



The Dene

b a r r y s t e a d

THE DENE

Barry Stead

*Once upon a time, not very long ago,
before mobile phones and the internet...*

PART ONE

The Valley in the Heights

ONE

The evidence the evil would return presented itself twenty years ago when two boys and a girl stayed out too late.

It was June, one of the sunniest they could remember in their short lives of eleven years, and it was Friday night: no school tomorrow and the weekend would last forever. After tea they had scrambled across the quarry and skipped through Thockley wood to the hay fields below Belfry. This was their domain, as was all the valley. They knew the secret paths and the best hiding places in every wood. Picnic sites had already been lined up for the long summer holidays ahead, and if the sun was really hot then perhaps they could swim in the large pond they called the Dams next to Thockley wood. Then there was the swing over the Dene which the two boys had made last weekend from a length of old rope and a tyre taken from the tip.

They all lay down, exhausted from running, on a wide flattened patch of grass and stared at the sky.

“What shall we do next?” said the taller of the two boys.

“We could go down to the road and watch the wagons,” said the other.

“Too far,” said the girl. “Anyway I’m bored with watching lorries and the quarry’s closed so there won’t be many.”

“But there still is some,” he replied in defiance of the facts. “I bet you!”

“Tell you what,” said the taller boy, sucking on a length of grass, “let’s go and play on the swing!”

They made their way, with less speed than when they had come out, back to the wood and climbed over the gate into the shade of the pines.

“Have you skipped piano practice tonight?” asked the girl.

“Yeah,” said the taller boy. “I can do what I want.” The other boy laughed.

“I can!”

“So why do you still have to go to Sunday school twice every Sunday?” He thought he had scored a point. “We don’t.”

“It keeps my mum happy,” was the reply. “Anyway, I don’t really believe.” He was on the defensive and had strode ahead.

“Why do you want to learn to play the piano?” asked the girl, sensing a fight and trying to deflect it.

The taller boy paused to let them catch up. “Because of my dad, I suppose,” he answered, a frown of regret furrowing his brows. “He used to play before the pit disaster.”

“Oh,” said the girl a little embarrassed. It was a subject none of them liked to dwell on.

Thockley wood grew on the southern side of the valley and the Dene - that was the local children’s name for it - lay close to the entrance. It was a cleft in the sloping ground of the wood about five foot wide, framed

by two silver birch saplings and overrun with moss and ferns. With a streamlet trickling out, it looked like a miniature gorge and the more it wound its way into the wood the more overgrown and blanketed with brambles it became until, impassable, it ended in a thick, tangled mass of holly bushes, hawthorns and brambles at the centre of the wood. A large oak - from which the swing was suspended - loomed over the silver birches and the streamlet crossing the path.

"I bet this place looks dead spooky in the dark," said the short boy.

"It looks spooky now," replied the girl, climbing into the tyre. "Push then, one of you." The taller one obliged, sending her arcing gently over the path, her dark hair flowing in curls behind her.

"We've got to explore the Dene right to its end one day," he said.

"Like a real expedition?" enthused the other. "Great! We could bring torches, and knives to cut a path. We might even find treasure."

They took turns - with the boys showing off as to how high they dared go - losing all sense of time and it was only when the sun dipped behind the trees on the other side of the Dams did they realise how late it was. The shafts of light through the branches had gone and the wood was cloaked in a rising gloom.

"We should have been home hours ago", said the girl, looking at her watch.

"Ah, don't panic," said the short boy. "One more swing, eh?"

"I'm going," replied the other boy. "My mum'll kill me." And he set off along the path followed by the girl.

"Softies!" yelled the short boy from the tyre as he launched himself into the air.

The other two paused at an arch made from two intertwining holly bushes that marked the entrance to the wood and shouted for him to join them.

"Okay, okay, I'm coming." He braked to a stop by digging his heels into the path and pulled the tyre over his head. From inside the Dene he heard a movement, like somebody stepping on a twig. He peered into the shadows but could see nothing. Just my imagination, he thought.

Then he heard sniffing.

He backed away slowly and ran to the holly arch. "There's somebody in the Dene," he said. He tried to sound casual. "We've been spied on!"

"Rubbish," retorted the girl on a laugh. "We didn't see anyone go in and it's so overgrown in the middle of the wood that you can't get in."

"But I heard sniffing," he protested.

"Then it was just an animal. A fox or badger," said the other boy. "They come out at night. Let's have a look."

They inched their way back along the path and half way to the Dene the girl pointed.

"Look, he's right." She suddenly stiffened.

Obscured by ferns there was something behind the birches.

"It might be a deer," said the tall boy and held his hand to his lips. "Shh!"

"No, it's just another kid," whispered the girl, "isn't it?" The short boy wasn't sure. "Didn't sound like one," he said. "I'm off. Come on." The taller boy ignored him, craning his head to and fro to catch a glimpse through the leaves as his friends hurried back to the arch.

"Don't be stupid!" hissed the girl in the best stage-whisper she could manage, then to the short boy: "Scarey."

"Yeah." He felt his knees tremble.

The taller of the two was congratulating himself on his curiosity and bravery as he dared another three steps toward the Dene. He knew there were deer in the valley but had only seen one once, and then from a distance, and was wondering if it would have antlers when he heard a low guttural growl. No deer, that. For a moment his feet refused to move, divorced from a mind spinning with thoughts of man-eating animals. He gulped and realised how dark it was and the wild animals suddenly became werewolves and unnamed monsters of the night.

His feet regained contact with his brain and he sped to the arch. "Run!" he shouted, waving his friends on. The look on his face was enough to propel them over the stepping stones where the burn flowed out of the Dams.

When the taller boy caught them up they were half way round the wide pond. The shorter one cast a look over his shoulder toward the wood.

“Look,” he said.

The other two were positive they didn't want to but nevertheless curiosity pulled their heads round. They couldn't see it but whatever was disturbing the ferns was moving with a cautious, skulking deliberation.

