

Eleven

She knew immediately that it would be a double-circuit day. A disturbed night like that usually had her up and out for the first bus of the day. Just after 5am: Straight from the garage. She liked it like that – cold; smelling vaguely of disinfectant –empty.

4.30 on the alarm clock, with no real chance of going back to sleep. Too much fizzing in and out of her mind. She snuggled down in hope, trying to will a drowsiness – but puzzle after puzzle seeped in.

Things weren't adding up. She hated that. It was like a scratch on a CD – something that was an irritant. You know it's going to be there but you want to keep playing the track over and over just the same in the hope that the sound would just flow - but (inevitably?): the scratch; the jump; the irritant – the letdown.

She tried to sleep but there, in the quietness of her breathing, she knew there'd be the scratch, the jump, and that she would suddenly be wide awake and trying to work out why. Things weren't adding up. She hated that.

What was it? What was the gap? Her mind worked by itself no matter how deeply she snuggled.

Nothing for it but to accept that she would get up and get out. That there would be at least two full circuits to clear her head. Four to five hours if she stayed on the bus all the way round. She could be back by lunchtime but there was nothing to come back to. The answers were out there, strung out somewhere along the twenty-six mile route.

She knew it wouldn't be five hours. She would spot something or get some sudden urge and be off – checking with one of her links, sitting in one of her cafes, mooching round the market. She'd be lucky if she was back by nightfall. Another day gone, but what were days for if not to slip by with as little attention as possible? Some quietly disappearing; some full of noise and buzz, but sliding past all the same.

In the kitchen, her usual breakfast hanging on for as long as she would let herself, on the more secure side of her terraced door. On the other side there were things that were just not in place. Nothing specific, just a set of feelings – things out of kilter, at odds with normal. Maybe that was the scratch. That there was nothing obvious to settle on – just a click, click, click – over and again, a gap in her understanding. Time to get out and about.

Maybe some introductory notes would help here:

Gail spends much of each day from 5.30 am to 11.30 pm on board the No 11 that circles Birmingham – with a choice of buses clockwise or anticlockwise. She knows her route. Where to get on and off, best spots to eat/go to the toilet etc. She talks to people; observes them; gets marginally involved through repeated/new/changed/ unusual patterns of comings and goings. She sort of keeps notebooks of her actions and stays vaguely in touch with her various friends as they go to work, go shopping, go home from college; usually via text – she's not quite into Twitter, got too much to say for a person of few words, and has never really figured out what to do with things like Facebook.

She sees Birmingham as a huge, buzzing, swirly confusion - rich in colour/ smell/ change – an organic thing that feeds her, sustains her, nourishes her as she circles the city. Sometimes she sees herself as an astronaut, in orbit – round and round, looking out on the scenes below her from top deck of the bus as it circles the 11 Route (More panoramic from the front upstairs seats; more warning of anything coming up .. still she's been taken by surprise from time to time, but doesn't like it). She knows how those first men in space felt looking down on the Earth each circuit – it's just that hers is nowhere as scenic or dramatic.

At other times she is embroiled in the absolute complexity of Birmingham, tangled up in all the thorny little capillaries that snag her and pump the city's lifeblood into her. She and the city become inseparable. It keeps her going; it builds her up; it gives her strength and resilience. Forget all those books on how to improve your life: She had Birmingham.

She notices the almost insignificant architectural details which are the silent backdrops for the daily flows of people. Details that connect today and its offerings back to the area's history and the accidents of geography, people and politics. She takes in things that pass others by. It's one of her strengths, but also one of her weaknesses.

She has a life off-bus. In one kind of mood she might spend part of the evening at home to google facts of history, culture, buildings, people. Over time she has built up fact on fact; impression on impression; atmosphere on atmosphere. Someone, if she ever let them, could start to peel back down through the strata – an archaeology of her mind. She doesn't know what it would bring to light, and will never know as she's unlikely to let anyone in that far. Her mind is a storeroom, though. She could win pub quizzes single-handed; she would cruise through TV gameshows if she could have been bothered entering. She could write best-sellers on how life works if she could bring herself to find the time.

In a different mood she could just as easily let herself mould into the single armchair, curling her legs underneath her body, large red wine or two, and wait for her mind to wander.

Her home? Living room – minimalist, functional. The one armchair (already noted). One swivel chair; set of bookshelves; cupboards with shelves not drawers (great for files/

piles of paper – vertical filing cabinet); little in the way of personal possessions. No TV, no excess of electronics. A thief would leave empty handed, or be tempted to bring things in out of pity. There is a basic computer which she regards as a functional workhorse. Her bedroom - wardrobe and drawers –single bed (no intention of inviting any stayovers). Kitchen – small; no real concession to modernity; gas stove; simple toaster; cupboards for usual stuff .. preponderance of pasta etc..

The majority of her time is out and about. On-bus. Still as minimal she can get though. Just basic necessities in her daysack: One folded plastic raincoat – not fashionable but vital – it works; one emergency bottle of drinking water from the tap at home; a thermos and some coffee sachets; a couple of small plastic boxes for food; and she's never without a notebook. She did carry a couple of plastic bags but now has a recycled 'bag for life', folded down to a tiny square but opens up to hold any bits and pieces she collects on the way. Most people would just think of it as 'the bag' but, to give you some idea of how Gail's mind would work, for her she would really puzzle about it: *A bag – could it be called a 'perchance': Was that German or Russian? A Tuite was it?? (Male or female? Gendered! – How can a string bag be gendered? – but then there are bigger mysteries in life). Perchance one day I'll come back and give it some thought.* You get the idea. A mind on the go in more ways than one.

This is England, so different days bring different weather. You can never be sure when you set out what each day will be like. Yes, she gets a broad idea from shifting weather forecasts on the wind-up radio she carries on bus journeys. There's always some vague guess at the weather but the rest is serendipity and adaptation. She needs to be prepared for eventualities, but not overburdened by them.

She builds exercise into everyday activities: Taking stairs two at a time until she starts to get breathless; jogging to the stop one beyond the next. Definitely not a gym, lycra and treadmill sort of person. She doesn't get into a sweat about life.

Her basic attitude makes few concessions to 'gadgets': The small wind up radio, with earphones for discretion, but an extended aerial tending to give the game away; an ipod present from a friend (been and gone – no need to go into all that) - usually uploaded with a fairly random choice of stuff via a computer in the back room of the shop run by Kieran (who has a soft spot for her; not love – based on respect more than anything). She's probably the woman he would like to be if he were to be any woman?? – but let's stick to Gail for now. Kieran will have his day.

She describes herself as 'homeless' in the sense that marriage/ job/ home are no longer there. She has deliberately gone below the radar of as much of officialdom as possible. She's not on any systems more than she absolutely needs to be – certainly no police record; no employment centre or benefits office file etc.

She's clearly not 'homeless'. She has an address, but only uses it for strictly necessary stuff – registering with a doctor. She rents her tiny rooms for cash – to benefit both her and her landlord. No heating bills (all in the rent); she has an 'arrangement' about

council tax; and no phone other than a top-up mobile left over as castaway in previous tenant's junk (She had tried to piece together the jigsaw of his life from the scant evidence he left behind – just to pass the time – and came up with several, some quite frightening, possibilities for who he was).

Gail doesn't work anymore – more does things for others, to bring in things in kind as much as for bits of cash. She has minimal outlay: Weekly trips to the market for a stock of food – mostly fresh, and just a calculated amount for the week – absolutely no waste there – and certainly no prepackaged, airmile-heavy imported supermarket stuff. Much else comes from charity shops. She has a clear view of what she is, seeing herself as having post-credit/ post-consumerism/ post-celebrity status.

What else do you need to know?

Age 55. No children; no pets; no parents - not much of anything really. No liabilities (unless you count Jean - a real liability after a pint or two that one! – but we don't need to mention her do we?).

