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Opening extract from  
**Crawling Round  
South Oakwood**

Written by  
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## Chapter One

Although I was more interested in the thought of a weekend break for two in Paris, which was the first prize of a competition in the local paper, the attention of my colleagues was firmly gripped by news which had not been reported in the paper and which was unlikely to ever reach its pages. It was the astonishing revelation that Fiona Carson, the lady who, as Joss would have it, always looked as though she had just bitten into one of her husband's lemons, had run off with Daina Billings. Their interest in this event was so enthusiastic I could not avoid the conversation about it. Not that any of us were gossipmongers, far from it; we could talk rubbish at times but we were not the sort for tittle-tattle. It wasn't because Daniel Carson was one of the richest men in town, or because Daina was a tantrum short of barking, that they were stirred up; it was more because Adrian Billings was a decent bloke and, although it was only occasionally he would join us for an evening, we considered him a friend of ours. We had known him since he had moved to the town, which was around the turn of the century. Not a determined drinker like Joss or a hanger-on like Blake, Adrian was a welcome addition to the group for he was peaceable and never missed his round. If he was out and we met, he would tag along. I liked his company, he was amicable and had a good, dry sense of humour which I particularly enjoyed. He spoke with a quiet voice so in a noisy pub you had

to pay attention to catch his remarks. I think the others (except Tarquin, who had the ears of an owl) missed a lot of his witticisms.

“If it was me and she’d left me, I’d be dancing in the street,” declared Joss. “But then I wouldn’t have married her in the first place.”

“I doubt Maureen would have let you,” Tarquin commented quickly.

“Ouch,” said Alasdair with a chuckle. The odd bit of evidence over the years had persuaded the rest of us that Joss was kept on a tight rein at home.

“I bet Daniel’s not happy; he doesn’t like anything that doesn’t go his way,” observed Tarquin.

“If my wife left me for a woman...” Blake started to say but was cut short by Joss’s laughter. Tarquin, Alasdair and I could not help smiling at Blake’s outburst. He was shy of women, more shy than you would think possible in this day and age. He could manage to order a drink from a barmaid and might venture a few pleasantries with her so long as she stayed behind the bar.

“Your wife!” Joss exclaimed after laughing too long and too loudly. Swinging round to face Blake he said, “I didn’t know you were married; tell us all about your wife!”

I had to leap across at that point to try and save the carpet from the deluge of coffee Joss was spilling from his mug. He was truly careless. It didn’t matter to him but it was me who got it in the neck from my wife. There had already been ‘conversations’. During the most recent it had come out that she had noticed in me, so she had said, a tendency to arrive home at night somewhat less than sober. As this had been a consequence of a routine I had maintained for most of my married life, and even since before I met her, I had to say that her observational skills were rather poor. Her remark probably

arose from the time the week before when I had been a little worse for wear and in a somewhat exuberant frame of mind entering the house. This may have caused me to make a bit more noise than perhaps I should have done. Ignoring my comments, she informed me that the fact I continued my routine and didn't *grow up* was something, apparently, she could not for the life of her understand. This lack of understanding was something she had let me know about before but, as I rarely understood her, I felt it was scarcely a revelation and was a bit pointless harping on about it. The whole thing got to me for I wasn't one to make issues out of little things or keep going on about whatever. I didn't pretend to be and never have pretended to be Peter Pan and if I had half the hang-ups she did about staying young then I would have thought I had ten times too many. And another thing, as she was fond of saying, if I found the toilet seat down, I didn't go into histrionics and if I were to have found a teaspoon in the sink, I didn't suppose it would have bothered me a great deal. The situation was making me aware I was going to have to do something about it, only what I wasn't sure.

"Well no, of course I meant if I *were* married," Blake was mumbling defensively. He clammed up after that so we never found out what he would do if he ever had a wife desert him. A mix of contradictions, Blake desperately needed company but was painfully shy. He wanted friends but hated Society. It was some time ago that he found a home with us and I have forgotten exactly how it happened. From what little about him we found out over the years there were no close relatives to speak of, which probably made us the nearest thing to a family he had. Being long-term unemployed, Blake didn't contribute a great deal and this grated on Joss's nerves. On numerous occasions Joss expressed a strong desire to launch a sizeable firework in a place that would surely have caused Blake profound discomfort, and maybe harm, had he succeeded,

although Joss always swore it would do him good. The rest of us tolerated Blake fairly well as he tolerated a good deal of jibing from us. He wasn't terribly communicative a lot of the time but occasionally, after a few beers, a braver and slightly more voluble character appeared and brought a different viewpoint to the discussion.