“Weird,” said the girl, plainly frightened.

“I think we're being watched,” said the tall boy, his voice shaking.

“Yeah,” agreed the other, not bothering to hide his fear. “I'm off.” And it was an effort even to say that. He dashed off up the path as fast as he could with the other two close on his heels, their fear magnified by the deepening twilight and their imaginations. They didn't let up on the speed till they were half way across the quarry. Even then they didn't dawdle.

Two days later under the bright sun which banishes all nightmares they were laughing about it, and two months afterwards it had been forgotten among the games of an unusually happy summer. Unwisely, for after the passing of twenty years it would bring catastrophe.

Nick Dunston, tall, thin and wearing what resembled a furtive look, reflecting a desire to hide, enjoyed passing through Kings Cross irregardless of the circumstances, and after the events of the previous night he was only too glad to take a short ramble through his memory. It was like a release. He tried to forget the burglary and the vandalism, and adjusted his sunglasses before joining the ticket queue.

Basically he was susceptible to nostalgia and to walk across the concourse was to replay a sequence of memories which made him conscious of his own mortality.

It was here he'd first arrived in London, eighteen, clean, polite and virginal. Three months later when he left after painting scenery and sowing costumes for an artistically obscure theatre company he was none of those things, and proud of it.

And it was here, at King's Cross, he'd spoken his last rational words to his mother. His mood soured as he recalled the accusations they'd fired at each other.

He had met Anne just outside, lost, dispirited and clutching her cello. It was from here Anne smuggled him to Lincoln for weekends of fleshly pleasures when her parents were away. Anne was her own law and love was its own excuse.

King's Cross had received him to be groomed by the BBC as a television presenter. He was young. He wore jeans, and they liked him.

And it was here on a frosty December morning with the cold caressing his teeth he had said goodbye to Anne. His heart still ached. Just a little.

“Yes sir, where to?” asked the man behind the perspex grille.

“Eh?”

“Where are you going? There's a queue behind you.” The vendor shouted and leaned forward.

“Sorry,” replied Nick, wrenched from his reminiscing. “Newcastle-upon-Tyne, please.”

“How long for?” the vendor asked, slipping into the responses like the machine that was certain to replace him.

“Not sure. Better make it a single. Pay by cheque?”

“Ask the thirty five people behind you,” muttered the vendor licking his forefinger before announcing the price. Nick dashed out a cheque to British Snail - he'd done this for two years and no one had noticed - collected his ticket and took a last look at the swarming people obligingly acting out his memories then strode through the barrier, thankful he hadn't been spotted.

He found a seat at the front of the train in a relatively empty carriage where a walkman wearing a punk crackled its presence a few seats in front and an elderly lady opposite counted stitches on her knitting needles. Farther up two red faced men opened a pack of cards and a tin of lager each. Nick stretched out his legs and once more went over what had happened last night. It was hard to accept it as a simple burglary, and not for the first time that morning he wondered what that peculiar dagger had been doing in his piano. Had his father known? He certainly wasn't going to ring his mother to find out.

“Excuse me, anyone sitting here?” asked a woman, plump, blue rinse and peroxide dentures. She pointed to the vacant seats.

“Er, no - “ He wasn't allowed to finish. The screech, as he'd come to call it, forestalled him.

“You’re Nick Dunston aren’t you? I’ve seen you on the telly. Fancy!” she exclaimed shrilly. “Our Gavin - that’s my son - liked your programme about the stars. I didn’t watch it myself. Mind, I liked the one on Christmas. Can I sit down?”

“I’m sorry,” smiled Nick, summoning the smarm. “Friends have taken them.” Aware there were neither coats nor briefcases to mark their occupation he added transparently, “they’re checking out the buffet car.”

“Oh,” her smile dropped. “But you are on the telly?”

“For my sins,” he replied, giving a tired smile. Her perfume was becoming suffocating. The bleached teeth glistened with a disappointed smile.

“I won’t disturb you then. I know how busy you “media” people are.” She sniffed and waddled off into the next carriage.

Usually he was reasonably adept at handling those who recognised him, though this hadn’t been much of a problem until recently. Previously he had been known merely as a pair of long legs who popped up now and again on BBC 2 to present short documentaries like “The History of Glass”, “On The Throne - A Social History of the Toilet” and “Christmas Customs”. The few who recognised him from these were usually as eccentric as his subject matter and he felt genuinely complemented that they were more interested in the topic than him, but this had changed in spring with the broadcast of “The Universe Outside”, a popular history of astronomy. Peak time viewing and promotional interviews had rapidly gifted him with a celebrity status he had quickly tired of. And lately, during a repeat broadcast of “Christmas Customs” (the scheduling caprice of the BBC would forever amaze him) he had been stopped in the street more frequently. Banks and supermarket checkouts now brought him out in a cold sweat as he waited for the screeching recognition. Increasingly his programmes were slipping down behind his personality. Two of the Sunday papers had wanted to interview him while one of the tabloids had asked him to pose topless, and he’d had half a dozen requests to appear on TV panel games.

He had been forced to leave three pubs in as many weeks after some one had sidled up to him to turn a compliment into a debate, and a debate into an argument. Hugh and Jenny, his drinking partners, were getting righteously pissed off. On the other hand Barney, his producer, was revelling in it and was to be seen parading through the corridors of Broadcasting House with a grin on his face that looked as though he’d been told that heaven was full of pubs which never closed.

Then came last night: a disaster which pulled all the mad, weaving problems into focus. Nick closed his eyes and ran through the events of the night, still clear in his mind’s eye, as the train pulled out of the station.

He and Hugh had gone to their local to discuss Nick’s idea for his next project. It was to be a short series on the history of the piano and since Hugh earned a healthy crust by composing jingles for adverts Nick intended to pump him for ideas and advice. Hugh gave of his wisdom willingly until they hit trouble on the fourth pint. A bearded little jerk, far too drunk for his own good, edged into their conversation to question Nick about black holes. When Hugh politely suggested they move on, the drunk threw his whisky in Hugh’s face and knocked Nick’s pint to the floor. That was it. Hugh snapped. He slammed the drunk to the wall by his lapels and threatened to knock him into the middle of the next century and post his balls to Australia. They were thrown out.