Gail is medium mostly - medium height; medium brown hair; averagely brown eyes with just a few dark specks in them - nothing outstanding. Nothing you would remember her by. 'Could get away with murder and no one would notice,' she often says. The only feature is a slight tremor in her left eye that comes and goes. You'd need to be up-close to notice and she never let anyone in that far. 'Scrubs up well,' her mother would have said if she hadn't been dead since Gail was ten – lingering on in vague, greyish bits of (possibly misremembered) memories. Gail had been brought up by her dad – doing 'dad' things: rummaging in junk shops, fiddling with bits of stuff spread out on kitchen table, never throwing anything away. Mind you that was also a memory of her grandma, from childhood – bits of string saved 'just in case' ('perchance' even), tinfoil screwed small and saved in a paper carrier bag, with string handles, hooked on scullery door – all probably a wartime thing rather than a dad thing or a gran thing. Probably no one does it to that extent now – mind you, hardly anyone has a scullery any more either – all things consigned to history but living on in Gail's head.

Her clothes are mostly brown, green, grey - natural colours seeming more 'ecological', natural, forest-like to her ... or 'psychological' maybe, harking back to Robin Hood? Or in preparation for post-calamity future where people would survive by merging into background and going unnoticed, away from crowd, living off the land ... but always with the occasional splash of red/ blue/yellow. As if to make some point. 'Smart casual' if her dress sense ever needed a label. Boots, long skirts, cardigan, layers. Too old for scruffy; too young for needing to seem proper.

She had been employed. Once. A never-really-specified number of years ago. In those days (not that she liked to think about it) she had a job description, a line manager, an appraisal form, a pay slip – everything you could ever want in a life! Her career went easily from degree in sociology and the built environment; to housing manager with the local authority; to regeneration and community development. Always an antipoverty

slant, hands-on helping residents groups; and every time being pushed back, almost imperceptibly, from support role to enforcing role - bad debts chasing, hassling people: too much emotion in dealing with people whose problems just got more chaotic.

When downsizing came she snapped up the offer of gap month, then gap year, which extended effortlessly into a gap life. Now, she could never face going back to a desk.

A personality profile would probably have her down as: Chatty but not pushy; observant; shrewd; modest; makes unlikely connections; sober and quiet - almost to the point of being invisible. Can't leave things alone. Picks at things; nosy in a gentle sort of way. Certainly she's interested in why things are as they are (politics; society; people), why things don't get any better despite people's best efforts. Most of all she likes to mull things over; laughs at simple things and strange connections, combinations, coincidences, quirkiness, linkages. Major dislikes would be conflict, injustices, hassle of 'the little man', unnecessary bureaucracy.

She writes with a stock of pens which were once (in those old pre-gap days) meant as promotional giveaways but had the wrong phone number printed on them - so sat in a plastic bag at the back of a stockroom for years until Gail freed them up.

Others see her as always there when needed. Someone to talk to. Too easy to talk to for her own sanity; too easy to talk away at for their own good in case of some people. If she was at all malicious she would have had enough on people to make a good living from blackmail etc.

That's Gail for you – inside and out.

So that's it. Time for me to be out and about. I have a good couple of hours thinking time before the cafe opens. The early bus, just in time, cold as usual and with that just-cleaned smell I take to for some reason (Something antiseptic left over from childhood?). Dave on today. I like Dave – simple, in that you get what you see; nothing more, nothing less. He says nothing, doesn't smile but you know that he is pleased inside that you have got on his bus. One friendly face for him to start the day with before he runs into all those people late for work who scowl, as if everything on the road were his fault; all those kids trying their hardest not to pay and spend precious minutes arguing the toss about it; and the schoolkid crushes and shriekings. No, he is pleased to see me alright. You can tell from his quick nod.

Settling on the front seat upstairs, I start going over and over what I know, trying to find the gap, the chink that will let me in:

One mugging gone wrong
One drowned in the canal
One cause not yet known

What's the average lifespan of a bus driver? OK the job is a bit more dangerous than sitting in an average office (but probably a lot less dangerous than the benefits office I used to work in, with all that anger and spittle). And if a bus driver did crash it was usually the wall, or whatever, that came off worse...

Maybe that's the wrong question ... What's the likelihood of a bus driver dying in any one month? Fairly minimal I would think. So what's the likelihood of three dying in the past month?

The police have it down as three disconnected incidents, according to that smiley community liaison lad who calls into Brendan's cafe. Maybe that's what it is – except that they're not just 'incidents', they are deaths and deaths of people I knew well. So these are not just incidental in any sense of the word. Maybe 'disconnected' but somehow that just doesn't feel right either. There must be a word for Things-that-refuse-to-add-up-and-I still-don't-know-why. I'll have come up with one by the end of the day.

The police have their accounts and people have given me others. Each a bit of story told from a part viewpoint – not quite fictional, but not fully factual – and all the time stories about people who were personal to me. I knew their families, their friends, what they had been up to over the weekend, their likes and their quirkinesses. Their chitchat fitted with mine each journey. So this is as personal as it gets.

I curl down into the seat corner and go over the ins and outs, shuffling things around, trying to get an order that makes sense. Some things get chased off; some things get polished up. Over and over: Who? When? How? How heard about? What were the other reports, the other stories? What was the gossip on the street? My mind filing bits into place – mental cataloguing – just in case:

- Darryl. Late 30s. Married, two kids. Kind. Family man. All the stuff that gets trotted out at every event like this. You could end up believing that the world is totally made up of kindly, good-guy-next-door, wouldn't-hurt-a-fly people who all get themselves killed. It's just that in Darryl's case it was all true – gentle, thoughtful, loved his kids and so on and so on.

A mugging gone wrong according to the official version. Hit from behind with half a brick. On his break between two shifts. He'd gone to the shops for a sandwich and to the bank to get cash. Was in a small alleyway off the High Street, sheltering out of the wind to have a cigarette. But a mugging??

No way. The mugger would have had to squeeze past him into the alleyway and Darryl was far too sensible to let some dodgy character do that, wasn't he? Bit of a lad ... up for a laugh (on his own terms) ... but streetwise enough. No, he knew the person well enough to let him share his small bit of shelter. Enough to not be alert; not have his guard up.

Hit with a house brick. There were several lying around. Police said there was some brick dust in a head wound. Nothing as convenient as a blood-stained brick full of fingerprints left behind for them to work on, though.

The person knew what they were doing. Less a spur-of-the-moment thing – more thought out. Followed him; chatted in relaxed way; squeezed in behind him; saw the brick and took the chance to smash his skull in; then casually walked away (with the brick). No money missing. The police said this was because the mugger was spooked by something and ran off. Probably a kid, an opportunist, someone without bottle. No witnesses, just a load of assumptions. All wrong ones in my view.

They asked if he had enemies (No). They looked for motives (None); They came to the conclusion that it was senseless, motiveless – but someone had done it deliberately, even if a bit spur-of-the-moment. It all made sense to someone right enough.

Tittletattle from those should have known better was that he might have been seeing someone. No one who knew Daz believed it. He wasn't that sort. He had taken to endlessly texting someone but that could have been his wife. OK that doesn't sound everyday-husband stuff but you could believe it of Daz. That's exactly the soppy-daft thing he would do. But what if ... (and I'm not really suggesting this – don't believe it for a second)... What if he was? Would there be an angry boyfriend or husband hunting him down? Squeezing in the alley to have it all out with him, then bashing him with a handy brick? No – discount it – not in his nature at all.

- Micky. Drowned in a canal. Fell from his bike on the way home after a long shift. Older chap, nearing retirement. Rode an old, heavy postman's bike – sturdy thing; weighed a ton. Had it years. Kept it in good condition – so nothing likely to be wrong with the bike at all. Maybe something wrong with him? Overtired after that long shift? He took the same route everyday so maybe he got over-relaxed, his mind on other things and hit a low branch, sending him wobbling off into the water. Certainly a snapped off branch was found (with his blood on) next to where his bike was found on the tow path. His body had drifted for a few hundred yards. Ended up bumping against a moored houseboat. Gave the owner a right shock the following morning, I bet.

But Micky knew that route. He would have known about any low branch. He used to stop and remove hazards not get smacked in the face by one. There were no fingerprints on the branch but that isn't to say that someone couldn't have been holding it in a cloth and swung it out at Micky as the peddled past. If he hit a branch and fell to the right he would be by his bike on the bank of the towpath not in the water. If he hit a branch and wobbled left over to the canal edge and fell in, wouldn't his bike have gone in as well?

