not a treasurer as there didn't appear to be any money. What cash came in from the Sunday collection immediately went out, absorbed by any expenses running the parish and by church maintenance. There were at least six black buckets in the church and in the sacristy, plus some more in the presbytery. A daily Mass attendee would empty these of any rain water each day. Father Athanasius had followed the tradition of many Irish priests, living on next-to-nothing and dining mainly on stew with plenty of potatoes, some home grown, but very little meat. When that was not available, there was always baked beans on toast. Father did not have a car or a bicycle; he walked everywhere to housebound parishioners to whom he took Holy Communion. On reflection, it was a simple and easy life, I considered, but there were times when I missed the regular meals at Leyhill.

I had been given the privilege of celebrating my first Mass at the Lady Chapel in Westminster Cathedral. At 9.00 am on a wet winter Sunday, it was time for my first Mass as parish priest in St. Callistus. There was a sacristan, a lady originally from Kingston, Jamaica, but who had lived in Bow for twenty years, who prepared the altar for me and kindly helped with my vestments. She was very pleased to still have a resident priest.

There was one altar server, a twelve year old whose parents were Pakistani and who had been forced to flee their homeland where Christians were being persecuted by Islamics.

Before the Mass started, I introduced myself as Father James, their new resident priest and I expressed, honestly, my happiness at being with them. I said that I wanted to meet everyone individually or as families as soon as possible. If anyone was urgent to see me or wished for confession, please see me after

Mass. At first there was silence, then smiles started to appear and eventually an elderly black lady applauded. I was feeling at home.

My first homily, or sermon as I called it, was on this Sunday, the eighth in ordinary time. The gospel of St. Luke was based on the human trend of judging others rather than ourselves – the splinter and the plank. If you judge people, you have no time to love them. Do not be angry that you cannot make others as you wish them to be, when you cannot make yourself as you wish to be.

The usual Sunday Mass attendance was thirty five. Today there was forty present. Had the additional ones come to see and assess their new priest? I was a little disappointed that only thirty received the Eucharist, but, with God's grace, I will work on building upon that.

My main worry or concern was how I would hear confessions, but this developed smoothly. As I was no stranger to sin, perhaps I could offer advice to others on theirs.

The presbytery, the living accommodation was inside and part of the main church building. There was a lounge, dining room, bedroom, kitchen and bathroom. The lounge was uninhabitable for many reasons, including severe damp. The bedroom was a mess and needed much renovation, whereas the remaining rooms were okay. The parish committee met in the dining room.

The presbytery needed a lot of attention, but there was no finance for this, so I would have to make do with what I had and live in that. More important was the rain leaking in the church itself, but still no finance. Then we received a remarkable surprise – perhaps divine intervention. A thirty thousand pound donation.

At first this appeared to be from a society for the promotion of devotion to St. Anthony of Padua (known as the wonder worker) and St. Martin de Porres. Finally it was revealed that the money came from an organisation whose name was already known to me – the Blue Brigade.

£20,000 of the donation was spent on restoring the church roof. Of the remaining £10,000, some was spent on sorting out the problems in the presbytery. Later, I and two parishioners plastered, painted and wallpapered the lounge and the bedroom. The remaining money was set aside for the poor, homeless and rough sleepers in the parish. We do not have many beggars in our parish. Our area is too poor even for the beggars. You will find many more in the West End where their begging is more lucrative. Perhaps not, though, outside the Blind Beggar in Whitechapel.

I never went to the Crown and Sugarloaf again. Sometimes I think of Leyhill, Plymouth and Pinner, but not very often. My real life now is at St. Callistus, but I often think of Marcias and pray for him. He made everything happen for me.

Sometimes I walk along to Mile End and visit the Little Driver with its London Pride from the Griffin Brewery in Chiswick. It is an old Victorian pub frequented by old Victorian-like men. My appearance in my black garb and white dog collar aroused little interest. The old 'geezers' there have seen it all. I noticed that the lady behind the bar was a striking image of Natalie in the Crown and Anchor. Perhaps all bar ladies look like that.

I spent almost thirty years as parish priest at St. Callistus. They were the happiest days of my life. Now I will skip many years. I am now approaching 80 (the four score!). I am on enforced retirement, having acquired an unpleasant cancer and I am a resident in a St. Luke's hospice. I have a small room with just a bed and a table. The room is smaller than my cell in Exeter. If I open the window and lean my head outside, I can just see the Little Driver in the distance. I do a lot of reading; the bible and the lives of the saints and my old favourites the Philip Marlow stories by Raymond Chandler, including the one entitled "Lady in the Lake".

St. Callistus is now a thriving community of activity and worship with a younger congregation. There is a young and vibrant parish priest and even yuppies want to marry there.

A few of the old parishioners come to visit me occasionally including the lady who applauded before the start of my first Mass there. I am contented in my little environment. We have a nice chapel where I can celebrate Mass and the Sacraments.

