

I am, I was, a divorce detective. You, the wider public, would probably have called me a private detective - with all the bogus glamour bestowed by writers of fiction upon that shadowy profession. No Phillip Marlowe me.

Nowadays solicitors call us 'Enquiry Agents'. Back then I called myself, in the phone book and legal directories, a Security Consultant. Which was the work I most preferred. Gadgets. What I was given mostly was divorce work.

This was, several lifetimes ago, in the mid-seventies, when the law and attitudes to marriage were slightly different. Divorce then was just starting to become popular; and the legal profession was rising to the occasion. Making the rules as usual as they went along. Law of Precedent, the legal profession reverentially refers to this. Jobs for the boys, print your own money, it's called by those who have to foot the bills.

Before The Family Act the law for obtaining a divorce was, simply, this. If the marriage could be proved to have irretrievably broken down, which was generally taken as 2 years officially living apart, then by mutual consent a divorce was granted.

When a couple are intent, however, on leaving one another mutual consent is pretty hard to come by. Passions are usually running high, there's often others involved - or suspected - and the pair are sick of the sight of one another and want shot as quick as poss.

Or both have set up home with new partners, extra-marital babies are on the way, houses have to be divided up, maintenance for offspring of the marriage is required... thus a rapid resolution is desired. The quickest way of dissolving a marriage then was by proof of what the courts called 'habitual adultery'. Which is where I came in.

Of course there were other grounds for divorce - mental and physical cruelty, gross behaviour, non-consummation, desertion. But none of those required my participation. Adultery did. Because back in the seventies joint admissions of adultery weren't sufficient. Third party corroboration had to be obtained.

I was the third party who went along to the address given and, initially unbeknownst to the adulterous couple, I established that they were living together 'as man and wife'.

That objectively done, I confronted the couple with my observations of their domestic habits; and with luck and persuasion I got a signed confession from both.

None of this meant that I had to climb trees or ladders, leave listening devices in bedrooms, or hide in wardrobes and leap out with flash camera at moment of orgasm.

Sufficient for the court it was to prove that they had spent the night together in the same house. I was more a functionary of the court, a professional witness, rather than a paid snooper.

Most people owned cars then. Most people, if they had garages, didn't use them, parked their cars in the street outside. All courts accepted, as proof both parties had spent the night in the house together, a chalk line drawn down the side of the tyre and out at right angles along the road. If the line was still unbroken in the morning it meant that the car had been there all night. (Try it yourself - chalk a line, drive away, and then park with your tyre in exactly the same position as before. Near impossible if you know what you're trying to do. Impossible if you don't.)

Nor is this practice unique to Private Detectives. American traffic wardens used to chalk tyres to keep tabs on overstaying parked cars.

Of course there were exceptions to the general practice of tyre-chalking. I'd have to wait outside the house of a carless couple the whole night, make notes of what time both entered, what time both left. Fortunately in my rural patch, Somerset, the bus services were and still are appalling, so most couples had to have at least one car between them. I did once though chalk a fat man's bicycle.

Stories there are many. To this story.

Names have been changed to protect myself from libel writs. I'm a cautious man. (Nothing to stop you though being your own detectives and guessing which of these Somerset towns are which.) I've called this one Woollaton.

Woollaton was a small brick town of very few souls. Several thousand people, but very few souls.

This adulterous couple lived on a newish open-plan estate on the edge of town, had newish cars. His was a gold-coloured Audi, four silver rings on the radiator, last year's registration. He parked it overnight in the road outside.

Hers was an off-white Renault 14 of earlier vintage. She parked it in the short drive to the up-and-over garage door.

That German car did not endear me to the subject under observation. What was wrong with buying British? Although I'd had a posting to Germany, and while there had had no option but to buy German, back in Britain I did not buy German unless there was absolutely no alternative. I never bought Japanese.