But, then again, he was supposed to be getting a bit past it. People from the depot had said that he had recently got a couple of shifts mixed up; had once almost taken the wrong bus out; had failed to show up for a shift handover. He was usually so routine, so on-the-job. Maybe he just didn't notice a stray branch. Still not adding up!

- Then there is Sean. When Brendan had called in at the police station all he could get was 'cause not yet known'. Brendan and Sean were friends with some distant

family connections back in Ireland. There was a twenty year age gap but they knew each other well from church, from football. Neither had family in the city. Brendan was the closest to family that Sean had here. Both rested heavily on these friendship links of pub, music, Irishness.

Even so, when Brendan asked all he got was 'cause not yet known'. But what was that really? I suppose it does rule out anything obvious. So not shot then; not stabbed; or smacked hard with a heavy object; or fell into water and drowned. I suppose it means that they're not sure if it was accidental or intentional. So not likely to have been found hanging; or electrocuted; or found with a plastic bag over his head; or stuff like that. Even if cause of death were uncertain no self-respecting desk sergeant would have resisted a chance to lean over, raise his eyebrows and whisper some juicy bits of gossip. ("... but no clothes on and an orange in his mouth, if you catch my drift..."). But there was nothing. Just 'cause not yet known'. Not much to work with there, but it's all there is.

What's linking them? All men, two quite young but one much older. All bus drivers. Two people doing what they always did – routine. Always used that bank, always cycled down that path on that bike. (Don't know about Sean – yet). But it wasn't that simple. On the day he was killed Darryl had decided to use that particular alleyway just to get a bit of time out of the wind. On the day he drowned Micky had, unusually, worked late.

A set of disconnected incidents? A blip in the random statistics of driver deaths? A serial killer who picked on men? A maniac killer with a thing about bus drivers? It is a kaleidoscope with too many pieces still missing. Too little to go on.

I give up and stare out the window. What's the time? Just around six. Too early for the cafe and nearly four hours before Rukhsana in the library. I could get off soon and go for a fast walk across the park. That usually clears the head. Slot in between the dog walkers who space themselves out (Some look more spaced out than others!) a bit like operating their own for of internal air traffic control system. I could do that – or could settle here for a bit longer. See how I feel in ten minutes.

Gail decided to stay with the bus. She went to stand downstairs, upfront with the driver. She would normally banter away with whoever was on, but this was Dave. Silent Dave. Taciturn Dave. He nodded. His quiet authorisation for her to stand there.

Then, from nowhere: 'They're beginning to be scared, the other drivers.' God, Dave had spoken! She couldn't remember that before. 'Even the hard ones are a bit scared. They try not to be, but it's beginning to get to people. Three drivers all from our depot – all

regulars on this route actually – too many to be just run of the mill stuff. Are we all targets? It's worrying, that's all.'

It was all. Dave went back to staring ahead. He was right though. It was starting to get to people. Three dead. All friends. All a bit puzzling. It was even getting to her.

Gail stared with him. Watching the lights pick out the curves in the road. Watching passengers flag them down. Watching the trees, the walls, the roundabouts. Watching without actually seeing. Anything to allow her brain to work on the puzzle in the background. She went back over it all and began to feel tiny ripples of something wrong colonising their small bit of the world. Something that needed stopping before much longer. Gail resolved to get to the bottom of this.

Not that she'd play the detective ... just clarify things so the police can get on faster than they seemed to be at the moment. Just a gentle nudge here and there – a kind of citizen's duty really, not a takeover.

'I liked Sean,' Dave (Again! The world really was being turned upside down... Unprecedented...) 'He was, you know, just a regular sort of bloke. Know what I mean?' She did. She did exactly know what he meant. A more Regular sort of person would be hard to come by. Regular might have been his middle name – regular as they come. So was there going to be anything out-of-routine in his death?

'Shouldn't have died like that. Well, shouldn't have died at all, that's obvious, but to die like that

Gail didn't know whether to be more amazed at Dave speaking again or at the fact that he (Dave, who didn't talk to anyone) knew things about Sean's death that she (Gail, who was tuned in all over the place) wasn't aware of.

'Like what exactly, Dave?'

'You know.' (No she didn't! She didn't!). 'You know, all that stuff about him being poisoned or gassed or something. That, and him dying at home with nobody around. He always liked to be the single man, if you know what I mean, but to go out from life all alone. Nobody should be like that. There should be someone there for each of us.'

Who will be there for you Dave? Gail found herself thinking – or, come to that, who will be there for me? But more importantly: Who was around at the end of Sean's time? If there wasn't anyone there to comfort him, was there someone there who had done the dirty deed (whatever 'poisoned or gassed or something' turned out to be at the end of the day)?

She had wanted to know the cause of Sean's death. It's just that she had expected to come up on it more slowly, more in her own time. This was all a bit too strange (Dave chatting and all) and a bit sudden (Having it thrown at her unexpectedly on a bus) but most of all was a turning point (So it's not random – so it is murder – so it seems to be

connected with that route or that depot – so it has suddenly become more personal than ever. A set of chain links that locked together.)

Gail didn't say anything. She went back upstairs to her front seat and pushed herself as far into the corner of it as she could get. Her eyes closed, but her mind speeded up. Over and over the same stuff. There were still far too few bits of the puzzle. At the same time there were far too many bits not to have to worry about them. Something was definitely out there – but 'out there' was somehow connected with 'in here', inside this little bit of the world that contained her friends, the bus drivers she knew, the depot or the number 11 route (or both), and herself. That was enough to worry about for now. She had a choice. There and then. An on-the-bus decision: get involved or keep out of it. Not that there was a choice, really. She was a traveller on that route. More than just any other passenger. It acted as a second home (almost a first home) for her. She couldn't stay out. She was already part of the unfolding story. It was all a matter of what part was being written for her, which felt unusually fatalistic for her –she'd have to think about that later. For now there was Brendan to consider.

Just after seven. Coming up to the market in less than thirty minutes. She would get off. Brendan's wouldn't officially be open yet but if she rattled to door she would see it was her and let her in. If he knew already about Sean's poisoning or gassing – that it was more murder than accident - then he would already be in bits. If not, if he still believed in 'cause not yet known', it was best that she was the one to tell him. There in his safe ground. In the security of his closed little market-edge cafe. Best that she was the one there to see him cry or whatever.

Thirty minutes to mull things over. I think about Brendan. I am beginning to feel the need to think hard about everyone. Do I really know anyone of them so well that I can absolutely rule them out as a potentially mad murderer? Do we really know people anyway? Or do we just know the aspects we have stitched together in our mind? Have we made people in our heads? Are there always hidden, secret sides to others – sides we can never get to? Are our constructions only half-constructed?

What do I know about Brendan? What makes up the bits I have put together? Have I built up Brendan correctly – or is the Brendan-in-my-head only a part thing, a demi-person, a fancy? What do I know? If I were Brendan how would I describe myself:

Cafe owner; Irish; 60 – Always asking myself (and any customers who think I might be talking to them): 'Should I retire?' What would I do then - sit at home? Come in here and tell the new owner how things were better in the old days when I ran the place? No, don't think I'll go just yet - give it a few more years, I think. Look at it this way - I get out of bed with something to look forward to, I have money at the end of the day, I meet lots of interesting people (Some more interesting than others, I can tell you!)

I almost always wear a striped apron, with stains (the histories of all I've ever served; the community history of all my lifetime of customers). I think of it more as a 'living archive': if I was an artist I'd get a grant for it! I like a bit of a flutter - nothing serious, mind you, why make all that money just to throw it away - and my two weeks in Tenerife (just for the sun and to be waited on all day long - to receive instead of giving, just for a change). I go the same week every year, tend to see same people there (give and take a few). An annual habit that marks the passing of each year – an extended clock mechanism; chimes each year 'Another one gone'.

My cafe I see as a social service, a community centre, more than just a place to eat. A place where people can meet and stay in touch; a place where people get directed to sources of help around benefits, housing, children; a place where people get a bit of daily significance.