If that was the overture then the main show didn’t start till they were making their way home after regaining their composure at another pub.

“I thought you left your lights on?” Hugh said as they turned none too steadily into Draisley Road. Nick looked up. “Oh God,” he muttered and started to run. The newsagent’s underneath his flat and his front door at the side of the building both looked untouched.

“At least they haven’t forced the lock,” said Nick, opening the door slowly, half expecting someone to jump out of the shadows. They bounded up the stairs leading to the flat together.

“Dear Christ,” whispered Nick helplessly when he switched the lounge light on. What should have been a pleasant night had turned round and kicked him in the stomach. The television and video were gone -small loss, replaceable, ephemeral - his Hi Fi had been smashed over the back of the sofa but worse, much worse, was the wanton dismembering of his books, torn and scattered across the floor.

“Bastards!” he yelled, following Hugh who had gone to check his attic bedroom where he knew the damage would cut closest to his heart. Still, Nick hadn’t been prepared for what he saw.

Human ordure had been smeared across the walls and the sight of his defaced diary, used as a trowel, almost made him vomit. Huge brown zig-zags cut across each wall, convening into two words above his bed:

HA HA.

Hugh shuffled over the knotted sheets thrown onto the floor and picked up a couple of photographs while Nick slumped on the piano stool. He didn't even notice the deep scratch running along the length of the piano.

"At least they couldn't carry it out," he said.

"They tried, though," observed Hugh, pointing to the impressions on the carpet where it had stood. "Or do you keep your safe behind it?"

Nick patted the piano gently, the only link he had with his dead father. Nick had luckily rescued it before his mother threw it out. He played a few bars of Traumerai then stopped when he heard something rattle inside. "This was special treatment, Hugh," he muttered, lifting the lid above the soundboard. Though he couldn't see any obvious obstruction the rattle was still there. Impulsively he hit a heavy chord. There was a clatter as something fell to the bottom inside. Ignoring Hugh's suggestions about it being more important to phone the police he swiftly took out the lower panel and reached inside.

"What the - " he pointed in surprise to a small dagger, lying behind one of the pedals. It was made from what looked like silver and though it was tarnished, faint, swirling tracings could be seen on the handle whose small pommel held a smooth, spherical, green gem. The blade resembled a single frond from a chestnut leaf, if about half the size.

"It must have been hidden in the piano," murmured Nick, wonder competing with anguish as he examined the beryl under the light.

"It looks very old. Ancient," remarked Hugh who was more concerned about cleaning up. "Perhaps it's valuable."

"It would be a damn sight more valuable if it was in those bastard burglars' ribs," snarled Nick.

"Now that is paranoia," said Hugh. "This burglary was a coincidence. They couldn't have known whose house it was. Anyway, I doubt that kind of lout would know who you are."

"Then explain that shit-smearred graffito," snapped Nick. Hugh shrugged and went downstairs.

When he returned he was wearing rubber gloves and carrying a bucket of boiling water reeking of disinfectant. "Look, I've rung Jenny. She'll be round as soon as she can," he said briskly. "You'd better phone the police."

"No." Nick was adamant about this. "I don't want to challenge them to a re-match - hey lads, let's get another one over on that know-all Dunston." He laughed sourly at his own mimicry. "Call it quits. I just want some peace. Let's get the place cleaned up."

Nick went into the kitchen which was mercifully untouched, except for the window by the sink which was broken from the outside. He'd often felt it was an invitation to burglars. Below, just to the right, the newsagent's storeroom reflected the moonlight.

He flicked a few shards of glass into the yard, heard them clink on the concrete, then closed the curtains more violently than intended. Not fully in control yet.

"Is he alright?" It was Jenny, whispering. He hadn't heard the door bell or Hugh answering it, and Hugh's reply that he wasn't, blasted what was left of his composure. He crumpled onto a stool, cupped his face in his hands, aware that parts of his life were out of control. Peace, all I need is peace.

Jenny put her arm around him. "Go away," she said warmly. "Get out of this bloody city. I don't have to be a mind reader to know you badly need to unwind."

"That obvious," sighed Nick, startled that she should be the second person that week to make the same observation. "Yes," he continued then added with slow deliberation, "The valley in the heights..."

By ten the next morning they had managed to shake the flat back to normal, and by the time they slouched exhausted on the sofa they looked like the trampled remnants of an evil party. Hugh was covered in white emulsion from painting the bedroom walls, Jenny's eyes were red while Nick had regained some of his composure. He picked up the dagger from the mantelpiece and handed it to Hugh. "Keep it for me," he said. "I'm going away for a while."

The sun came out, highlighting the pale golden corn of early August. Flat fields, one after the other, blew in the wind. Was it only four hours ago he'd said goodbye to his friends, leaving them to see to the glazier? He knew deep down he was right to go north, go home in fact. Strip away the accumulation of television tinsel and there would be a boy from a Durham pit village, nine or ten, in short trousers, mucking around in the quarry or playing for hours in the valley. Anne used to say he'd never left that boy, but unhappily Nick

wasn't too sure. Even Barney had sensed his malaise. He closed his eyes and thought about what Barney had said.

They had last met a few days earlier in a pub not far from Broadcasting House where Barney made the effort to give his prize investment some advice.

"As a producer I put my reputation on the block for you," he had said, "and this stupid decision to disappear into the dark crypts of BBC Two will as good as hang me."

Nick had nodded mutely, amused by Barney's expected tactics.

"Look," he continued, knocking back a pint angrily, "after the success of the "Universe Outside" you could have anything you wanted: a mega series on the Tzars, the Development of the Theatre or the History Of The Whole Fucking World. But what do you choose? A pissy little project about the piano. If you want to go back to minority viewing fine, but don't take me with you."