I went to fetch a sponge from the kitchen and when I returned Joss and Alasdair were back on their current favourite subject, the elopement. This event had the unfortunate effect of etching some seemingly indelible imagery into their minds and the horrible thing was that they would keep referring to it. They continually brought up the latest aspect to occur to them and they would discuss every little angle and curve of it. It was as if they had an ambition to imagine each and every detail of the girls' private life. That they were talking about the wife of a friend of ours did not seem to matter to them, whereas it felt to me as though they were letting Adrian down. I found it tiresome to say the least. I often felt there were so many conversations I would rather not have. It seemed a lot of people had no greater desire than to drag every topic that came up down to its lowest level. While I knelt and sponged the carpet, I made an effort to lift the talk out of the gutter. I admitted that, like many people we hear of these days, Fiona was only a figure to me, I knew little more about her than her name.

"Somebody said she used to work at the shop?" I asked, curious if anybody had more information.

"They've had hundreds working in Carson's shop over the years. Must be half of South Oakwood has worked there at some time," commented Joss. "There and Woolies. I miss old Woolies."

"Maybe not quite half the population; I doubt even a hundred," muttered Tarquin, always pedantic.

Joss, ignoring him, continued, "I remember there used to

be a nice blonde worked there years ago. Good-looking lass, I quite fancied her.”

“I think there were several good-looking blondes, brunettes and redheads in that shop,” said Tarquin. “Mrs C is a brunette but I wouldn’t call her good-looking. I reckon she worked there for a couple of years before she and Daniel were married.”

“You say she isn’t good-looking but she must have had something for Daniel to go for her,” I pointed out.

The chemistry of attraction had always been a puzzle far deeper than my brain could fathom. It was something I had wasted an inordinate amount of time pondering. How my wife and I became involved, for example, was a mystery I suspected even Darwin could not have explained.

Still thinking of his blonde, Joss continued, “I used to go in and ask what was ripe. It made her smile anyway,” he chuckled at the memory.

“It must have been before you met Maureen,” observed Tarquin.

“Yes, I think it was,” replied Joss, who was still reminiscing and missed the jibe.

“Judy!” exclaimed Alasdair, who had been sat in deep concentration for a few moments. “She’s who you’re talking about. Blonde, a bit dumpy.”

“Yes. You’re right,” Joss confirmed. Suddenly, an image of the girl appeared before my mind’s eye.

“Oh yes, I remember her, she wasn’t bad,” I agreed.

“She was there after Fiona,” claimed Tarquin, who had a memory like an encyclopaedia.

“I can’t remember seeing Fiona there,” I said.

“I’ll tell you what happened to Judy,” said Alasdair. “She married a chap who works for the water company. I know that ’cause her boy goes to my boy’s school.”

Joss had finished what was left of his coffee and, as I was

going to return the sponge to the kitchen, I took his mug with me as well. When I got back to the lounge I asked, "So how long exactly have Fiona and Daniel been married?"

"Must be over fifteen years," answered Alasdair. "It must have been about the time Daniel stopped working in the shop."

Daniel Carson spent most of his time up at the golf club where he was some sort of big cheese and his greengrocer shops, he had four in all, the one in South Oakwood and three others, were run by managers. The golf club was a province none of our crowd had any interest in.

"Can't stand the game," Tarquin pronounced emphatically one night. Unusually for us, it was something we were all agreed on.

Then Tarquin changed the subject completely by asking, "Hey, Malky baby, you were getting mighty close to young Connie down at The Shepherd last week. What's all that about?"

"Oh nothing," I answered as casually as possible while at the same time trying to quell an urgent desire to brain him. Not only did I hate him calling me 'Malky baby', but also if he had to be so nosy as to have noticed that particular incident, he could at least have had the decency not to bring the subject up in my own home with my wife only yards away. Tarquin could be extremely irritating sometimes; I could never decide if it was deliberate or not. I said as dismissively as I could, "You know what women are like, always something going on."