I've been here through thick and thin. Times when there was lots of building - lots of my people in and out every day - lots of money coming my way, but more than that - the flow of news and stories about back home - you know how it is when people want to stay in touch with something they've actually lost. My links with the old country were broken a long time ago - but it's always in the blood; always a bit of self-pretence. Times of the city-centre pub bombings - when we were all told to keep a low profile, to soften our accents, to be more English than the English.

The Irishness shows through a bit from time to time, I suppose. I do flare up. More than that, I have a real temper at times - can be unpredictable, erratic, never quite knowing where you are. Embarrassed silences settling round the tables - people trying to see their egg sandwich as more exciting than me sounding off. Not that all Irish people are like that, of course, but even if it's too much of a prejudice, too bold a caricature, it's there nonetheless.

So that is Brendan. I think I know him well enough, but does that guarantee he isn't capable of killing? Yes I'm sure it does. Deep inside me, I absolutely know it does.

I stare out the window and shuffle about on the seat. So that was Brendan. Who else do I know. Brendan operates at the centre of his own personal little web. Who is Brendan linked to? Who are the fixed planets to his shining sun and just how much do I know about them?

There's Brian: who runs a car repair shop - understands all the tricks of the trade about cars; has links into other garages; licensing; knows police - who come to him occasionally with the odd questions. Not that he's a grass, you understand. Nor do the police have any hold on him. He answers them out of a strict sense of public duty. 'Old

school' he calls it ... from his dad. 'Misplaced middle-class' others might say – those others around him who might think of 'old school' as don't talk to officialdom at any cost, except in self-preservation. He gives the bare facts and nothing more. He's not paid to be a policeman so why leave them with nothing to work out for themselves? He still expects them to be civil though – especially as he sees himself as paying their wages – takes the 'public servant' label literally. Short hair - bit longer than shaved, but definitely short. Sunglasses outside if there is a bit of sun - puts it down to working in semidarkness of workshop. Has access to all sorts of tools and specialist knowledge.

Then there's Ainsley: paramedic, motorbike man who parks up outside the cafe, radio on, cackling away (the radio not the cafe, or the bike, or Ainsley). Spot him a mile away - fluorescent jacket (one of those bright yellow things with silver bands – hard to creep up inconspicuously in one of those). Dark hair, glasses - always a smile - often a joke. Says hello to everyone as he passes. Hands larger than you'd expect. Twinkly eyes, brown. Seems health conscious - tries to avoid fry-ups but succumbs from time to time; goes for a vegetarian option if he fancies it: 'just to compensate'. He puts tomato sauce on nearly everything. Funny how many bits you know about someone you only see from time to time, but how the bits seem to add up to not very much at the end of the day.

Or Grace: Mid-forties. West African. A cleaner in a number of offices. Works for an agency with lot of teams in different places. She always looks worried. Little frownlines permanently over her right eye; small pearl earrings; simple clothes, little ornamentation. She has a son (Louis, late twenties?) in his leather jacket, trademark red and black scarf ('Socialism and Anarchism, my friend. Socialism and Anarchism'). Knows people, if you know what I mean. Gets calls on his mobile: 'Got to go, Mum. Got to go'. Into 'stuff' (unspecified). Works casually - bouncer; roadie etc and fills in in a band.

Out there as well there's Kieran: aged 23. Runs a shop that is a mix of computer sales, computer repairs, gizmo construction, video copying, photo-enhancing, photocopying, scanning documents. From what I've seen of his own computer, it has a whole screen full of icons. Knows his stuff. His shop is stacked with books, catalogues, magazines, odds and ends of wiring. 'Bytes of everything' – is that what I'd call it if it were mine?? There's a set of Russian dolls lined up on a small shelf. I asked him about them once. They seemed not to fit in with all the electronics. 'It's symbolic, you see: for every problem, there's another problem inside it - a problem within a problem within a problem - ad infinitum.' There's no end to the mystery of things - it's fathomless.' He always has a good line does Kieran. Spot on, though, in this case: Puzzles within puzzles.

Who, in turn, does Kieran have as regular customers? Who is in the circles beyond circles? Who else could I drag into suspicion if I wanted to?

There's that Karl: White working class; from an estate. God that sounds a prejudiced bit of categorisation. I can make it even worse: hoodie, spots, flaring nostrils, eyes downcast, always looks not really there - present and not present at the same time. Thin lips –that's the thing you notice more often than not. I've seen him come to Kieran's

shop from time to time. Mostly to get bits of kit mended or made. Even Kieran seems not quite sure what any of it is for. Karl doesn't say: hints at communication/ outer worlds/ conspiracies/ cover ups/ hacking/ etc. He likes music that no one else has heard of and seems to live a large proportion of his life in other spaces - second life or something; multilevel interactions (whatever they might be) with groups across the world. He did try to explain it all to me once but I switched off a bit. I know he makes good use of chatrooms; tunes in to weird blogs; that sort of thing. He gets on the number 11 from time to time. Plays music on his mobile – upstairs, back seat, legs splayed wide, head nodding . I suppose there are so many similar Karls out there, it's just that he seems that little bit different, that's all. Even in a lineup of Karl's you'd pick him out straight away. I'm not sure why, there's just that air about him.

I met his girlfriend once. Caitlin. Twenty-one I think she said she was. Lives in her own flat. I try to picture her: Hair, black, partly hides face. I believe she works in an art gallery. She said she was an art graduate. (Why do I remember all this stuff?) and a part-time actress. How did she ever get linked up with Karl? Another of humanity's little puzzles. She said that she knows other actors/actresses. Is into 'flash' events as new performance art - can rustle up a crowd to take part in any event. But these killings weren't crowd events. They were single, solitary, secret. That's not Caitlin if I have her right.

So many people rotating in and out of Brendan's small cafe. A little universe all of its own. A universe about to be spun off in some new direction when they all hear, in their different ways, about Sean's death.

But could any of them be thought of as vague suspects? Are any of them capable of planning, of killing? I don't think so – but you never can tell. Still, I can't believe it's any of them. In the old

black-and-white cowboy films they would be the goodies. They would wear the white outfits that were still spotless after two day's posse riding. So, if they were the goodies – who were the baddies? And who else is out there? Maybe, further out than the group she knew, was there someone waiting for a fourth chance ... ?

All that will have to wait for now. Time to hop off and check out Brendan.

Downstairs Gail nodded at Dave and waited, but nothing else from him. She slowly stepped off as the doors hissed open. She wasn't rushing to get to the cafe, not knowing what state Brendan would be in, but there it was. A few easy strides, and on one side of the door was the pressed nose of Gail and her cold hand rattling the door handle. On the other, the slow zigzag outline of Brendan, stooping to lift a bolt.

'I'm coming. What's with your rattling there? – and it's still way before opening hours. Steady on, and who is it anyway?'

'It's only me, Brendan. It's Gail. Take your time. No rush.' Gail wanted to see him but, at the same time, didn't really fancy facing up to him.

The floor bolt rasped. Brendan's shape straightened as the door slowly opened.

'Gail. Lovely to see you girl, but what's all this with the rattling and the visiting this early?'

Still trying to read his mood, Gail went round him and sat at the nearest table.

'About Sean ...' She watched his face. 'Have you heard anymore? Heard anything back from the police? Anything about how he died' Her voice trailed off to a quiet echo.

'No, love. He died at home, that's all I know. Police weren't giving anything away.'

'Only, I'd heard ...' Gail breathed in more slowly, watching a frown crease more deeply into Brendan's forehead. 'I'd heard that he was poisoned. Or gassed, or something. I don't know – just something I heard that's all. Might not be true at all. Just something and nothing. I just, you know ... Just something I heard. Sorry, Brendan.'

'Poisoned how? Gassed how? His flat was all electric; didn't have gas. Rubbish, that's what you've been hearing, my friend. Utter rubbish and no mistaking things.'

'I know. I know ... I just thought you should know what's being said.'

'Said by idiots who should say nothing if they know nothing.'