My life has been transformed and I feel the better for it. The guys of old in Pinner in the Oddfellow's Arms and in Plymouth in the Noah's Ark – even some in Leyhill, wouldn't believe it. Sometimes I can't believe it myself.

I remember an invocation on a memorial prayer card for a good and strong Irish priest: "To the higher shine of love divine, my lowly feet have trod; I want no fame, no other name, than this... a priest of God."

Life is just a short sojourn. We make what we can of it. Some failures; some successes. The next life will not be a sojourn, it will be forever. I am at peace with myself and the world and with the expectancy of death. So I did live before I die. I hope that you are also at peace with yourself - et Dominus Vobiscum.

## Epilogue

You have read the fiction, now for some facts, which are often stranger than fiction.

An accountant who stole £350,000 from her employers to feed her gambling addiction walked free after a female judge said she was “not the general stuff of which the prison population is made.” Natalie Saul, 37, pilfered the money from a technology firm’s accounts for over a year and blew more than £250,000 playing online poker. She submitted more than 400 fake invoices to get the cash from the software company between March 2015 and December 2016. Saul was given a two-year suspended sentence and 250 hours unpaid work by Judge Catherine Newman, QC, who admitted the sentence was “wholly exceptional” and fell outside guidelines. The court was told that Saul used her role as office manager to create false invoices to pay cash into her own bank account before switching the details to avoid detection. A new chief financial officer spotted the invoices after Saul took maternity leave.

An accountant who stole £300,000 from a Mayfair jewellers was jailed for three and a half years. Mikiel Aurokium, 60, was trusted to manage the books of the firm in Burlington Arcade. He worked three days a week on a 35,700-a –year salary, but secretly siphoned money out of the account. Aurokium had pleaded for a suspended sentence which Judge Martin Griffith refused at Southwark Crown Court in 2012.

Church treasurer at St. Boniface Church, Plymouth, Nicola Holding stole £90,000 and none recovered. Taken over a period of three and a half years. She was sentenced to thirty months imprisonment.

## VALUE ADDED TAX (VAT)

VAT does not add value, it decreases value. It is really the **PRICE INCREASE TAX (PIT)**.

Before we became a member of the United States of Europe, we had **PURCHASE TAX** instead of VAT.

Purchase tax was applied to goods only, not to services such as building repairs, car maintenance, hairdressing, food in restaurants, insurance, etc.

VAT is applied to goods and services.

Purchase Tax was based upon the cost price of goods, the price at which the retailer purchased the goods, hence the name purchase tax.

VAT is based upon the retail price, the price at which the retailer sells the goods or the service provider charges for their services.

The majority of purchase tax was 10%. Men's wear was 5%.

VAT is 20%. It started at 10% and eventually reached to 17.5%. Gordon Brown and Ed Balls reduced it to 15%. David Cameron and George Osborne increased it to 20%, confirming again that the Tories are the party of high taxation, mainly through concealed taxes (like freezing income tax allowances) and stealth taxes. This policy of taxation particularly affects the poorer people in our community.

Those items which are zero rated in VAT (children's wear, books, magazines and most foods) were also free of purchase tax. Chocolate biscuits and some other foods have 20% VAT.

Items such as home and car insurance (which Government should encourage) which were free of purchase tax, of course, are now subject to VAT, at rates which have been increased a number of times in recent years.

## THE FACTS ABOUT GLOBAL WARMING

Global warming has existed since the beginning of the world and will continue, unabated, until the end of the world, despite the failing actions of misguided and egoistic humans. Humans cannot and will not stop it. All they are achieving by their pointless actions is to increase taxes and prices and bring more suffering upon poorer people.

In the Ice Age, the British Isles were land connected to Europe. When temperatures rose, the ice melted and the waters rose and as a result a sea was formed between Britain and Europe.

In Victorian times it was possible to skate on the frozen Thames, albeit that the Thames was wider and slower moving then, but it was also possible to skate on the Regents Park Lake. These are no longer possible as the world warms each century and has done so for ever and will continue to do so until the end of time, despite human efforts to stop it.

God promised Noah that he will not destroy the world through water and flooding again. The only alternative would appear to be fire, burning – global warming. The world will not be destroyed from above; it will be destroyed from below, from within and this will be the task of the four Destroying Angels (Book of the Apocalypse 7:2-4)

These bullies who dictate to us what we can do and cannot do should cease their pointless actions and pray. They won't save the world because God created it to be finite and one day it will have fulfilled its purpose and be no longer required, but by praying they may save themselves. See St. Mark Chapter 13: Verses 24 – 33.

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BBC Teletext, 6/11/2021

“Food production is one of the biggest threats to our planet,” said WWF chief executive Tanya Steele.

So come on folks, let's stop eating and starve to death and thus save the planet which was given to us by God to live in and use.

BBC Teletext, 9/11/2021

Recent parliamentary report said that agriculture produced 10% of the UK's greenhouse gases.

So let's do away with agriculture and starve to death.