Connie, one of the barmaids at The Shepherd, had been telling me how her useless boyfriend had left her. I had the distinctly pleasant feeling she thought we might have something in common. She was German, blonde, good-looking and a few years younger than me. For some reason as soon as I saw her I started recounting blonde jokes. I told her

the one about the blonde walking down the road with a pig under her arm in which a passer-by asked 'where did you get that?' and the pig replied 'I won it in a raffle.' She had found it amusing and, emboldened by her laughter, I had continued with the one about the two blondes found dead, frozen to death in their car at a drive-in-movie. They had gone to see 'Closed for the winter.' That one she found even more amusing and after some banter she had let me buy her a drink. After that, she had kept coming back to chat whenever she could.

Luckily for me our programme came on then and Tarquin, who was keeping one eye on the TV, shushed us. I quickly jabbed the sound button on the remote control and brought the show's noisy introduction into the lounge where my wife allowed me to entertain 'the mob' as she usually referred to my companions. They, Tarquin, Alasdair, Joss and Blake, had come round to watch 'So you think you know what you are talking about' before we went out for the evening. We all enjoyed this programme and hadn't missed one since it started. The way the presenter put his victims on the spot was priceless.

This week he started off with an exercise for the audience of one hundred. Bringing them down to the studio floor he had them blindfolded and then he began to ask them a series of questions. He asked them to point to the parts of the body he named. They all managed the shoulder, elbow, neck and foot but when he asked them to point to the sternum, patella, pinna and axilla some were pointing to all sorts of different places. It was jolly funny to watch. Once the presenter had finished asking questions, their blindfolds were then taken off and the audience returned to their seats. While they did this, some footage of people pointing to the wrong parts was played on the TV screens in the studio. It was brilliant.

Once the audience was seated, the presenter proceeded to the next section of the programme and introduced the subject word, which this week was 'prodigal'. As the members of the audience arrived at the television studio before the start of the programme, they had been asked what this particular word meant and some of the answers were now played back on the TV screens. The sheer variety of opinions as to its meaning was hilarious. After giving us the correct definition, the presenter mentioned the story of the prodigal son from the bible. A lot of the confusion as to the word's meaning appeared to have sprung from a general misunderstanding of the message of this story and was not helped by a basic lack of education in English and the meanings of words. He then showcased misuses of this word, most of them from articles in broadsheet newspapers where the authors and editors were clearly confused about the meaning of the word. It made a number of know-it-alls and clever-dicks look not so knowledgeable or clever. The presenter also made a good point about how the newspapers, by publishing these articles, actually promoted confusion in the populace. We enjoyed it enormously.

"That was the highest percentage of any audience they've had so far to have been completely wrong about what the word meant," remarked Tarquin, once the programme was over.

"It's incredible, isn't it!" exclaimed Alasdair. "You wouldn't think so many people didn't know, and yet *everybody* has heard the story."

"They don't understand it properly though," said Joss. Of course *he* understood it once it had been explained. We were lucky because at the beginning of the programme he hadn't known what the word meant either, so he had kept quiet and we could all pretend we had known. He liked to think he was clever and rarely missed an opportunity to inform us if he

thought he knew this or that. He probably should have made his home with a group more interested in quizzes than the rest of us were, for his interest in trivial information was inexhaustible, as was his energy in recounting it.

“I seem to remember the programme about plc had a pretty high percentage,” I remarked.

“Yeah, that was a good programme too. The percentage wasn’t as high as this one though,” Tarquin assured me.

“Hey, what are we doing sitting here all night?” Joss cried out. “Aren’t we going for a drink?”

“Yeah, where are we going tonight?” Alasdair asked and then said, “Let’s go somewhere different. We always end up going to the same places every week. I fancy a change.”

Living, as we did, in a small town with a good number of drinking establishments, it wasn’t hard to choose a fresh one to visit.

“Let’s go up to The Orchard,” proposed Tarquin. “We’ve not been there for ages.”

“We won’t *get* there for ages, it’s miles away,” objected Blake. “Half the evening will be gone.”

“Come on, it’s not that far!” exclaimed Tarquin. “A ten minute walk is hardly half the evening.”

If anybody had a right to moan it was either Joss or Alasdair, or both. They had walked from their homes in Lower Oakwood, the housing estate over the hill to the south which was at least a mile away, maybe two. Blake lived much nearer to my place than they did. He had a flat somewhere down towards the main railway station which was not far but walking wasn’t really his thing. While his divorce was going through, Tarquin was renting a small flat just off the bottom bit of the South Oakwood one-way system, so he was the nearest to me and didn’t have far to walk at all. As my house was central, it was right by the park, they all came round to meet up and watch the TV programme.