For the last three nights I'd chalked the Audi's off-side rear tyre at or about midnight, had come back and checked it at six. Which meant, the drive home taking an hour, for the last three nights I'd had 4 hours sleep. I'd made it up in the daytimes and evenings, an hour here or there, but it's never the same as a good solid 8 hours. Name of my chosen game though.

I dozed behind the wheel this morning in the car.

My car was a British Leyland dark brown Maxi. Which then was the perfect car for my job. A bit heavy on petrol, but with mileage going against expenses that didn't matter; and it had a good powerful engine, 1750. Also, importantly, it had plenty of space inside.

I'm six foot one. On those jobs where I had to wait outside a whole night I put the back of the passenger seat down flat and lowered the whole of the backseat. That gave me enough room, wrapped in a couple of blankets, to stretch out. (I kept an alarm clock in the car, took a thermos and pee-jar when I knew I'd be overstaying.)

This morning I sat upright, dozing.

I've often thought, with my face and body, I was born to be a policeman. Imagine me big-boned with a flat MP's cap pulled down over my eyes, round chin jutting. I don't wear a cap now, favour anoraks and slacks for working, got a dark grey suit for court appearances, jumpers and cords for country walks and country pubs. Molly, my girlfriend of 3 years, kept trying to get me into jeans and tight shirts. But I knew what I was, and I wasn't going to be made ridiculous by fashion.

By this time though Molly had given up trying to change me; and my clothes had become a public grumble, public joke.

That was the outside of me. Inside..?

Inside I was then, as I am now, my history. And my history is what this book is going to try to tell you.

Sufficient for now the formfilling facts of my existence - name: George Hawkins; age: 34; status: orphan. So far as I then knew.

When I was sixteen my father died and I joined the Army, became a Military Policeman. I was 25 when my time in the Army was up and I left to join an old friend who'd set up a Security Consultancy. After 4 years he moved North after a woman, and the practice entire became mine.

This was the anxiously self-employed man who sat this morning, nodding into and out of dreams, parked around the corner, slightly uphill, with a view through glistening shrubs across the corner to the gold-coloured Audi.

The morning was clear and dry, clouds making shapes along the dark horizon. There'd been a couple of showers during the night, and now all was bright and fresh. Every time the car windows misted up I put on the cold air fan, opened my window, and closed it again as soon as the windows were clear.

The estate, latest to be built, was on the side of a hill on the edge of town. Like most of Somerset the hill sloped down to a comparatively long level bit which led, eventually, to some more hills.

I was parked on the edge of the estate. To my right a woman in baggy blue trousers, baggy blue sweatshirt and white hair, was walking down across a field. A fit 50 in wet-shined wellies, she had a brown and white dog, a spaniel cross, that went down the field ahead of her, diving in and out of the hedge.

The reason I was hanging on this morning - I'd already checked the chalk line, noted times - was that I felt that I had neglected this job, couldn't readily put a face to the case even though I'd been supplied with photographs. (Always at least one of those photographs is a wedding photograph. Bitterness itself.)

Most divorces though are not about revenge, but rights to property, both moral and legal. And in divorce children are property too. Not that there were any children in this case.

I'd already had one look at both Michael Alexander Probyn and Anne Marie Blatts, had watched them both arrive home from work, he a good hour and a half after her. And she'd been rushing around late.

If asked, before that morning, I would have described them as a young professional couple, mid-twenties, he with dark hair, she light-to-blonde. But I couldn't, with any conviction, have picked them out of a line-up.

Mentally I was still caught up in my last job.

I'd had to work undercover in a cattlefood factory. This was in the days before BSE scares, so you can imagine the offal stink. In that respect I, Molly too, was very glad it was all over; but I'd enjoyed the challenge. I'd already fingered the three responsible, and they'd all three been suspended pending enquiries. Which enquiries had already been made, were simply awaiting my dates and times report.

The job had given me some satisfaction. Management nor auditors had been able to locate the fiddle. Which was no surprise as the three had kept it tightly to themselves; and one had been a manager. Nor had I got anywhere near sussing it; not until I'd looked at the factory's sickness records for the four years of the 'discrepancy'.

