

Sunday, March 19th, 2006

I arrive at Roy and Anne's.

Monday, March 20th

We catch up with each other's news and my cold reminds Roy that if his Dad or one of the other brothers was feeling unwell, their mother, Sarah Jane, would always say, "Go and get a haircut. You'll feel better."

Anne tries to call Bob and Joan to invite them here next Sunday because that's the only day I'd be able to see them but there's no answer.

We go to the quiz night at a local pub in the evening. The questions are on themes such as "hats", "music" and "Irish" and with no help from me, our table gets second place.

Tuesday, March 21st

Anne tries Bob and Joan again and is answered by someone who seems to be Joan but doesn't know who Anne is and just says "No" when Anne asks if Bob is there. "Do you know when he'll be back?" "After lunch, perhaps." Anne tries to work out if this really is Joan by asking, "Do you still have the parakeets?" "Oh yes," the woman replies, but Anne isn't sure she understood the question and says she'll call back later.

While Anne goes swimming with a friend at a nearby pool, Roy and I make two fast and very cold circuits of the adjoining park and then I drive to Madge's.

I miss the exit to the M56 East and when I get off at the exit for the M56 I can only go west or take a minor road so I stop where the road divides and consult my map. It looks like I can take the minor road and find a route paralleling M56 East. As I set the map down I see a police Landover behind me and a policeman walks to my window and asks why I'm parked so dangerously. I start to explain and he tells me to come and sit in their car. "Should I pull forward first and get the car to a safer place?" I ask, "I'm sorry. I didn't know this was dangerous." The policeman looks puzzled and I say, "I could pull up there, I guess, but I need to end up going the other way and I can't see a good place that way." "OK" the policeman says. "Go up there to that roundabout, go left and just down the road there's a farm entrance. Pull in there and we'll follow you." I do that and the policeman ushers me into the back seat of his car. "That was a very dangerous thing you did," he tells me, "and it requires a mandatory court appearance. It's a serious offence and I must caution you that anything you say..." Etc. "I'm very sorry," I say, "I live in America and I was lost. Back home the right thing for me to do would be what I just did, pull off into a place protected by white lines." "How long are you here for?" "I leave on Monday. I'm visiting relations and I'll be moving around." The policeman tells his partner, the driver, that the court appearance isn't going to work. He thinks aloud. It's a very serious offence. I apologize again and say I did what I would have done at home. "I'm sure you have the same law about crossing a solid white line," the policeman says so that I'll know he doesn't believe me but is giving me a

break. "I'm going to give you a verbal warning and we'll show you how to get to the motorway because that's the way we're going."

Madge and I spend the afternoon chatting and she tells me a couple of new things. Whalley always said September 20th was a special day for the family because so many big decisions and moves happened that day (unfortunately I don't have any examples). Madge is Eileen Willshaw's god-mother and saw a lot of her before Eileen went away to university.

I call Sheila to arrange our Thursday visit and later we go for dinner and a nice evening with Michael.

Wednesday, March 22nd

I have more Sidwell history questions and we chat about those. Madge thinks Whalley and his brothers each had their own friends and didn't do much together. Whalley, for example, went to Wembley for the football Cup Final one year with his own group of friends. Archie Ward died not long before Edith.

Madge gives me a letter she recently received from Minnie Bland's daughter, Rosemary, in which she says she was born in 1947 and Minnie subsequently remarried. Rosemary's maiden name is Ritter so presumably John Ritter was her father, but I think John and Minnie were not married because I believe she and Leonard were not divorced until shortly before he and Florence were married, which I think was in 1950. Madge thinks John Ritter is the one standing on his own at the right in the Aspley Guise photo. I'll write to Rosemary when I get home.

Madge forgot to tell me she doesn't eat cheese or cream as well as beef and pork so we must call Sheila before she prepares tomorrow's lunch. We can't call until after 11 am, however, because Madge says it worries people if the phone rings before then. They think something must be wrong.

We go to lunch at a vegetarian restaurant in Altrincham where you can have one kind of salad for one pound fifty or five types for four pounds fifty. Madge is puzzled because she wants two types. The server makes several attempts at an explanation of why that's a problem but eventually gives up and Madge gets the two types she wants. I order the baked aubergine special, which has run out so I have potatoes dijonnaise instead. I notice the servers and patrons seem a bit apprehensive about the long haired old stranger in their midst.

We return to the flat and continue chatting about current affairs, daily life at the apartment complex, people Madge meets through the Quakers, Michael and Alison, and Sidwells of all generations. She has wide interests and a remarkably positive disposition.

