The Nightshelter Committee Meeting

by Jill Gossling

Early evening September 9th 2019

The committee met in the drawing room of the Rectory, the large ramshackle home of Daphne Dagnall and her brother the Rev. Tom Dagnall, where they lived side by side, like two peas in a vast drum. Daphne sat in an armchair which had seen better days, nervously twisting the hem of her crumpled tweed skirt, that unbeknown to her, had been donated to the church's jumble sale three years ago by the Doctor's wife as a possible lining for a dog's bed.

The room was extremely cold, even though the villagers were enjoying an unexpected Indian summer. Some of them were now wishing they had thrown on a few more layers, ruminating on the fact that it was surely warmer outside. With lavender knuckled hands, clasped around chipped mugs of weak Nescafé, they watched the dying sun set in the west, the last of the warm rays shining through frayed net curtains.

Christabel Gellibrand gazed scornfully at the dried flowers and pampas grass arranged 'artfully' in the empty fireplace, which rustled in the draught as Miss Grundy and Miss Lee entered the room, hooting and cooing their apologies for being late, and explaining they had just come from the church where they had been putting the finishing touches to the flower arrangements for Sunday.

"I do hope you have left the pine cones for *me* to arrange Flavia." said Mrs Gellibrand, priding herself on the fact that church members had praised her often for her *spiritual gifting,* when it came to the arrangements of woodland flora and fauna for Harvest Festivals Past.

"Oh yes," twittered Miss Lee, speaking for Miss Grundy, "and we've left you the most absorbent oasis. For the Chrysanthemums."

Mrs Gellibrand nodded her approval; Miss Grundy and Miss Lee nodded in relief. The two ladies nodding up and down with their tightly curled white haired heads, reminded Tom that he really should harvest the cauliflowers in the Rectory's vegetable patch, before the Nightshelter began in December.

"I wonder," thought Emma Howick, "…are these women aware that the flower rota was formulated by men after the Reformation… to subdue troublesome educated women returning from exile with Calvin back to the Elizabethan court?" She wrote in her commonplace book:

'Women Who Read Are Dangerous...?'

Underlining it twice, as a possible title for a future essay.

"Yes," dreamed Tom, "…cauliflower cheese …slightly browned on the top …"

"Tom!" said Daphne bringing him back from his reverie. "Shall we begin the meeting? We've a lot to discuss and we need to draw up some sort of rota…"

"Put me down for the catering." drawled Adam Prince adjusting his jeans, which seemed to have shrunk in the wash. He thought casually of the rainbow trout caviar he'd bought at the local Deli, "*Would go nicely with Bath Olivers, a triangle of toast perhaps, the butter just kissing the surface, or a Jacobs Cream Cracker, an adequate vehicle for paste …"* Adam's only interaction with a homeless person was the shapeless bundle he'd noticed (but never spoken to or barely glanced at) sitting on the pavement in all weathers outside the train station … "*Bath Oliver's might be a bit too hard for someone who is toothless…unless sucked…ha-ha."* Laughing inwardly at his private joke, he ran his tongue triumphantly over his own dentures, flashing a grin at Miss Grundy who jumped in fright, looking momentarily like a tiny bird caught between the paws of a cat.

"I hardly think it's the time to allocate *roles*," said Avice Shrubsole whose background in social work made it imperative she *immediately* allocate herself the role of 'Nightshelter Consultant', " …we *have* to talk *logistics …* the church is nigh on impossible to *heat* as it is … the fuel bill will be *enormous,* and the wattage of the light bulbs *throughout* the *whole* church *blazing* away day and night must surely be causing some *concern…* will the church funds *absorb* the extra *cost*?*"*

*"*The Lord will provide," announced Dr Gellibrand, "eh Tom?" He cast a penetrating glance at Tom who, startled, cast around in his mind for a suitable line of scripture in response, but could think of none.

Emma volunteered to take the minutes. She was fond of Tom, who she thought was looking rather handsome in a worn kind of way and took pity on him having been challenged scripturally by Dr Gellibrand.

"Oh, would you Emma?" Said Tom, relieved. His brain had been stuck in 1 Kings for the last few seconds, namely the bit about Jezebels persecution and slaughter of the prophets. He glanced fearfully at Avice.

"I rather think that rough sleepers will prefer the church to be on the chilly side." added Martin Shrubsole, having just read a paper in The Lancet about heroin users and hypothermia, "They're used to the cold and it can be quite dangerous for ones body heat to climb rapidly causing all kinds of problems with hypotension, bradycardia, cyanosis, not to mention thermoregulation … my suggestion would be …and I'm sure Dr Gellibrand will agree with me on this point –silver foil space blankets may be a better option, cheaper too …"

Here he was interrupted by his wife, "Yes, but that's all very well Martin," said Avice, "but I for one, don't want to spend freezing cold nights in the church positively *wrapped* from head to toe in tin foil, whilst we *police* our *guests*."

'Guests' being the required term for the homeless, from the Diocese's guide – '*How to Launch a Nightshelter- December 1st –April 1st 2019*'.

"Yes," said Mrs Dyer, who had invited herself to the meeting, and had no intention of volunteering for the project, "and I'm worried about them brasses."

"What about them? Surely that's the least of our problems?" said Tamsin Barraclough lazily, whose dark frizzy hair stood up around her head as if she were holding tightly to an electric fence, this impression giving her statement more gravitas than it probably deserved.

"They'd make off with them like they did in All Saints last winter!" said Mrs Dyer. "I had it on good authority from the Evergreen Oldsters. They hid the brasses under their hoods! And a lot of them Cagoules was donated by decent Christians!"