In those four years only five men in the whole factory, musty and smelly as it was, had never had a day off sick. Two of those were cretinously old codgers. Of the other three one was a driver, one worked in the loading bay, and one was a manager. The link man, Mr Loading Bay, had even come to work when he'd had a broken ankle.

After that it had just been a matter of tracking through Mr Loading Bay's paperwork. Turned out to be a simple carbon paper fraud that had needed a co-operative driver and a manager to redirect the excess funds.

Auditors and owners were pleased with my work - I'd saved them forty grand that year alone - that's how greedy those fiddlers three had been getting. We didn't, however, have enough outright evidence to carry through a criminal prosecution. What we did have was enough evidence to sack all three and then hope that one of them sued for unfair dismissal. In which case, case unproven, he'd bring a police investigation for fraud down upon himself and his accomplices.

It is, however, one thing to know the ins and outs of something, and quite another to accurately describe it. Words, layout of that report, were in my head as I became aware of the man approaching his Audi.

Small wonder I hadn't been able to place him. Nil distinguishing features, slim, clipped hair, suit and tie - looked like a million others his age, race and income.

Key already in his hand he didn't notice my dark green chalk line on his rear tyre, threw his square briefcase across to the passenger seat and got in. Engine started first go.

He had to reverse a bit to get into the road. Using his wipers to clear his windscreen he went down the hill on the edge of the estate. Brakelights came on before the bend.

I've been over and over what happened next, and to be fair he wasn't going fast.

His worst crime, up to that point, was that he hadn't been fully awake, wasn't paying sufficient attention to his driving. It was what he did afterwards... If then he'd acted liked a normal human being then this whole story would be different.

That long bend, from the new estate into the old country road with its high hedges, was blind.

As the Audi's brakelights came on at the bottom of the estate hill the white-haired woman was getting down off the gate at the bottom of the field and trying to grab hold of her dog. She missed. The dog ran into the road. The slight twist toward the sound said that the woman could hear the car coming.

The gold Audi had disappeared between the hedges.

The woman ran into the road after the dog. The driver braked. But, with the road being so narrow, and with her being bang in the middle of the road, the driver had no chance.

She was still chasing the dog. The offside wing caught her left leg and upended her. Her head hit the ground beside the driver's door. By which time the car had come to a stop. No skid marks. The car, as I said, hadn't been going fast.

An accident, a mischance, misfortune. It was what happened next that had the alarm bells ringing.

First the driver, Michael Alexander Probyn, wound down his window and took a moment to study the vital signs of the woman lying in the road. When he looked up from her I could see that he was listening.

I sat deeper back in the car so that my white face wouldn't be seen.

Michael Alexander Probyn let the car roll forward just far enough past the prostrate woman so that when he got out he wouldn't step on her. Once out of the car, from a standing position, he examined the woman again; then he went to the front of the Audi, bent over and looked for damage.

The dog was still running off along the road. Heading for home I guessed.

Standing upright this driver took his time - I could almost hear him in his bearing instructing himself to think. And something else I saw - the bearing of a professional, of a person used to acting in emergencies, to making decisions. So did Michael Alexander Probyn stand over the body of that fiftyish woman estimating the chances of his having been seen.

Nothing was coming towards him from where the dog had gone. Only half a mile that way was the junction.

Nothing was coming from the estate, nor along the old road which joined the estate road at the bottom of the hill. The state houses were all blind end on to him, had been built facing one another across the hill. Only me in the line of parked cars could see him. And I, inside the brown dark of my brown car, was holding my breath.

Believing the accident unwitnessed Michael Alexander Probyn stepped over the old woman and swung back into his car, engine still running and, not skidding, he drove off. I let out my breath.

A blue Cortina came out from the old road junction at the bottom of the hill, stalled noisily to a halt just short of the old woman.