Nick hadn't told Barney he felt he owed this to his father's memory. Instead he gave other reasons equally true and forceful - that he wanted to step out of the limelight for a while and regain some the integrity he thought he'd lost amongst the computer graphics of "The Universe Outside".

Six pints later they had struck a bargain - Barney would willingly produce the piano series if Nick would agree to do a big, popular number afterwards.

"I don't want to intrude, so shut me up If I am," Barney had added as parting advice, "but if there's something wrong, if London's getting on your wick, then get out. I don't care where you go so long as there's a telephone. Even a nudist colony that swears by a diet of daffodils, as long as you work. I want a breakdown for the series on my over-loaded desk in six weeks."

Nick had agreed and went home leaving Barney to complain into his pint about the cussedness of presenters, artists, journalists, historians and anyone else who wouldn't dance to his tune.

The first thing Nick noticed stepping onto the platform at Newcastle Central, or indeed any city other than London, was the air. He had arrived shortly after rush hour when the lead content was at its peak but it was still cleaner the capital's air. He was also pleased to find it as warm as London thereby giving lie to the misconception that Newcastle was locked in a permanent ice age. He took a deep breath, picked up his three cases and a carrier bag then struggled up the ramp and over the bridge in search of a taxi.

Earlier in the morning he had telephoned his uncle Ned and aunt Jessie to ask - well, no looking back on it - to tell them he was arriving that night. They were his only living relatives left in Crawside now that his mother had moved to Nottingham. When he was little, perhaps because of the death of their only daughter and his own father, they had assumed the role of adoptive grandparents and he knew they would welcome him even if he arrived on their doorstep pursued by creditors and cuckolds.

His mind was clearer now, sleep had swept away the clinging haziness of the previous night and with it the first few tendrils of his malaise. The burglary was in the past and London was a population problem in a southern sky. His future was as promising as his smile to the porter was generous.

Under the station's newly sand-blasted portico mini-cabs lay in wait.

"Where to, bonny lad?" the driver asked through the window. Nick, who spoke with anonymous drawl of the BBC, was taken aback by the accent, as thick and impermeable as tar. His ears had all but forgotten the Geordie sounds and it took him a second or two to adjust.

"Crawside," he answered eventually. "It's in Belfry Heights."

"Here, I'll open the boot and put your cases in," grunted the driver, getting out. Nick acquiesced, musing over how he could represent the driver's gabble phonetically. Then came the screech....

The driver was almost knocked down by the advance of a thin woman smiling predaciously. To Nick, Alice Finster, doyen of Crawside's gossips and street corner moralists, had always reminded him of a finger permanently in search of a scab to pick. Most of the time she found one.

"But it's never Nick Dunston, is it?" she exclaimed. The object of her enthusiasm winced. "It's a long time since we've seen you round here. On your holidays?"

"In a way...." answered Nick.

"I see you've done well for yourself - on the telly and that."

"Just now and again." Nick opened the taxi door.

"I always said you'd do well," she continued ingratiatingly. "First we thought you'd gone off the rails. Natural, since all your friends went on to be doctors and dentists and what have you. John Baxter has his own computer business now. Fancy, and here's you actually famous on the telly!"

“Not really,” said Nick, climbing into the car and fastening the seat belt. The driver lit a cigarette. The woman leaned down and peered through the open window.

“I’ll bet your aunty will be glad to see you. It’s a long time since you’ve been up here. How’s your mother?”

Nick said she was fine then wound the window up with a speed that carried an implicit insult. The woman was still smiling and he just caught, “we’ll have to get you to give us a talk at the Women’s Institute,” before it closed.

“Absolutely.”

“Glad to be back?” asked the driver, pulling out.

“No.”

Given the clear streets after the rush hour they were soon out of the city and driving calmly along the main road to Hexham, some twenty miles further up the river. To Nick’s left in the distance loomed Belfry Heights, a range of hills and undulating arable that circumscribed his childhood and for a moment, too brief to be measured, a breathless sense of expectation and uncomfortable nostalgia flashed through him, distilling into a question: what will I find here? He shifted in his seat.

“You know, I thought I recognised you when I saw you come out of the station, but I wasn’t sure,” said the driver looking in the rear view mirror. “Actually, astronomy is a bit of a hobby of mine. I just have binoculars but I like seeing what I can spot. Especially in the winter - like the Orion nebula. But I suppose it’s bit simple for you, that sort of thing.”

“I haven’t even got a pair of binoculars,” said Nick sourly, hoping to kill the conversation and to hell with courtesy.

The turn-off for Belfry and Crawside was marked by a cast-iron sign next to a stile underneath and ancient oak. Memories flew at him; one afternoon driven by the boredom of cops and robbers they - Billy, Pamela, Derek, Joseph, Sally and himself - had blazed a trail from Thockley wood through the fields behind Belfry to this stile for a picnic while they watched the lorries laden with sand drive slowly down to Newcastle.

Where was Pamela now, and Derek and Joseph? Billy he knew was dead. Misadventure the police said but the gossips whispered murder in spite of no more evidence than their imaginations manufactured from the strange circumstances. He was found, cold and blue, floating in the Dams.

And what of Sally? They had been the best of friends but had drawn apart in their last year of school until all they could do was argue. Considering it now he saw clear resemblances - independence, imagination, curiosity. The very characteristics which had driven him from Crawside. Perhaps they had dimmed in Sally since she was supposed to be teaching at a nearby school.

The road through Belfry took the car into the foot of the valley and across the last bridge over the burn immediately opposite the quarry yard - now the entrance to a corporation rubbish dump. Stripped of their machinery the remaining hoppers seemed to represent the decay in Crawside whose roofs and chimneys were now coming into view. They passed a ruined farm where, his mother had once told him, his father had worked before moving to the pit.