'You're right, Brendan. Right as always. Tell you what: You give me a cup of tea and I'll sit here quiet as anything. Not saying anything. Not being an idiot. How's that with you?'

For the next hour Gail sat, hands round an empty cup, scanning the free newspaper. Occasionally she looked across at Brendan busying round the cafe, doing things that barely needed doing. Customers drifted in; the place slowly filled. Brendan was genuinely busy now. There were few spaces for him to talk but he did occasionally drift over to her table. Pleasantries, that's all, but enough to mend any hurt Gail might have been feeling.

'I wasn't saying you are an idiot or anything. It's just that, poisoning ... well that's a bit Agatha Christie, isn't it? You don't hear of people being poisoned. It's all natural causes, or heart attack, or stabbing, or a shooting. Not poisoning; not these days. Poisoning sounds a bit 'domestic' if you know what I mean. 'Wife Puts Rat Poison in Husband's Curry' sort of thing but Sean's lovely bit of a wife she'd never do that. She loved him to bits. Anyone could see. Plain as anything.'

Off to his bacon and egg sandwiches; his two mugs of tea and two rounds of toast. Back to his chatting and his smiling. More people drift in. Full English; more tea and toast; more cups of coffee.

Gail waited for a gap and got herself a refill, and a smile for Brendan (The sort of shruggy 'We're still friends then, but I don't understand things anymore than you do' kind of smile). She chose a different table. One nearer the back, out of the way. Quieter. Better for thinking. Better for keeping her head in some sort of order.

Brendan was always right, or usually right at least. Poisoning was rather 'domestic'. She didn't think Sean's death was any kind of family squabble taken to extremes. She couldn't see that at all. His death had to be part of the others; part of this pattern she didn't understand.

She doodled across the top page of her notebook. She had a refill, then another, then another. She smiled again at Brendan. She sat and went over it all again; all taking her no further forward. The television in the corner gave nothing relevant, even on the local news. The big clock hands clunked round, sliding onto just after ten past nine.

Brendan, finding a minute or two here and there, had added other bits. 'If it wasn't his wife (How is she doing, poor thing?), and it certainly wasn't eating here that might have poisoned him, then where? He didn't eat anywhere else, not as far as I know.' ... 'The more I think about it the more it's not real. Can't be real. Poisoning? No way ... and wouldn't that daft sergeant of a policeman have said something if it were poison. He'd have been holding forth in that slimy whispering way of his about the whats and the whens of it all. But nothing, you see, not the faintest whiff of hot breath. I really don't think the police know how he died or why, when it comes to it. Simple as that, for now anyway, I'm afraid.'

Gail felt it was all far from simple. She felt the need to make progress; to move on. She went to the toilet. Back at the counter she got her flask topped up with tea, and gave Brendan a hug.

Out of the corner of her eye she saw a flash of yellow, looked round and gave a quick nod to Ainsley.

'Hi, Ainsley. How's things? Quiet enough I hope?'

'And better stay that way until I get a breakfast down me. You can't face some of the things they send me to without a good breakfast inside you. It has been quiet though, except for your mate Sean. I had to deal with that.'

Gail was halfway towards the door but spun back.

'Dealt with what? What was it? Sean, I mean.' She squared up opposite Ainsley and tried to keep her voice down. 'What happened? What killed him?'

'The official version is for the coroner to decide and meanwhile the police are saying nothing because they know nothing. It's only that I've been in this job for years and have come across most things at one time or another ...'

'Get on with it, Ainsley. What killed Sean?'

'Well my guess, and it is only a guess mind you ...' Ainsley read Gail's face and cut himself short. 'Simple truth is I believe he died of one of those nerve-attacking virus bug things ... act in a few hours ... shut the system down so that you can't breathe. The body goes strangely rigid, well the expression on the face does at least. A grimace sort of look sets in.'

Gail struggled to take it in.

'I've only seen it once before and that was in the army reserves when we were abroad and had to deal with some chemical warfare stuff. Once you've seen it though it doesn't go out of your head easily. Anyway, I can't be sure but I'd almost swear that it was something like that in Sean's case. As I say, though, I might be wrong.'

Gail said nothing. There was nothing she could say. She nodded and turned for the door.

'Brendan, love,' speaking over her shoulder as she left the cafe. 'If Kieran comes in, get him to give me a ring. I have a feeling that I'm going to need him. I have no idea what for yet but whenever there's something that I can't straighten out in my mind I usually need him and his computer.'

She paused, making other connections in her mind. 'Or Caitlin. Or Louis come to that, Grace's lad, he might just come in useful. That's all for now. Stay safe, Brendan, stay safe.' It was their usual parting, but this time she felt as if it carried more weight with it.

Outside she turned up the High Street and headed to the library.

So it's no longer just some young kid with a house brick or a case of 'did he run into a branch or was a branch smacked into him?' Things were in a different league altogether now. This was about deliberateness. This was spyland, warfareland. This was MI5, Special Branch territory. This was getting way beyond Gail, something deeper and darker than maybe even she wanted to step into.

More puzzles; more questions. Maybe Rukhsana had the beginnings of some answers. Gail really hoped so.

As she walked she started to set up the bare outlines of a plan. There were too many unknowns, that was clear. So, out of all the people she could call on, who could do what? Who could find things out? There was a shortage of fact and detail, so where

might that information be waiting for her, all ready to be unearthed? The plan began to take shape in her head.

I take the High Street at a brisk pace with the heel-to-toe rolling technique I had read about in a magazine somewhere; with the arms doing their bit with each step, back and across/ back and across. I get up a good rhythm. When I started this power walking stuff around six months ago it was five minutes and a sit down, now its twenty minutes and a short relaxation. The ten minutes up to the library is more like a simple limbering up for the day than any real exertion. So that's progress of sorts. If ever I have to chase a murdering mystery man down the sidestreets at least I am in good shape for it.

Just coming up to 9.30; the library will be about to open. A year ago it had been on the point of closing. It took a bit of petitions and whatnot to keep it open. Not that I wanted to necessarily keep it forever as it was, but once the trench warfare got started I stopped trying to be rational. Once there was a critical mass of unintelligence behind the Save Our Library Campaign I simply left them to it.

Things have to change. So why not make use of any chances that come along? I would rather have tried some other alternatives. People, it seemed to me, were confusing the library as a building and the library as a set of services. Community campaigners always find it easy to focus on some Victorian red-brick facade but if it costs more to keep the building leak-free than it does to provide people with books, internet and so on then the balance is wrong. It's got to be people first, services next, buildings last – hasn't it? That's how it seems to me, anyway.

My solution? I suggested books in all the community venues spread down the High Street (and beyond). At Brendan's, one of his trolleys would be ideal. I'm sure the books would be returned. Brendan's customers are a reliable enough lot. You could check the books out through the till. Well not Brendan's current one. It is one of those 'Open All Hours' Arkwrighty things. It would have your hand off, that monstrosity. It would have to be a new modern snazzy electronic thing. The ones with the laser zapper for reading barcodes. Brendan could barcode his food ... Bacon sandwich: Zap! Full breakfast: Zap! Or he could build a grid shape into his toaster so that the toast popped up ready-coded. I'm not sure how he'd barcode his fried eggs ... or the beans ... or the tomatoes ... (Yes I do, course I do. It would be one of those laminated sheets with pictures of different meals. See, there's a solution to every puzzle at the end of the day).

So, where was I? Tomatoes ... toast ... barcodes ... tills ... books ... library. That was it: The library - nearly shut. Like the Central Library (The one Prince Charles likened to an incinerator for books rather than a place for borrowing them). That's due to close and be replaced by a great new designer one. What was it that guy from the Council called it? 'a palazzo of human thought ...'. Good one that. It came with all the other words:

Flagship, designer, world-class, whatever, whatever. The idea is to catapult Birmingham into the top twenty-five world cities, the Vancouver of Britain. I assume that will be a nice thing – so long as we get to keep our Number 11 Outer Circle route.

What would I do with the old library? It's a Grade 2 listed building with lumps of concrete dropping off, so maybe I'd put the new one up and just let the old one collapse in on itself. It could be left to become overgrown as an urban heritage relic, something for future generations to uncover and dig down into evidence of our lost civilisation. Maybe they'll find the evidence I'm looking for.