I call Sheila to let her know that Madge can't eat cheese or cream and Sheila asks if she can eat fish, then calls back a few minutes later to suggest we go to a restaurant where everyone can choose whatever they like, which Madge says is a very good idea.

In the evening we watch a gritty whodunit set in Glasgow that Madge watches regularly, then an Hercule Poirot story, and end up with the news. I'm always struck by how insulting British politicians are to each other, poking fun and going for laughs. Politics is much more overtly a game than in America.

Thursday, March 23rd

Today is another fine day. We set off for Sheila's and get lost, or think we are. In fact, we haven't gone quite far enough. They live in a fine new house on the outskirts of Garstang. Robert is a retired civil (i.e., not criminal) judge who continued working part-time until the mandatory retirement age of 75. His previous wife died not long before he and Sheila got married. They visited each other when Sheila still lived in Atlanta. Robert had a big house that he sold because it was too big for just two people and "because it wasn't Sheila's house." They kept his deceased wife's dog, Whiskey, a friendly little guy.

Sheila knew Rennie even though he died before she knew her husband, Jim, because she worked at Arnside at a guest house that was popular with Nelson folk. Rennie and his brother Jim went there on vacations and her parents knew them and they had friends in common. That's how she knew Rennie, Jim and Jack and their wives.

Rennie's son, Jim, went back to America in his early twenties to the Cleveland area where he was born. Madge believes he went to the States because he had a bad back and could specialize in electrical repairs to cars there instead of having to do every kind of car repair work in England, some of which was very difficult with a bad back. Sheila confirms that Jim hurt his back but doesn't know if that was why he went to the States. He designed and built their house outside Atlanta and was very proud of it. Roy deeply regrets not visiting him there. Madge says Jim was a thoughtful person although you might not get that impression on first meeting him.

Jim may have worked in other parts of the US, also, or traveled on holidays but in any case he and a friend from Cleveland who worked together at a foreign car repair shop got the idea of setting up a similar business in Guatamala. After three years they decided the business couldn't support both of them and since the other guy was married and more settled there, Jim left. He returned to England for one of his periodic visits and Rennie died unexpectedly three weeks later. Jim stayed in England to help Fanny get sorted out and she began to lean on him as she had on Rennie. I think this is when Sheila and Jim met.

Sheila worked as secretary to a bank manager when she left school, then as an au pair in Belgium and Switzerland. Robert used to visit the bank manager periodically at that time and he would send Sheila for coffee for himself and Robert. She came back to England and was asked by a millionaire to be nanny to his child by an estranged wife. When she arrived at his house, the housekeeper had just quit so she ended up doing everything. She says she learned a lot in six months there. After she married Jim in 1968 and moved to the States she worked for the local school system. They asked her to establish hearing tests for all the children in the district. She continued that after Jim died so she could finish putting her boys through college. She decided after Jim died that when she retired she'd go back to England and bought a cottage near Garsden

where she spent the long school holidays while she was still working. Bob and Joan spent a week with her there every year.

Jim went back to America after Rennie died because Bob had gotten work at Lockheed in Atlanta and Fanny decided to go, too, so there was no reason for Jim to stay in England. Madge remembers that Fanny traveled a lot by Greyhound Bus to visit friends from Akron who had relocated all over the US. Fanny returned to England after a while and lived with two of her sisters.

Sheila remembers Rennie as a very sweet man whose life revolved around music and who "kept Fanny from getting out of control". "Now then Fanny," he'd say. Madge says Fanny was an excellent cook and Sheila looks askance. "Not your experience?" I ask. Sheila shakes her head. "Why did Fanny need to be kept under control?" I ask. "Well, for example, Jim remembered the time when someone went to get a jar of jam from Fanny's kitchen and it was growing mold. They threw it away and picked up the one behind. That had mold on top, too. She always kept everything." Thinking about this late, I realized that's not as odd as it would be now. In those days many people made their own jam. My mother, who was a fastidious house-keeper, made fifty or sixty pounds of marmalade every year and sealed the jars with candle wax. Occasionally a bit of mold would get under the seal and because "we couldn't afford to waste good food", a common saying then, she'd scrape the mold off and the rest of the jar would be just fine.

Fanny was a good pianist and an excellent needlewoman. Madge and Sheila remember her as always sitting with her tatting, a finer form of crochet, making little mats and so forth. "You need clever fingers to do that," Madge says. "I could never do it."