She hardly spoke of his father, but this one story remained of the man who had died in the mining disaster of 1960. Nick was two years old then, too young to remember the marathon of funerals but old enough to feel loss. Pits might be abandoned, quarries filled in and fields reclaimed but human suffering could not, and dead fathers could not be bidden from the grave.

The dull clunk of the doors and the short conversation when Nick paid the fare brought Jessie and Ned Norton to the door of 2 Alnwick Terrace. The garden was the same, a small patch of sallow lawn bordered by optimistic chrysanthemums struggling against the wind and poor light. Through the front windows he could see new wallpaper and a gas fire. A smokeless zone now, he realised.

His aunt, a small, smiling woman with grey hair rushed down the path, smoothing her pinney, to embrace him. Ned, only slightly taller, stood behind wearing a grin which banished the wrinkles from a face which had seen years of grim labour. As usual his hands were in his pockets rattling his change.

“Come in lad,” he said

TWO

Rising steeply out of the southern side of the Tyne valley the glacially carved hills of Belfry Heights were

a microcosm of the surrounding Durham and Northumberland countryside. Tidy arable fields wove their patterns between the deciduous woods and coniferous plantations, from Belfry in the east to Highgate moors in the west where the land dropped again into north Durham. Uniting this landscape like a natural theme, Belfry burn flowed eastwards down a long, shallow valley that ambled across the middle of the Heights. Its waters gathered in marshes on Highgate moors then trickled into a dense pine wood out of which it tumbled to follow its course to Thockley wood where it spilled into the Dams.

There was hardly a village, major or minor, that did not boast of once having a colliery and some of the more populous, like Low Hinton, Charfield or Dipley, had had two. Now they were all closed, exhausted or uneconomic; their only memorials faded brick buildings used by small businesses, or incongruous mounds landscaped with thin grass and under-nourished saplings. Other than coal, the heights yielded sand in enormous quantities. Two vast quarries at Low Hinton and Gannis End were still being worked, though less was taken out each year, while a third, near Crawside, had become a corporation tip in the early seventies.

Although the population fluctuated - from youngsters longing to leave to newly weds escaping from Newcastle to the country - there was still an element of the past that clung to the villages, more alive than in the sepia photographs of local history books.

“This is the spot,” said Andy triumphantly, his hands on his hips. He was standing like a conqueror on a bare patch of sandy soil by a gully, surrounded on three sides by bushes. Chris was sitting with his legs dangling over the crumbling edge in the shade of a gorse, sucking his thumb where it had been punctured by a thorn.

“Yes,” agreed Chris, inspecting the blood trickling out of the wound. “Methy won’t be able to see us, and the door can come out in the trench.” Both boys peered into the gully, considering the practicability. Not far away on the tip a lorry sounded its horn.

They were in the middle of one of the green islands of gorse and scrub which were successfully reclaiming that part of the quarry not yet filled in by the tip.

“It’s not a trench,” Andy pointed out finally with the air of an expert. “It’s a crevasse!” Chris shook his head: the gully was only five feet deep.

“No. They’re cracks that open in the ground during earthquakes,” he argued, “like in San Fransico. This was probably carved out by rain.” He flexed his thumb, wondering if gangrene was fatal.

“Hey, by a monsoon, you mean!” cried Andy.

“Sort of - or at least a few days downpour.”

“So, it’s a gully then.” Reason had triumphed. Andy shaded his eyes and peered over the gorse toward the tip. Seagulls scattered from a lorry backing up across the rubbish.

A trampling in the bushes behind followed by a string of curses brought Patrick out into the open, his face bore two scratches and his red hair was covered in feathery willowherb seeds.

“I’m not being the lookout anymore,” he complained, wiping the dust from his hands onto his jeans. “There’s no chance the Stokoes will find us here.”

“Scared of being by yourself, Pat?” teased Andy.

“Who, me? Not likely.”

“I think we’re alright anyway,” added Chris.

“Yes. The Stokoes are too stupid to imagine anyone would build a camp in gorse,” Andy answered confidently. “We’re surrounded by the stuff.” The last two camps they had built had been wrecked by the marauding Stokoes. Chris knew with a vengeful certainty half of them would end up in prison.

Andy and Pat had called for him shortly after breakfast. Their original plan was to go to the Ponies, a sort of open common dotted with trees at the top of the village, where there were the remains of a stone circle. To the adults of the village they were probably the waste from a worked out drift-mine, but to the children they were the location of ancient pagan sacrifices. However, Pat and Andy, embraced by a new enthusiasm had declared they were going to build a camp in the quarry instead, despite a prohibition which had been laid on the place. They had been warned many times at school to keep out of the quarry but Pat said that during the holidays the rules didn’t apply. Chris wasn’t so certain. His mother taught at Biddington Junior school, not Crawside thankfully - life would have been unbearable if his mother taught his friends too - so he was prone

to taking teachers' advice seriously. Andy and Pat perceived this as a weakness and considered it their duty to wean him down the path of rebellion. Much of the time they succeeded. So it was with an air of daring that the three of them had headed down the abandoned railway line to the quarry.

"Brilliant," said Chris, trying to forget his thumb. "So how are we going to dig the hole. Dynamite it?" Andy winked.

"No problem, senior," he said, holding up a finger to indicate the possession of secret knowledge. "We've been saving this up." He and Pat disappeared into the bushes.

Chris stood up and idly pulled at a stem of grass, started to chew it and wondered what the others were up to. Probably another mad idea of Andy's.

Thanks to a series of madcap ideas from Andy, these summer holidays had been the best ever. The catalogue began immediately after term ended with a dam across the burn, then, when that was washed away, the three of them had built a rabbit hutch with two fish boxes. Chris's rabbit had voted this a failure because of the lingering odour, so they had moved on to map out the drains at the back of Alnwick Terrace by using two pieces of bent copper wire as water diviners. They got a map but whether it bore any relationship to the subterranean reality was a question they dropped in favour of opening a coke mine on the railway line. This was Pat's brainwave. It would make them rich, he said.