This driver's reactions were different. He ran stumbling to the body, stared at it, at his car, backwards around the road for help, and then he took off on foot back up the road. As he ran he yelled,

"Help! Help me! Accident! There's been an accident!"

Still shouting he banged on the door of the first house at the bottom of the hill.

An older man was just leaving for work. His wife came out and went quickly in again. The two men marched back to the old woman. A white Escort came down from the estate, came up behind the two men at the Cortina. The Cortina driver and the man from the estate knelt beside the old woman. The woman from the estate left the house with a folded blanket. Nurse? Ambulance called?

I looked across to Michael Probyn's house. His cohabitee, Anne Marie Blatts, had just got into her off-white Renault. She reversed it out of the short drive and back up the road, came around the corner below me with her long hair done up in a sort of bun. At the bottom of the hill she braked and signaled left, went back along the old road unaware that anything untoward had happened.

More people arrived at the accident, sought not to get involved, wanted to get away without seeming callous, didn't want to be late for work; so they reversed to the bottom on the hill and went along the back road.

I did a three-point turn and went back up a narrow lane just wide enough for the Maxi, came out on the road to Esterbury that the other road joined at the bottom of the hillside.

The accident had stunned me. In one respect it was removed from me, had all happened at a distance. In another aspect I was a part of the accident in that I was its only witness, could not therefore be separated from it.

I knew, before I did that three point turn, that I should have reported what I had seen to the police. I knew that I should have waited until the police had arrived. Or that I should now turn the car around and go to them.

But if I went to the police now and told them of Michael Alexander Probyn I would be destroying my own adultery case. And I only needed another night and then to confront the pair of them with my evidence. After that I'd parcel up my story and make a gift of Michael Alexander Probyn to the constabulary.

That's what I'd decided by the time I'd traveled the slightly undulating road to Esterbury.

Somerset is all hills - Polden, Blackdown, Quantock, Mendip, Brendon - all joined together by flattish bits. As I went along the flat bits and up over the hills to Tonevil I acknowledged that something else had stopped me instantly and automatically volunteering my testimony to the police. Some deepseated unease.

Michael Alexander Probyn had not panicked. He hadn't been pleased that he'd driven into the woman, but neither had he gone into blind headless chicken state like the man in the Cortina. Adrenalin up he had computed the odds on his being caught, of his having been seen. No self-recriminations. No pity. Only thinking what best to do next. For himself.

I knew the look of him. The last time I'd seen men like him had been in the Army, young up-on-their-toes NCOs and spanking brand new subalterns, all of them enjoying guns and unarmed combat, ways of killing. Michael Alexander Probyn had only looked at the woman to ascertain her condition, not out of compassion.

I let the scene play over and over in my mind. Not even when he'd first left the car had Michael Alexander Probyn displayed any sign of anger, irritation even, let alone dismay. Just stepping past, making the quick inspection of the front wing, then the slow look round

for witnesses, which made me certain that he hadn't seen me; and then his smoothly leaving for work.

What work?

Driving home, tired, wishing my brain awake, I was convinced of one thing - that I had neglected the Probyn/Blatts case. Which was another factor stopping me contacting the police. Which I again told myself to do. And, had I known the case inside out, I'm confident that's what I would have done.

Instead I decided - I was a man then quick to prejudice - that I disliked Michael Alexander Probyn; and as soon as I got the case courtworthy for his deserted wife I would enjoy dropping him in it with the police as well.

The police, I knew, were not going to be pleased with me. So I cursed Michael Alexander Probyn because he could easily sour my contacts with them. And up until then I had maintained a good working relationship with most of the stations on my patch.

That was the worry foremost in my mind when I parked the Maxi on the slope outside my Tonevil house. Which was a small end of brick terrace with its own garage. That was the worry as, just after ten, I put my key in the lock and pushed open my front door.

Soon as I was indoors I knew something was amiss. Change in the light? More light? Thinking I was just spooked, overtired, I went through to the kitchen.