I do have to admit that things are slowly getting better as some things come down and other things go up. Like the new bus station down Digbeth. I haven't seen it yet but it's supposed to be quite good. Better than before, anyway. Mind you, 'before' was pretty crap by most standards. Better than before will have to do, though, as it is progress of sorts. Maybe Birmingham might change its historic motto from 'Forward' to 'Better than Before'

It's amazing how this city is changing and the cost of it all. £193 million the new library is down as costing. Times are supposed to be tight but there is money out there. It's all hidden behind three-word slogans: Invest to Save, Work to Prosper, things like that.

The last time we had politicians hacking away at the public sector it was all 'Boys from the Black Stuff' and depressive gloom. Good writer though that Bleasdale. He caught the sense of the age. The hopelessness of blokes who came into our office each week with that haunted 'Gis a job' look about them. We're not quite there again yet ... but nor are we out of the woods.

What woods? There's not been a hint of a forest round here for a few hundred years. Which brings me back to the same puzzle. I was going to say that maybe I'm not seeing the woods for the trees but if there are no trees then everything would be plain sailing (oh dear .. sailing .. in woods .. that aren't there anymore! Funny thing this English of ours). What would the twenty-first century equivalent be? How about: 'Can't see the message for the emails'? Which reminds me: Better text Rukhsana and check. Let's just hope that her boss Kathleen has some extra-special stock selection meeting to go to.

I don't want to break step now that I'm in the flow but it's bloody hard work texting on the trot:

"R. Is the bookdragon in?" Send.

A few steps on : "Hi no all clear – R"

"Put kettle on there in 2 mins" Send.

I use that library because it has a better than average reference section, has more public-use computer terminals, and gives me access to Rukhsana's information network. Oh, and the toilets, don't forget the toilets - toilets are vital to us bus travelling community.

Where was I again? I'm rambling all over the place today: Yes .. new library .. opening soon. This so-much-older one is just opening as I get there. Brian and Gerald forming an ordered queue of two. They're always there first thing. Brian to do his research (No one is quite knows what he's researching. He doesn't seem to go into university very often. He says it's Philosophical Research - 'Ideas about ideas - that sort of thing'. Gerald is there simply to bring his books back before he does the rest of his daily list.

I follow them in, not even having to break step. Such timing! Inside I breathe in the unique smell of old libraries and head for the office.

Coming up quietly behind Rukhsana I do a good impression of her boss Kathleen aka the book-dragon:

'Rukhsana dear I don't know why you encourage that bus-woman. She never borrows any books. How can a library meet its targets if people don't take books out? She doesn't even have to read them even – just take them out, and bring them back of course'.

Rukhsana laughs and gives me one of her best hugs. She's good to me. She smoothes things over between the book-dragon and me. She has a neat way of being open and honest, whilst in reality hiding the facts. They are only simple facts: Kathleen doesn't like me dropping in to use the toilet, or to use the kettle to get hot water for my instant coffee flask refill. Rufi covers for me all the same.

I check what she knows, which is no more than I do. I go round the book shelves and check with Gerald and with Brian but they know even less.

'Ok, team meeting everyone. Five minutes time, behind the DVD section'. Just time for me to gulp the coffee Rufi has made.

I go over the bare facts then start to set the plan going.

'Gerald. You're a whizz with numbers. Always on about formulae, algorithms, logic models – none of which I understand, but if there's anyone who can sort out probabilities it's you.'

Gerald gave me a gentlemanly slight bow. So old-fashionedly nice.

'Could it be chance, random events? Or could two be accidents, leaving Sean's death sticking out?'

I could see his mind switch on. He somehow went into another mode – hard to explain really but you'd know what I mean if you saw him in action.

He's sprightly and very much still alert; an ex-university professor. Does the hard versions of the newspaper crossword ('in record time today, my dear - very satisfying,

very satisfying indeed'), does any puzzle in the free newspaper, always got his brain going. People buy him books of sudoku but he doesn't see the point ('all too easy, you see - it's the challenge/ the difficulty that makes things so enjoyable - when your brain has to start to hurt to even get going, then you leave it all to stew at the back of your mind whilst you are thinking about something else, or simply walking the dog - and the answer starts to half work itself out - then you kick the cogs into place again and worry away at it all for a few hours and, usually, you start to feel it getting somewhere - often somewhere you could never have predicted. That's the beauty of it, you see, the absolute unknowingness of everything and yet there is an answer at the end of the day. Often, you know, the answer is stunning in its elegance and simplicity.')

I'd mentally blinked; just as Gerald was coming back almost immediately with: 'No, there's a definite link and a likelihood that there'll be a fourth and then a fifth and so on, getting closer and closer together. I'd say that there was a more than 60% chance that the fourth will be in the next couple of days. Maybe even today.' He paused. 'In which case, I think I'll walk home rather than get the bus.'

He wandered off to choose his books for the day. That left Rukhsana and Brian. Rukhsana first, I think. She has networks of people (a) in Asian communities across city, her 'community mafia' (b) who use the library and who each know others, who know others, and so on - her 'library mafia' as she calls it. She also has a telephone network. It operates as a book discussion group once a fortnight, but in between it is a social network run by fifty year old Elizabeth (uses a wheelchair and doesn't come into the library much) as part of a Lottery-funded 'community good cause'. It covers the phone bills for when she occasionally needs to phone Citizen's Advice or the police, on behalf of someone in the network. She has built up strong contacts with just about everyone in the public service offices across the area. This very neatly allows her to slip in some calls on behalf of me or Rukhsana, when we are on one of our missions. It's especially useful when I might need to check some legality or official thing without doing it myself. There are times when anonymity is safest. This feels as if it might turn into one of those.

'Rukhsana: Get your telephone mafia talking; get your community mafia talking; get Elizabeth talking. They're unlikely to know anything or come across anything – but if they are talking and thinking it's like an expanded brain – like the experiments where they link up all the spare bits of memory in thousands of separate desk computers to produce massive background computing power – big enough to crack any problem.'

'And, meanwhile, we all know how good you are on internet searches, knowing information in books, and all that. What is it you are always boasting: "A real quarryful of information, I am", or something like that.' Rukhsana smiled.

'Nerve gases: any chance of scanning back through the online papers to see if there have been cases of anyone using such things round here, or any going missing. It's a long shot but worth a go.'

I turned. 'Brian. What can you do to help?' He shuffled. I would try to read his expression but I'd given up on that ages ago. He face is always deep in a hood or something. Today it's a long parka with the hood up. When he wears that thing he reminds me of Kenny from South Park - only he dies less often (I hope that's not tempting fate given all that's going on).

'Your research: ideas about everything, or whatever. Well, just run all I've just told you through your little ideas-mill and see what comes out the other end. See if there's anything leading somewhere, or is it all going nowhere?' He shuffled again. I took it as agreement.

'I know your answers can be cryptic – borderline baffling sometimes – but you are reliable. That's one big thing in your favour. Reliable. Always where you say you'll be; always with an answer (even if I can barely understand it most times). See what you can do, anyway. Same arrangements as usual.'

He's slightly strange, (no, more than 'slightly', he's borderline unfathomable). I would guess around early twenties, but it's hard when you never see his face. We have a very simple relationship. I give him tasks and he comes up with answers. When he's not in the library, his agreed approach is that he will stand by the roadside holding up a hand written placard with the answer to my query just at the time my bus goes past. He's only prepared to stand at the one particular spot on the 11 bus route and then only for a few minutes, so I have to text him my ETA and hope that the bus isn't delayed in traffic.

Brian shuffles one last time and wanders off to his research, so that I'm left with just Rukhsana.

She looks at me. 'Did you hear the local news this morning? I caught the end of it as I drove in. There was a bit of a mention of Sean, not much. Just "mysterious of death of city dad ... found at home by his wife ... cause of death unknown".'

'There was nothing about him being a bus driver. They were sort of hinting things without actually saying anything. Know what I mean? Suggesting it might link to his private life or something. More in the hope that someone might phone them up with the answers, I suppose. All the same, it felt really weird hearing his name coming out of the radio.'