No one assembled in the chilly drawing room challenged this stunning statement. Having adopted a '*there but for the grace of God, go I*' attitude to last years' Nightshelter being held in their neighbouring village, they had collectively proceeded not to give it another thought. They had felt it incumbent on them, however, to donate the proceeds from their Bring and Buy to go towards the acquisition of new brasses for All Saints, announcing this act of generosity in the parish magazine letter.

Tom was about to disclose some rather troubling information he'd received from the neighbouring Rector. It transpired that last winter, Miss Lickerish had presented herself to All Saints Nightshelter as 'Homeless', filled in various forms, and informed the volunteers that she was in need of a bed for the night, even though she already had a bed back at home in her cottage that she'd lived in her whole life. "Yes, rather *sad* really." the Rector of All Saints had said to Tom who had popped round to Crampton Hodnet to hand over a cheque for £37.84 from the proceeds of the Bring and Buy. "We found out in due course that she wasn't a rough sleeper, but were too late to prevent the infestation of fleas in most, if not *all*, the sleeping bags"

"*Fleas?"* Tom repeated, weakly.

"Yes," replied the Rector warming to the subject, partly due to feeling considerably lighter in spirit now the 'project' was over. He then continued to share more information than he perhaps ought, despite the Data Protection Training he had undergone prior to the 'launch' of All Saints Nightshelter.

"None of the volunteers thought to frisk her for hedgehogs. Drug paraphernalia yes, that's *de rigueur* …hedgehogs, no…didn't even cross their minds." said the Rector, in a manner suggesting that it should have done. "Still," he continued reminiscing, "she seemed to enjoy the M&S Meal Deal from the Food Bank and much appreciated a hand knitted balaclava and matching mittens on string… one of the volunteers thoughtfully threaded the mittens through the arms of a donated Cagoule," he continued, in a whisper, "replacing a rather *fragrant* woollen coat of hers which had to be *incinerated."*

But before Tom was able to regale the committee with this insight from All Saints, Robbie Barraclough woke dramatically from a beer-induced doze. The detritus from some salted peanuts were visible in his reddish beard, as he announced in an outraged clipped voice, "What about the wine?" staring hard at the group, as if daring them to accuse him of closing his eyes for a nap.

"The wine?" asked Daphne nervously. Should she have offered wine? But surely it wasn't appropriate at a committee meeting for the homeless? She knew the Barrowclough's spent every lunchtime in the pub…but surely one drinking session per day was enough… even for academics? She looked to Tom for some kind of support, trying to signal by waving a custard cream in his direction in the vain hope that he would at least fetch some Ouzo she'd brought back from Paphos. However Tom was gazing at Emma who was busy writing.

"Well…" interjected Adam "I rather think this is MY speciality." He glanced around the room searching for admiring looks, momentarily put off his stride when he saw Magdalen Raven asleep with her mouth open.

"In my opinion," he continued, undaunted, "Liebfraumilch goes with *everything*, and is fairly *cheap*… Blue Nun in particular … I'm sure our guests won't be complaining about their meal arrangements with an expert in charge. I shall only need a couple of volunteers as sous chef, to chop and sauté, and of course, a gaggle of washer-uppers." He smiled satisfactorily, leaning back gingerly, his tight jeans inhibiting his movements on the rickety kitchen chair.

"I don't mean wine to go with *meals*!" spluttered Robbie, evoking a raucous laugh from Mrs Dyer. "We can't give alcohol to alcoholics! I mean the communion wine that's kept in the vestry! It will have to be put under lock and key! I suggest during the Nightshelter, the wine for the sacrament should be replaced by Ribena!"

"Oh yes please. That would be nice dear." said Magdalen Raven, roused from sleep by raised voices and addressing this to Daphne the 'hostess' of this gathering. What was this get together about again? Was it Dog Mercury, or something, running rampant in the graveyard? She had forgotten.

"Sugary drinks, this late in the hour, would not be wise." Martin Shrubsole informed his mother-in-law. "Camomile tea would be much more beneficial, or a simple glass of water will adequately quench a thirst." This was said in a soothing bedside manner, accompanied by a smug smile on his teddy bear- like face. Magdalen blinked mistily.

"This is getting us nowhere!" exclaimed Mrs Gellibrand, rising majestically from the Rectory's best chair, gesturing with her extended arm as if proffering a ring for her subjects to kiss, "I cannot impress on you enough, Rector, TIME is of

the essence! We have scant resources to accommodate the homeless as it is! We need a plan of action as soon as possible, therefore, I myself will organise another Hunger Party in aid of the Food Bank."

Tom, who up until now had been happily imagining recording homeless people on his iPhone for future historians – hopefully, their tragic tales of sleeping in ditches and haystacks - suddenly became aware that everyone in the room was looking to him for a response and to… *lead.* He doubted very much about his ability to lead anything, but he *was* used to doubt, experiencing it every morning.

"I…" he began falteringly.

"Shall we meet next week? Same time, same place?" asked Emma.

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When everyone had taken their leave, Tom and Emma stood under the porch looking out at the trees in the Rectory drive. A full moon was rising in the east.

"A Corn moon," said Emma

"Ah yes," said Tom "…it's mentioned several times in Anthony à Woods diaries and…"

"Would you like to come for tea before the next meeting?" interrupted Emma before Tom could wax lyrical about the Corn moon sighting of 1678, "To go over the guidance for the Nightshelter from the Diocese?"

"Oh Emma," breathed Tom, taking her into his arms and blissfully inhaling the scent of medicated shampoo, "what would I do without you?"

And, as the new lovers embraced, a few green leaves fell from the trees, to herald in the autumn.