It didn't. The enterprise collapsed along with one of their tunnels when it was pointed out that the "coke" was cinder used to build the embankment. And lastly, over the weekend, they had hung a rope swing across the Dene. This too ended abruptly when the rope was shredded. Pat suspected the Stokoes but Chris wasn't so sure. Kids from Belfry also played in Thockley wood.

Chris began to feel uneasy. The noise of the lorries and the distant shouting seemed to emphasise an uncanny silence he couldn't describe. The gulls weren't screaming. No birds sang, that was it. Nervously he surveyed the valley and felt the pocket of silence expand, bringing with it a vague slowness. The tip, the valley, even the air presented itself like a watercolour on gauze through which he could see a deeper blue of another sky bending over tall trees clumped in swaying grass. He was hot too, and the feeling became more concrete as if the landscape beyond was washing away his surroundings.

There was movement to the right. Scared witless, he spun round, tripped and tumbled into the gully. A blurred figure clutching something - he couldn't make out what - peered down at him. Chris shook his head. There was a snap - quick, certain - and the quarry solidified.

Andy, who was standing on the edge of the gully holding a rusty spade, was laughing at the effect of his entrance.

"What's up with you," he asked. "You look like Methy's caught you with a dirty book...hey, you haven't found one, have you?"

"No," Chris replied sharply, brushing sand from his jeans but not without noticing how much his hands were shaking. His face was sticky with sweat. Pat dropped the pick he was carrying and gave Chris a hand up.

"I must have been daydreaming," explained Chris. Yes, that was it. Bloody funny daydream though.

"What about?" asked Pat.

"Nothing much," Chris answered. He still wasn't sure. "Where did you get them? They're brilliant," he continued enthusiastically, referring to the spade and pick, hoping to change the subject and divert his mind. "They're just what we need."

"Found them last night on the tip. That's what gave us the idea for the camp." Andy enjoyed explaining his own cleverness. "You can go first since we went and got them."

"I think he should dig all morning," threatened Pat.

"Not likely." Chris was still jittery.

"Okay, okay, just joking. Anyway, it's an honour to break the ground first."

Chris managed a laugh, took the pick and swung it above his shoulders. "I dig this camp in the names of Chris Williams, Andy Fawcett and Pat Hall." The pick pierced the sandy soil easily and Chris vigorously carried on, breaking up the surface.

"Anyway, why were you so scared?" Andy tried again.

Chris wiped his brow with the back of his hand. "Dunno. Sometimes it gets a bit spooky round here by yourself."

"Yeah, I know what you mean," Pat said, unexpectedly sympathetic. "Nobody's going to get us, though."

They only go for little kids anyway. And it only happens near roads. Like the policeman said, never take lifts from strangers - cos they need cars for a quick getaway. Can't see any cars here."

"There's a knackered one by the burn." Chris pointed out seriously.

"Fat lot of use that is," said Andy, then struck by an idea. "But what if it's full of zombies and werewolves out to eat people. It would be dangerous then."

"Zombies and werewolves don't eat people," corrected Pat. He growled, bent his back and clawed the air. "They turn people into monsters like them." He lurched on top of Chris.

"Get knotted." Chris thrust him off.

"Hey, do you think Granny Luce's dogs are werewolves?" declared Andy. "She hasn't got much money, so what does she feed them on? Kids - that's what. I bet she drags them to her place where the smell kills them. Then she strips the flesh from the bones."

"So what does she do with the clothes?" Pat was intrigued.

"She brings them to the tip at midnight. I've seen her go for walks after dark carrying bin liners. Full too. Weird, eh? I think the police should search granny Luce's"

"They'd need a warrant to do that," Chris pointed out, trying to introduce an element of rationality and struggling with a root at the same time.

"Well, clever clogs, when they warrant it, I bet they find the bones of that kid who disappeared. Snatched in broad daylight by red-eyed wolves. OOOWWWH!" He collapsed laughing.

"It's not funny," responded Chris seriously. "My mum knows Sarah Gill's mum. She says she's distraught."

"What's that?" Pat was puzzled.

"Something you can't get over."

"Like one of life's hurdles?"

"Sort of, only it makes you cry a lot," Chris explained.

Sarah Gill, well known for her red dungarees, had been in the infants' school. All three remembered Easter when she vanished: taken, everybody said. A febrile dread had settled on the school, made poignant by the elliptical warnings of the policeman who'd lectured the assembly about not taking lifts from strangers. Also, they must never, ever play alone.

Chris tried to concentrate on the digging but he couldn't help thinking about Sarah's little friends holding hands and crying in the playground. After a while he put the pick down and stepped back to admire his work. He thought it was impressive.

Andy, who obviously didn't, sniffed imperiously and picked up the spade as Chris collapsed onto his back.

"Water..water.." he gasped, trying to sound like Indiana Jones.

"Pathetic." Pat wasn't impressed. Chris ignored him and fell into silence. The memory of the shifting landscape troubled him. No, it was just a daydream, he tried to persuade himself. I was just tired and dropped off. Or perhaps it was the sun - they say it affects people in funny ways. Yes, that was it.

Pat saw he was withdrawn and tried a joke. "Hey, what do you call a boomerang that doesn't come back?"

Chris moved his head abruptly but didn't reply.

"A stick," laughed Pat.

"Shh, somebody's coming." Chris strained to listen.

"Bugger," muttered Andy, slipping the spade under a bush. Pat dived for the pick.

"Bet it's the Stokoes," he said as they retreated into the gully.

"It's Granny Luce and a werewolf dog," said Andy.

"Shut up," hissed Chris. "We must have made too much noise."

"Shit."

But any further curse Andy might have volunteered was scared out of him by a bobbing flash of grey moving toward the gully to block their escape. They stopped and turned, determined to dash into the gorse when a figure, clad in a dirty grey overcoat and a flat cap, appeared at the entrance in front of them.