She looked towards the door, checking that her boss wasn't on the way in.

'I'll get on the email right away. I'll set things going and see what buzzes round. If Kathleen stays away long enough I'll phone Elizabeth and put her in the picture. I might even go on Facebook and put up something non-specific – set a worm wriggling and see what can be caught. What do you say "Sprat to catch a herring" or something like that'

That's typical of Rukhsana. I know for a fact that she was educated in good Birmingham primary and secondary schools. She speaks excellent English when she wants to but plays this game: Likes to pretend she is all Uneducated Asian; invents slightly off idioms. She put it down once to having watched too many bad films when she was little – "Peter Sellers as a doctor – or was that in a song – I can't remember now'. Actually she has a degree in English, can quote all sorts of literature, is a locally-published writer. She has this front and quietly does some brilliant stuff behind it.

I gave her a hug. I had done all I could at the library. Time to move on. Time for a bit more bus-time; see if that brings anything else.

That's better. Upstairs. Front seat as usual. New driver on this one; not seen him before. Wonder if anyone pointed out his life expectancy to him as part of his induction. Probably not.

Quick timecheck: just after 10.30. The day is going along nicely, but I'm not making progress at anywhere near the pace I want. Still there's nothing more to be done at the moment, except sit here, stare out and see what comes. I'll probably stay on this one as far as Perry Barr because that will be around lunchtime and I can nip into the university coffee bar for a subsidised sandwich; and you never know who you are going to bump into there. There are also a few things I could check out in the university. Let's see how it goes. That's all I can do at the moment, let things go and see what happens to them.

I stare Birmingham in the face as it slides behind me. The mix of houses; the mix of people. All those lives being lived out. It's always fascinated me, ever since a child. All those separate houses or all those separate little cars lined up in traffic outside the bus window. Isolated tin box cars each with its own isolated little driver. Who were they all? What did they do all day?

It's the same on the bus. All those people. Who are they all, everyday, every journey? Where are they all coming from? Where are they all going to? More than fifty thousand people a day just on this route. Imagine all those lives hopping round the city via this twenty-six mile circle. It's almost incomprehensible. The absolutely terrifying bit is the thought that I'm just one tiny speck in the maelstrom of it all. It's best not to dwell on it. It's better to focus on some concrete bit of reality and forget all the nebulous stuff.

The bus picks up a bit of speed on the downhill. Over in the distance, the new hospital buildings. More money; more progress. Up past the old bus depot on the other side, now converted into one of those 'Park bits of your life here for awhile' set of storage units. I remember when it was the depot but you can't keep harking back to past times. Life moves on and you move with it or you become someone whose life is filled with

moaning about anything and everything. You hear them at bus stops, constantly. The days of the steam tram must have been truly wondrous times!

Slow progress on this bit. Stopping and starting as traffic moves jerkily past shops, traffic lights, parked cars. They're going to have to sort this stretch out sometime; a real bottleneck.

10.55 and there's my house going past. One full circle. Going round in circles. Circling round; or skirting round? I momentarily think whether or not to get off for a sandwich at home but decide to stick with the plan. An hour more and lunch at the university. I relax, suddenly realising how hunched up in the seat I was. Straining forward as if the answers were about to loom up in front of me and take me by surprise. They won't simply come to me though. I'll have to hunt them down. I let my body soften and stare out without really looking at anything. My mind empties and refocuses on the plan.

I need to know what's in the police autopsy report on Sean's death. I need to know if they have any theories at all. I don't think the searches I'd just set going would bring anything on that, but you never know.

Other passengers come and go without me paying them much attention. Vaguely I notice fragments: The slight variations in people as the bus crosses from one area to the next, but always the same overall types. The mother struggling on with an oversized pushchair and two toddlers, the pensioner with shopping trolley, the tidy older men trying to keep up standards and traditions, the student young woman with her earphones and files.

I am in a world of my own but, from time to time, I get snatches of conversations that are out of context. Fragments again. Life is all fragments. One huge kaleidoscope slowly shifting patterns in front of us and occasionally, just for fun, life gives it all a huge shake.

"... and so he said ..."

"... appointment, and I met that woman, you know, the one who had all that trouble ..."

".... well, you can't be too careful, can you? I mean, to look at him you wouldn't have thought"

"... and I said to her ... and she said to me; so I said to her ..."

All the stuff of everyday life. Fragments, snatches, bits of people's existences – all adding up to nothing much. Maybe I should get down my battered Sartre or the existentialist novels from my student days. Maybe there's something in it after all.

I bring my mind into focus and do an instant time/place referencing.

Erdington: Six Ways – but you can only get it to be five roads no matter which way you count them. Where did the other one go? And when? I'll look it up one day, or ask Gerald. He'll know for sure.

Six ways is one of the more important stops. One of the places where the circular outer-ring crosses the main radial routes that go spoking out from the city centre linking Birmingham with Bristol, Pershore, Alcester, Stratford, Warwick, Coventry, and so on.

I like these big stops where half the bus gets off and a different half get on. I scan down the queue.

There's Fiona. Emo/goth or whatever they go by these days; drama/art student (studenting forever, it feels). She always looks slightly different each time you see her (although I'm sure she's the same behind it all) trying out different fashions and makeup. She's one of the few people I know who I would properly call 'posh' - private school educated (one of the better-known ones as well). Her parents are in London and she hints at them being semi-famous: 'You'd know them straight off if I ever told you who they were,' she says, 'but they're of no real importance to my life here - so no point in saying anything, is there.' She's an actress (in more ways than one) - no, to be more accurate, she has small roles in small-company plays and likes to put on different fronts in real life. Actually, when I talk to her I am not convinced that she can tell where acting ends and reality starts. Maybe for her there is no precise boundary: she acts her realities; she really acts; she plays at being real; etc, etc.

I wave through the window but she's too engrossed to notice. She'll come upstairs, on her way to the university. It's a chance for a quick catch-up.

She sees me and drops into the seat behind. Typical of her that: Me having to twist round and still only being to half see her whilst she can hide herself away behind and whisper over my shoulder. Some days she's full-on, others (and apparently this is one) it's a semi-detached-Fiona that we get.

My phone pings. A text from Rukhsana: 'everyone on the job. nothing yet. let u know if - and zero on nerve gas'

'Gail. This is nice. I was just thinking about you the other day. Thinking I hadn't seen you for ages. I was watching the Central News and saw this report on bus drivers dying. I half expected you to pop up being interviewed.'

'Too much profile for me. I live the quiet life. You're right, though, they were friends of mine and I am deeply disturbed by the whole thing. Disturbed and puzzled.'

'Look. Five minutes and we'll be at Perry Barr. Jump off there and have a sandwich and a chat. You can tell me all about your puzzles and I'll have some blinding insight and produce the solution like a rabbit from a hat. Shazzam; just like that. It's what happens in films, so why not in real life? Simple as that'

I like Fiona. 'Simple as that' just about sums her up at times. She doesn't see why anything has to be complicated; everything just 'is'. She can be hard work herself, all

that pretentiousness, but she's got something about her. If I could only work out what it is I'd maybe be able to find a real role for her; play her into my vague plan.

Twenty minutes later Gail and Fiona were brushing the crumbs away and draining the last of their drinks. They hadn't even got round to Gail's puzzle – so no Shazzam; no rabbits; no 'simple as that'. Fiona had rattled on about things in general. They had got lots of chitchat out of the way. Gail was beginning to calculate how rude it would be to go, against how much longer she could sit there. She decided to get back on track, to pursue her main mission for the day, to crack the enigma, to ... whatever.

'So you heard the news about the drivers being killed then?' Gail didn't think Fiona would have anything to add but wanted to get the thing focused back in her own mind.

'Only a snippet.' That was one of the delights of Fiona, she still used words that others had given up on ages ago – "Snippet", lovely! 'The reporter was trying to make a link between two drivers dying, then the third. I think he was trying to create a storyline even if none existed. That's all.'

Gail wondered if it was worth contacting the reporter.