Rennie read a lot, usually not going to bed until 2 or 3 and getting up at the usual time. He didn't sleep much. He suffered from "nerves", ulcers and such, as well as from emphysema that doctors attributed to the dry cleaning chemicals he worked with rather than cigarettes. "What did he talk about?" I ask Sheila. "Was he interested in politics?" "Well, remember I was quite young," she replies. "I don't know about being interested in politics. He was against it. He had very deep feelings and his own opinions but he didn't say much. You could tell he was someone with strong opinions about what was right, someone you knew you could depend on."

Sheila's father was a mill manager. She had the sense that Rennie's family had more money than hers because they had big houses and a car (perhaps I misremember this because Roy and Anne recall Rennie as having a car but not big houses, and think a mill manager would have earned more than Rennie). Madge says the man who financed Pendle Cleaners was Ada's brother who was at school with Rennie. She thinks he owned the business and got all the profits while Rennie worked for a wage, but Sheila thinks Rennie must have been a part owner or at least got part of the proceeds when the business was sold.

Sheila was puzzled when her son, Michael, became depressed, which seems to have been triggered by his father's death. Jim wasn't depressed and there's no history of it in her family, but then she realized that Rennie suffered from it. Michael is OK now and

working as a social worker through an agency. He hopes it will lead to a fulltime job and it's the field he's always wanted to work in. His degree is in psychology.

Sheila's Richard has letters that Rennie wrote to Fanny when they first came back to England and he was in Bedford while she was in Nelson. He itemized the prices of a loaf of bread, a jar of fish paste and other such necessities.

Edith didn't approve of Fanny's boys because in her opinion they hadn't been brought up right. She thought Fanny was a very lackadaisical housekeeper and parent so she wouldn't let Madge stay with them. It was OK for her to stay with Jack and Lizzie so she knows Roy much better than Jim and Bob. She says Roy used to be very keen on fishing. Roy remembers that he did fish but it wasn't a passion.

I notice in a photo that Sheila's Richard had long hair when he was in college and she says, "All Sidwells are tree-huggers, intellectuals and vegetarians!" It was her Jim, not my dad's uncle Jim as I previously thought who became a vegetarian after working in a butcher's.

We go to lunch at a pub owned by the Queen in her role as Duke of Lancaster. It's a very olde worlde charming place with excellent food. Robert and I have the fish pie, which he always has, and he follows my lead on the sticky toffee pudding. Robert tells me it's been said the Queen would like to retire here and I imagine she'd do a fine job behind the bar, then I figure Charles would do even better.

Bob left Marian before Beverley died. Sheila thinks Marian was severely depressed, probably triggered by Beverley's illness. She was born with a defective heart, had many operations and died when she was 23. Bob seems to be estranged from his sons but Marian isn't. Roy and Anne still exchange Christmas cards with her.

I tell Sheila about Anne's strange phone call when she tried to reach Bob and Joan and how we're worried that Joan may have had a stroke and become confused. Sheila calls and finds out they were away from home when Anne called so it must have been some other lady who keeps parakeets, or one who's excessively polite. I ask about Joan's daughters because Anne thinks they live somewhere here, but they live close to Bob and Joan in Maidenhead.

We drive back to Madge's much quicker because we don't get lost. Then we watch "Listeners' Question Time" where the audience asks questions to a panel of politicians. I'm surprised to find myself in complete agreement with one of them, the only one who answers questions clearly and specifically. The others just give their prepared speeches. The one I agree with is Tony Benn, who I used to think of as being on the lunatic fringe of the left wing. Have I gone further left or has he mellowed? Both, probably.

Friday March 24th

Madge and I arrive at Alison and Chris's flat in Cirencester around noon. We have lunch and Alison takes me for a walk round the town past the impressively huge church. They live right in the center of town in a block of apartments where most of the other residents are in their 80s and 90s. I buy two giant jars of Marmite for Felicity.

Chris has a cough and Alison says he's suffering from "man-flu". "It starts as a cough and progresses amazingly fast into the worst illness the world has ever seen." He has a new job as warehouse manager at a small garden products wholesaler and enjoyed his first week there. The oven cleaning business didn't work out because it was more of a strain on his back than he expected – he hurt it in a head-on car crash into a cement truck long ago – and because it's seasonal, very busy around Christmas and slack later.