"What are you three doing here?" asked a wheezing, gravelly voice. The boys stood still. The watchie had caught them.

"Sorry, Meth, er, Mr Nottely," stammered Chris. "We were taking a short cut from the burn..er.."

"Cos we're late for dinner," Andy filled in. Pat stood nervously on one leg, nodding in agreement.

George Nottely who had suffered the nickname Methy - after Methuselah - since the pit disaster when his hair had turned prematurely grey, giving him the patina of old age, regarded them suspiciously. Everyone called him that but since his real age had caught up with his hair he was less inclined to tolerate the joke. Especially from cheeky bairns.

"Can we go, then. We're in a hurry," Chris tried again.

"You'll go with my boot up your backsides," he wheezed. "You two as well." Andy and Pat looked up from their shoes. "If I catch you here again during the week I'll lock you in my hut till the police get here. You're mother's wouldn't like that, would they?"

Andy attempted to back Chris up by explaining they had been playing in Thockley wood. Methy breathed in sharply, his lungs rasping with the effort. The boys thought he was going to say something adult and dull.

"Keep away from that place, lads," he said, fulfilling their expectations. "Or I will have the police on you. Mind what I say!"

"You can't do that," protested Andy. "You're just a watchie - not a secret detective for the Heights. It's a free country and we'll go there if we want."

Chris and Pat looked away. Oh, oh, there goes Andy's big mouth again, they thought. Methy wouldn't hit us, would he? But "bugger that" was all he said as he sat on a boulder, taking out an untipped cigarette and lighting it.

"Look, lads. I don't mind yous coming over at the weekends for stuff from the tip when I've got time to keep an eye on you. There's no lorries then. But I won't have young'uns running around in the week. It's not safe. Tell you what," he added in a kindlier voice, "if you want to watch the lorries sometime, come in through the gate and see me. I'll show you where to stand. I don't mind that. But stay out of the quarry and keep away from Thockley wood. Right?"

"Right, Mister," they answered.

Methy coughed. "Good. Now bugger off." He pointed to where the railway line ran close by the quarry's edge and watched while they walked briskly toward it.

The boys made no attempt to return to the camp, so they made their way up the long, steep bank and hopped onto the railway line. It was nearly dinner time anyway.

"Do you think he spotted the camp?" Chris wondered.

"No, he would have said something. You know what a nosey old scroat he is," said Andy.

"Good. Then we can go back again."

"Yeah!" And they ran down the line dodging bullets and laser blasts.

From the bottom of a refuse heap Methy saw them slip out of sight. He smiled as he blew out a lung-full of smoke. He knew damn well he'd been the same at their age and justified another smile by realising at least he remembered it. Some blokes treated kids like an inferior species. But it was good tactics to frighten them with one hand while holding out an olive branch with the other. Building camps probably, he thought, and laughed to himself as he scrambled up the rubbish back to his hut.

When he was in short trousers the quarry had just opened, liberating a landscape of domes, mountains and craters. He could remember how exciting it was to watch the lorries when cars themselves were a novelty in Crawside. One day he and Tommy Allinson had dreamed up the mad notion that gold was buried in one of the newly excavated sand cliffs. They didn't find gold, naturally: they nearly found death. The roof of the tunnel had collapsed.

In an instant the prospecting turned as cold as the wet sand pressing down on them. He had been nearer the entrance so had managed to paw his way out and catch enough breath to dig Tommy out with his bare hands.

Gasping and crying alternately they had sworn never to dig a tunnel again. Or go down one.

But they broke their promise. Like most who didn't take a ticket to the grammar school via the eleven plus they took the cage down the pit, and twenty three years later Tommy had died in another tunnel, in the Crawside pit disaster. He himself had only just been dragged out alive and despite the relief he felt daily it still disturbed his mind. His wife was used to him catapulting himself out of bed and curling up on the floor for protection from the fireball his nightmares delivered from time to time. Nothing underground was safe.

Chris lived in a cottage absurdly joined onto the gable-end of five terraced houses and it took, a little dejectedly, the full force of the prevailing west wind. It was crowned with a converted attic which seemed to have been added as an eccentric afterthought by a Lilliputian builder, but the consolation was the view. From

the front room the whole valley could be seen.

His mum waved to the boys through the bay window from her desk.

“Hi, mam!” shouted Chris, opening the gate which creaked painfully. The boys, reminded of finger nails being dragged across a blackboard shuddered. However his mum preferred not to oil it since it gave good warning of visitors when the curtains were closed.

“We daren’t go digging this afternoon, that’s a cert,” Andy said. “Old Methy’ll be expecting us.”

“Suppose we go to Thockley wood instead,” suggested Pat. “We can take my nockies.” He had been given a pair of 8 x 40 binoculars for his tenth birthday. “No short cuts though. We don’t want to make Methy suspicious.”

“Suppose so,” moaned Andy. It was a long walk.

“Tell you what,” Pat whispered, “tomorrow we’ll go and watch the lorries like Methy said. Once we’ve convinced him we’re promising to be good we can sneak back and finish the camp.”

“Brill.” agreed Chris, mainly because he’d concocted the same plan but hadn’t been given the chance to mention it.

“Staying for dinner?” Chris’s mum asked, entering the kitchen.

Pat and Andy declined. Their mothers were expecting them back at one.

Chris already had the fridge door open. “Can we have some coke?”

“On condition you play in the garden. I’m preparing some lessons for next term.” The boys looked glum on being reminded the holidays would be over in a couple of weeks.

“Where have you been this morning?” asked Chris’s mum.

“Just around.”

“Where’s around? I’ve never been there,” she came back sharply.

“Just around the railway line, Mrs Williams,” answered Pat whose parents, like Andy’s, laid no prohibition on where he played as long as it was with friends. The vigilance following Sarah Gill’s disappearance was receding.

“Yeah, at the bottom of our garden.” added Andy.

Chris pulled at Pat’s sleeve. “Come on, lets get the Transformers.”