Molly had left my mail on the kitchen table. Bills. Nothing for her: she usually left hers open on the table.

Something was different. Again I looked around. The door from the kitchen through to the garage was slightly open.

The garage was my workshop/office. From outside it still looked like a garage, but I'd bricked up the inside of the up-and-over door, had plastered it, laid a wooden floor, put in a ceiling with fibreglass lagging, and had built worktops all around the walls. The ironframed window looked out to the paved patch of back garden.

The yale lock on the door had been kicked open.

Now it was my turn to stand still like Michael Alexander Probyn and think hard and listen and look.

Nothing that I could see in the kitchen was out of place. Molly, as usual, had done the washing-up before she'd left. I couldn't hear, couldn't sense anyone else inside the house.

I pushed open the workshop door. It went all the way open, began to swing slowly closed. All the worktops in there had been disturbed.

When the door bumped closed I again waited and listened. Could hear no-one. I pushed the door open again. When it started to swing closed I rushed into the room.

No-one there.

Straightaway I saw my lump hammer and chisel by the safe, the raw metal dents in its green door. The safe was bolted into the floor. They'd tried to chisel out the brass fittings too. (Pure ornament, any experienced safecracker would have told them.)

A soldering iron, possibly a couple of screwdrivers, were missing. Nothing else in there that I could see. Transistors and circuit boards had been pushed and spilled all over the place.

Careful not to touch the lump hammer or chisel I unlocked the safe. All papers and 'sensitive' equipment were in place. Standing I scanned the worktops for anything untoward when the police came.

My new electronic typewriter hadn't been taken. Nor my old drill. Too bulky I supposed for a singlehanded thief. Filing cabinet was still locked. No attempt even to lever it open. They hadn't been after information.

Careful now not to splodge my fingerprints over the thief's I returned to the kitchen. Coming from this angle I noticed that Molly's small radio was missing.

No broken windows in the kitchen. Back door not forced. All living room windows intact too. Telly still there.

Guessed now how he'd got in. Opportunist.

I immediately swore at Molly for not shutting the door behind her. Security-minded I always locked the Chubb mortice behind me on the front door. Molly, except when I'd had a go at her, usually only pulled the yale to behind her. Only she didn't always give it a hard enough pull and a couple of times I'd found it, like the thief, open.

The thief had closed the front door behind him: I'd only had to use my Yale key to get in.

Standing at the bottom of the stairs I looked to see what it was had made me think there was something different about the house when first I'd come in. The bulk of Molly's coats had gone, letting in more light. Thief must therefore have had a car. Why then hadn't he taken the telly and the typewriter?

Both bedrooms were a mess, all drawers pulled out, turned upside-down, and chucked. I stood in the doorways and simply looked. My store of readies, about 300 in notes, had gone from one drawer. (I'd had my credit card on me.) Molly's jewellery box had gone. So too my clock radio. Something else too..?

My suitcase. Cheeky bastard had nicked my suitcase from the spare room to carry off his plunder.

I went back downstairs to call Molly, let her know before the police, thank her for letting the thief in.

The girl in reception recognized my voice. (I was always ringing to let Molly know what time I'd be home, was home, had got home...)

"So what's up?" she said, lighthearted.

"Plenty. Molly'll tell you. She free?"

"She's not here." the girl sounded surprised.

"Didn't come in today?"

"No." Eager edge for scandal in her voice now.

"I'll call back."

A couple of brass ornaments had gone. And the domed brass clock with its swinging balls. Hadn't liked that anyway, had been Molly's mother's...

Rubbing at my chin I went back up the stairs, looked in the bathroom. Molly's toothbrush was there. Molly was fussy about her teeth.

I looked in our bedroom again. I couldn't be sure but it looked like some of Molly's clothes were missing. Why?

Had Molly left me, left home, before the burglary? In that case she'd have taken her toothbrush.

Had Molly been kidnapped? Preposterous, I dismissed the thought. Mine though is/was a preposterous profession.

I called the police.