Chris was in the navy for the full 21 year term and gets a small pension now and a full one starting when he's 55, five years from now. He says he'll retire then, but Madge and Alison can't imagine it because he always has to be busy. He was stores officer on submarines, responsible for everything from toilet paper to torpedoes, and was planar-certified so he also drove the boat. Alison says submariners often wake up at first thinking their boat has sunk and they're running out of oxygen, but they get used to it.

Alison is a project manager at a small company that provides much of Microsoft's technical writing for their website as well as help documentation and so forth.

We go for a pub meal in the evening, an excellent steak and kidney pudding followed by spotted dick for me, and then Chris stops off at his favorite pub and the three of us watch a program about "iceberg cowboys" who tow icebergs off-course when they're heading for an oil rig, or move the oil rig.

Saturday March 25th

I leave fairly early to drive back to Roy and Anne's. Madge has remembered my birthday and got me a book of Buddha's sayings and Alistair Cooke's autobiography. It's a complete surprise and a characteristically sweet thing that Madge would do.

I chat with Roy and Anne for a while and then take the tube to Gill's. Anne says Sheila was quite quiet when she was a young woman but Roy says his dad, Jack, was a bit afraid of her because she was so direct, "straight from the shoulder."

Gill has been housebound because of her broken arm and the first thing she wants to do is go for a walk in the Lexham Gardens square. It's very attractively maintained.

Back at the flat I set about the tasks Gill warned me she'd like help with. Her computer displays just a few narrow lines, which seems like a hardware problem but after I power it off and on a few times and try some other random things, the display comes back. Then I fix the sofa seat. I'm interested when I look round her large library to find that we have a lot of the same books, many of them Richard's including several by Aldous Huxley. I start to read one of hers, "The Buddha of Suburbia", while Gill cooks the pasta. It's very funny.

We spend most of my visit chatting and it's very enjoyable. Gill travels frequently and goes to several programs organized by Third Age University, including a writers' workshop that she runs, Shakespeare readings where they each take a part and the leader explains the play, one on the modern novel, and she's also studying Italian because she goes there every year. She says she's shed most of her volunteer work.

Gill did a variety of jobs after she left school, the most interesting of which was for the architects' association. Her mother noticed an ad for a job at Pinewood Studios and she ended up there working for several producers, which was how she met Richard. She trained as a teacher after Jon and Amanda had grown up a bit but says she wasn't really cut out for it – she wasn't good at maintaining discipline.

Gill lets me read an account she wrote about Richard's illness because someone asked her to do it to help others in a similar situation. It's very moving and brings tears to my eyes, which is very unusual for me. She opens by saying it's a love story and the love and the good times come though very movingly along with the terrible spells of confusion, paranoia, aggression and so on.

Gill knows that Arthur and Ethel didn't approve of Richard's pacifism but isn't certain why. She thinks it was chiefly that Ethel didn't want Richard to have to go through what Arthur's brothers and parents did in WW1. She was quite concerned about what other people might think. That's why Richard was so moved by the fact that Arthur came to his tribunal and testified to the sincerity of his beliefs.

It's Jon's partner's sister who immigrated to Perth, Australia.

Amanda worked as a nurse until she was invalided out with a back injury from lifting patients on the geriatric and disturbed teenager wards. She now works with Alzheimer patients. Her husband is a paramedic.

When I get back to Roy and Anne's they're still out at dinner with friends. They lent me a door key that I foolishly left in my bedroom so I wait in my car. After an hour I wind the seat back down to get more comfortable and wake up an hour after that to realize that Roy and Anne are home and must be wondering where I've gotten to.

Sunday March 26th

Today is Mothers' Day. Anne has prepared more than enough food for her entire family and any friends they might bring but we have no idea how many people will in fact come. Roy and I stand in the kitchen having toast and coffee and he explains the impossibility of planning anything with his kids. "Grandma Sidwell used to complain about the same thing with her six boys. None of them could ever make up their mind about anything. 'I should have bought pigs,' she'd say." He starts phoning around and gets the idea that Steve would prefer us to go there. He thinks they're not dressed yet. Richard will come here sometime. Neil doesn't seem to know what he's doing. Anne comes downstairs and is very frustrated. "We never made much of Mothers' Day," she says, but she's very much hoping they'll all come here. Roy calls Steve again and decides it's best we go there now. He calls Richard and Neil so they won't come here while we're out. Richard says he'll come for lunch. Neil still doesn't know what they're doing. They'll probably go to Chessingham. No, they aren't going there. They aren't going to Karen's mother. At last a quite cross Anne gets on the phone with Neil and very sweetly tells him, at length, that they should do whatever suits them but it would be lovely if they come here. He agrees, but doesn't know when they'll come.