'And now there's this other one earlier today.'

Gail's mind went into sudden overdrive: What! What! What other one? And why was it that everyone else was telling her about them. She was usually the hub of any flow of information, yet here she was, totally out of the loop. Except that the loop was this damn bus circle looping its way round Birmingham's suburbs with gems of information being dropped on her as she made her clunky way round it. What was going on?

Her mind spun for only a second, then the words came out all orderly and calm: 'Sorry, Fiona, say that bit again. What other one?'

'They were talking about it on the bus I got earlier. The driver had heard it on his radio. There was a hold up or diversion or something – all because a motorbike had gone up onto the pavement and knocked some woman down. I wouldn't have paid it any attention but the driver was telling this old guy that the woman knocked down was someone from his garage, one of the bus drivers. A Polish woman, he said. It just caught my attention because of the coincidence.'

'Coincidence? I don't think so. That's what I was saying. It's bus drivers that are dying and they are being killed. Murdered.' It was the first time she had used the word and Gail shocked herself using it.

Gail got out her phone. Why was she sitting here when there were things to do; people to set going? Who to text: Elizabeth was the best bet, but she only had a landline. Rufi was a possibility, but couldn't do anything. Brian? No, not yet. It wasn't time for Brian just yet. It had to be Elizabeth.

'Back in a minute, Fiona. Just one call to make.'

The corridor payphone worked fine. She momentarily had to stop and work out where the money went and when to dial. It always felt a bit clunky using public payphones, as if it were part of some dying art, something vaguely recalled; something that would, one day, have faded away like 'Push button B' instructions from her childhood.

'Elizabeth,' (never 'Liz' so early in the conversation). 'I need a real favour, as usual.' (Nothing wrong with a bit of pleading ...) 'You know just about everyone in the world of health,' (or flattery...) 'Who do you know at the couple of hospitals on your side of the city? Someone was admitted earlier today – it would be late morning by the time they booked her in, I guess. Female. Knocked down by a motorbike. Serious injuries but alive. She's a bus driver; Polish. If she's the one I'm thinking of her first name is Agnes; no idea of her last name. Is that enough to go on? Can you find out which hospital; which ward; when she can be visited; how badly hurt she is; anything really? You're a real gem, Liz. See what you come up with and I'll give you a ring when I'm nearer the hospitals.'

Gail turned back to Fiona but she was already talking to a group of others. A quick wave and out into the fresh air. She needed to breathe in the city. She needed to draw in things from out there. She needed to connect with what was going on.

12.40: There'll be a Number 11 along in a couple of minutes. That will get me over towards the hospitals by just after one o'clock. I'll find a phone and check back on Elizabeth. She'll have got it all sorted – she always does.

There is a crowd hassling onto the bus, so there's no real chance to hang around by the driver to see what he can tell me. In any case I know this one. He's not likely to have been paying much notice to anything other than getting to the end of his shift as early as he can.

Upstairs there is someone already up front but I'm not that fixated on having the same seat. I'm just as happy anywhere, except down at the back. I settle for a midway seat on the left side. You get a better set of scenery from that side. Sit on the left for the anticlockwise service and sit on the right for the clockwise service. The logic being that this always means you are looking inwards towards Birmingham's heart and not outwards to the Black Country's poverty.

A bit hard on our near neighbours maybe, but it's never personalised or meant disparagingly. It is part of some grander theory about the way poverty and grime is socially, economically and geographically distributed. (Is it true that the north/east part of any city is poorer, crowded, more industrial etc and the south/west part is always more affluent, spacious, pastoral etc? Some article I read once believed so and rattled off examples in support, claiming this as a mini-reflection of the north/east of a country, in the northern hemisphere at least, always being poorer than the south/west).

I'm not sure it fully stands up as an argument, but as the bus I'm on swings round corners away from the terraces of Perry Barr and Witton, through Bearwood, and sets its cab towards Harborne you can see what she was getting at. One day I'll do a proper survey of the economic landscape of this fine city of ours, and then maybe go on to spend ages on buses round Manchester, Leeds and maybe Sheffield. I think you have to discount any city that you can go round on an open-top tourist bus – I'm sure my friend didn't have places like Bath, or York or Stratford in mind, although it would be interesting to see if her theory fits there as well.

Meanwhile I have other things to occupy my time. You would think that being wrapped up in murders would focus my mind, but it is as prone to wandering as ever. Maybe it's the gentle rocking of buses as they go along; some kind of mini-hypnotism that sets the mind free to wander. I'm sure there was some research a while ago about the repetitive rattle of train wheels matching the brainwaves associated with creativity. Or maybe I've just imagined that; and maybe I'm wandering again already. Focus, girl, Focus. Back to the plan for goodness sake.

I know this route well enough to have every shop, every post box, every public toilet logged in my head. I go down well before the next stop and nod at the driver.

'Hi. Heard anything about that Polish driver being knocked down? Anything over the radio?'

'Wasn't really paying much notice, love. The hold-up not being on my bit of route. You see.'

Yes, I saw. Some people would automatically tune in to anything about a colleague. Some people would care enough to take notice. He wasn't one of those. I suppose it's the same in any job – those who do the task and those who see things in terms of a set of individuals acting as a whole. It's one of those 'The world is made up of two kinds of people ...' things, but then you could argue that the world is made up of two kinds of people: those that think that the world is made up of two kinds of people and those who don't.

I thank him anyway, (politeness costs nothing), and walk back to a phone box.

'Elizabeth, anything for me?'

She has come up with the goods again, as always: Female; Agnes Kierosky; now on Ward 3, after an examination on admission that showed a broken leg and some broken ribs. 'Stable'/'comfortable' – that kind of reassuring category. Being kept in so that they can keep an eye on her. Yes, she can be visited but not for long periods of time and no known relatives in Birmingham so might like someone showing an interest in her.

So not at death's door, but certainly not going anywhere for a while.

I take the short cut across the park towards the hospital and soon I'm sitting next to a drowsy Agnes. She shifts painfully and looks at me as best she can.

'Do I know you? You are not a nurse, so what is it you want?'

Her English is slightly stilted but is promisingly good. Not good enough for a complex conversation, and I'm not sure that her concentration will last long, so I decide on a short-cut bit of truthfulness (OK, a small stretching of what was technically accurate).

'I am a voluntary visitor. I sometimes check on people and I have come to see how you are.' That is close enough to the truth to not make me feel uncomfortable. 'You had an accident with a motorbike?' I try to sound authoritative, as if I have every right to pry into her life. 'What happened?'

'I was walking along. I was thinking about what to buy. The motorbike came from the road and came into me. It was deliberate. He tried to kill me. Why would he do that? What have I done? Nothing, I think, so why would anyone want to bang into me like that?'

It didn't take long to get the full story, mostly because there wasn't much to tell. She didn't know who or why. It was a man (but that was mostly assumption on her part, the driver had leathers and a helmet); unknown kind of motorbike ('I don't know such things. I know buses but I don't know such things'). The bike had been parked further down the road, she looked up when she heard it rev. It came towards her. There was no reason for it to have to leave an empty clear road, go onto the pavement and aim straight for her (but that's what happened); she jumped to one side and he (if 'he') still tried to turn into her but caught her side rather than full on and sped off as other people came out of the corner shop.

It had happened on a quiet side road. The driver must have been waiting for her. There was something quite deliberate about the whole thing.

There isn't likely to be any CCTV there, but it's worth checking. There were no real witnesses, according to Agnes, but again worth checking to see if there is any chance for a better description of the bike or where it drove off to.

I left Agnes as soon as I could. She was fine but was the one that got away, the one who lived to tell the tale. I may need to be a volunteer visitor again later today or early tomorrow.

I went to the loo and sat thinking. Things had taken a particular turn. It was no longer just a feeling. There was a definite substance to it. There was now a very tangible reality to the disturbance. I could almost reach out and touch it, whatever it was.

The whole of my world seemed to have moved sideward into some different context. There would be no going back. This was a whole new place. There were different rules. This was past the point of no return.

Sitting there I made a commitment to get to the bottom of it all.

(To be continued)