She followed them into the lounge where Chris was rooting in some boxes in his toy cave. Adult eyes saw it as an untidy partitioned cupboard under the stairs.

“What are doing this afternoon?” she asked.

“Nothing much...”

“Good. You can come to grandad’s grave if you like. It was his birthday today. Gran’s not well so I’m taking the flowers.”

“Actually, we were going bird spotting,” Chris answered, hoping it was enough to discharge him.

“Okay, but keep away from the quarry.”

Death was something Chris’s mind was beginning to accept as a steely reality rather than a cosmetic translation which happened to everyone else but him. His mother knew he found it frightening to grapple with the possibility of absolute oblivion so she didn’t press him to go. In his own time, she thought, then it’ll be girls next. Probably the young buck is more advanced than me at that age.

Set in a depression between the church and a hill of ferns and rotting oaks, it was too plain, too empty to be a cemetery; or to be comforting. There were no trees or bushes by the paths running through the graves to break the monotony, just wire litter baskets. The entrance, an arched wrought-iron gate stood in a lay-by at the side of the main road, while the opposite end, open to the wind, dropped out of sight to the Low Hinton road. Chris’s mum shut the gate, the clank of the handle breaking the silence.

Her father was as much a victim of the pit as those who died in that dreadful Easter of 1960. He had been rostered to a different shift but nevertheless it had caught up with him twenty five years later. Coughing blood and black sputum, pneumoconiosis - the Dust - had choked the life out of him.

The gate opened behind her. She looked back, brushing her dark hair out of her eyes and saw a tall figure she didn’t recognise, slim in a pale shirt and jeans, carrying a bunch of chrysanthemums toward the corner sheltered by the hill. She turned to her father’s grave and put her carnations in the vase.

“Happy birthday, dad. Sorry mum can’t be here. Next year, perhaps.” She doubted this. Arthritis was curtailing the exercise her mother’s heart needed and next Christmas would very probably be her last. Making her way sadly to the entrance she remembered how her father was the only one who had really stood by her

when Christopher was born.

She was at the gate when a voice stopped her.

“Sally?” he asked, tentatively. Even close up Nick wasn’t sure. Yes, the hair was the same colour, but instead of a plump, awkward teenager an adult, stylish figure looked at him questioningly. She wore no bra and he tried not to notice.

“Hello, Nick,” she replied mildly, controlling her surprise. “What are you doing here?”

“Visiting my father’s grave.”

Sally nodded understandingly. There was a moment’s uncomfortable silence as they went through the gate.

“I’m here on a working holiday,” he explained. “What are you up to these days?” It was better than nothing.

“Teaching at Biddington.”

“So I heard.”

“Then why ask?” she retorted, flashing him a citric grin.

“Just to annoy you. Old habits die hard.” Nick drifted back to when they had last seen each other: thirteen years ago I was festooned with acne and she was as round as the Michelin man. What was left of their circle of sixth form friends had met in a pub in Highgate during the first summer holidays from university and college, when already the marks of separation were showing. After a year in London performing in the fringe Nick was complaining about how provincial they all were until Sally shut him up by pouring a glass of beer over his head and walking out. Amid the embarrassment and laughter his only consolation was he had seen the envy in her eyes.

“Want a lift?” he asked, retreating from his reverie.

“Is it safe?” She pointed to a ford van held together by a jigsaw of bodywork and rust.

“If the brakes fail there’s no one I’d rather die with.”

“Charming,” muttered Sally, allowing Nick to open the door for her. “So this pile of junk is the rewards of TV celebrity?” Nick winced. She had other weapons in her arsenal other than beer glasses.

“No, it’s my uncle’s,” he answered, coaxing the sparkplugs to live up to their name. “Where to?”

“Hedgebrow.”

The van pulled out in the direction of the three isolated terraces which lay like an appendage to the main body of the village.

“My son and I have the white cottage on the end,” she told him.

“My mother never mentioned that,” replied Nick caught between surprise and trying to keep the van on the road. “Before she moved to Nottingham she kept me up to date with all the gossip. Was he born after that?”

“No, before. But then she wouldn’t mention it, would she? I didn’t marry the father,” Sally explained. “Is she still a religious nut?”

“Er..yes..” was all he could articulate, surprised by the revelation and the sudden resurrection of their teenage banter.

“Unmarried mothers are still anathema up here,” continued Sally.

“Particularly to religious nuts?”

“Sorry, but yes,” she answered. “Oh they’re full of superficial kindness but mostly they keep their distance - like you’d contracted the black death. Don’t touch, they say. You learn the signs.”

“I can understand. What about our generation, the people we knew? They can’t be like that?”

“Our generation’s gone, Nick. Ben, Carol, Derek, Pam, Joseph, they’ve all left. And the few who’ve remained have regressed to the ways of their fathers.” She paused then added in a different, less bitter tone, “Did your mother tell you about Billy?”

“Yes,” he answered then fell into memories of them playing together - on the railway line, in the valley, or swimming in the Dams. Nick lifted himself from his past and continued the conversation before the silence became embarrassing: “You were keen to work abroad. What happened?”

She explained very casually how she left college finding herself pregnant. Once she’d decided not to marry the father (he was okay but dull) she came home and tried to find a job while her parents looked after Christopher.

“Yes, I wanted to work overseas,” she sighed and wound the window down. “One day maybe. But money

and circumstances are too tight for the luxury of dreams. Besides, I think we've all grown up. Except you."

"The odds favour that opinion." The van drew up outside the cottage. "Pretty," he added, staring at its whitewashed walls.

Sally got out. "Knock it off, Nick. If you think it's twee, say so."

"No, honestly, it's very nice."

"Come in for a coffee if you like," she suggested with a genuine smile. "Take a few draughts of nostalgia."

"No thanks, Sally. Another time," he replied, trying to sound regretful. "I've got a zillion letters to write."

As he drove off he caught sight of Sally in his rear view mirror opening her door. She was laughing gently to herself.