As we drive to Steve's, Roy tells how Janet's father put an ad in the newspaper asking for information from anyone who remembered his Mooney family's troupe of traveling performers who toured round Ireland in the early 1900s and earlier. A man wrote him a letter saying, "I'm afraid I don't know anything about your family. Yours faithfully."

Steve is out when we arrive at their fine large Victorian house in Hadley Wood. Janet is very welcoming and Kate and Paddy are pleased to see us. They're selling this house and moving closer to the kids' school, Haberdashers, I think. This house has subsided a bit at one corner, a common problem with houses on the London clay, so they're having it under-pinned. We gather in the huge kitchen and Paddy and Kate want to see where I'm going. I show them on the atlas and Paddy brings another book that explains about tectonic plates and erosion.

Steve comes in with flowers and chocolates for Anne and Janet. He's much more relaxed than when we met last year because he's just finished a project and is about to go to Ireland for what he calls a fishing trip much as Roy might describe one of his days fishing near Garstang when he was a young man. He asks Paddy to get the Ordnance Survey map so he can show me where he's going and I realize after a bit that this is a salmon fishing trip with friends, one of whom has bought the rights to a stretch of river.

Anne asks about the piano while the construction work is being done. It will go into storage. That leads to stories about pianos. Janet's grandparents had one that her grandmother wanted to get rid of so her grandfather broke it up with a sledgehammer and buried the pieces in the garden. "What are you going to do with all that earth you've dug up?" she asked. "I'll dig a hole and bury it" he told her.

Back at Roy and Anne's we chat for a bit then Richard arrives with Clair, a big bag of mussels, parsley and French bread. Clair has baked him a chocolate cake and he brings that, too. Clair is slim, pretty, 38, unmarried and childless, good fun, and Anne likes her but wonders why there's been no talk of marriage since Richard told her it might be time for her to start looking for a hat.

We have a fine lunch of soup and mussels. Anne keeps offering everyone more mussels, more bread, some chicken or salmon, a prawn cocktail, yoghurt, ice cream, cheese and biscuits, tea, coffee, more wine. Clair went to the same school as Richard and she and Anne know many of the same people. Anne comments on what has happened to several of them, their parents and others since school, "they were very nice... he was a bit of a galumpher..." and so on. Nobody knows what a galumpher could be. It turns out to be Anne's term for someone who's a little slow-witted. Richard says something about UFOs and other mysterious phenomena he's read about. Roy challenges him, saying there has never been any physical evidence left behind and surely there should be something if there really had been alien visitors. I remember Robert Haythornthwaite telling us a theory that the Loch Ness Monster may be an escaped circus elephant.

Neil, Karen, Abby and James arrive in mid-afternoon and join us sitting around the remains of lunch. Anne gets out toys for two-year-old James, who is tired. Clair and Karen sit in the hall chatting while James doesn't play. Richard and Neil chat about

football. Anne plies Abby with hummus and French bread. She's not very hungry and can't be persuaded to chicken but has some pasta and is enthusiastic about Clair's excellent cake. James keeps wanting Neil to pick him up. We slowly transfer to the back room where James alternates between watching "Bob the Builder" on TV and being picked up by Neil. Richard asks if I've seen the videotape they made as a 40th anniversary surprise from Roy and Anne's 8mm home movies. There are lots of school games and summer holidays, quite a bit of footage of Jack and Lizzie, some of Jim and Ada, and it's thoroughly charming. Meanwhile Neil has taken James for a ride in the car. They return and James wants Bob the Builder again, then he wants to go out in the car again and we return to the family video. Anne is plying us with tea and coffee and more food and there's happy, random chat among all the adults. Abby continues to be cheerful and charming. Richard persuades her to give a piano recital but she soon becomes shy and stops. It's a very happy afternoon.

Later I repack my bags, work out how to get to the airport in the morning, and chat with Roy and Anne about fundamentalist religion, pacifism, Blair and Bush and such.

Monday, March 27th

I've greatly enjoyed my time visiting relatives. I was afraid I might have packed in too much but it was just right. It occurs to me that I'm in the middle between the two generations. Roy is 79, Anne 70, Madge and Gill are in their 70s, as is Bob, Sheila is 60, and I'm 62. Bob's James, the next oldest after me in my generation, is sixteen years younger than me, followed by Roy and Anne's Steve, who is seventeen years younger.