

*Delfigo Street*

*By Michael W. Thomas*

It took ten-pence pieces: a grey-bellied, ravenous meter in the sorry kitchenette. At any other time of year I needn't have bothered. The windows in the place were wide, suggesting that the builder had solved a shortage of bricks by tacking them in; the curtains were thin as muslin. Day or night in the summer, the rooms probably bulged with heat. But this was December: one of the coldest on record, so the weathermen insisted. Hence the need to keep the chipped little gas-fire fed; hence the pile of ten-pence pieces on the kitchen counter, which shrank alarmingly as I made my search.

Apart from keeping the fire sweet, I had to stop and pat my pockets over and over. Typical of Dad: front door key, porch door key, flat key, no key-ring. In all the time he'd lived at home, he'd never lost a single thing – not a knife, not a roll of tape, not the thinnest curl of fuse-wire, none of his trade's essentials. But he was forever letting things drift apart: pens and pentops, drills and bits, washers and bolts. He knew where they were, always; but it struck me as a waste of energy, having to traipse about retrieving them when they could have easily been kept together. Letting things drift was Dad's way, though: those words went through him like lettering through sticks of rock. As with washers, so with family – which was why he was in this gas-guzzling flat; or, more precisely, why I was there, hunting about for his Fleet Air Arm cap to take to him in hospital, courtesy of Mom, who was in her car outside.

Dad had given me his array of keys when I'd visited him that afternoon, along with a list of likely hiding-places for the hat. He'd written it on what looked like a torn bit of bib: it was white – well, whitish – and it did resemble paper from a distance. But it had a smooth, almost plastic feel, and some of the writing was simply gouged into it, un-inked. Then, too, there was the matter of Dad's hand, which didn't aid my search. His writing was a spidery affair which had no truck with ruled lines. It was always Mom I'd gone to if a note for school was required – partly because it seemed to be Mom's province, but also because I dimly suspected that, were I to present a note from Dad, I would have been subjected to all manner of spatial and coordination tests on his behalf. Dad's writing was at home among the pragmatic demands of his trade: cable, red, 30yds; breaker-switch, one, black; bastard files, two, BSW 435; plugs, co-ax, male-female. It was a stranger to discourse; it shunned elaboration. Regrettably, his mouth did not, which was partly what had done him out of his home. Not that he'd said much when I saw him at the hospital. He was worryingly grey round the gills; even his stubble looked like blown ash.

I moved swiftly, disappointed that the bottom of the list was approaching. I'd tried "brown kitch cubd," a free-standing effort that relied on a side wall for support; also "botm drawer dresser," the only drawer that came out without sticking. As for "wdrobe," its side-shelves were tilted and useless, so that I instinctively fell to my knees to rummage under his shirts and trousers, cuffing aside the heavy material of his two good coats in case the cap had wedged itself between. But I also moved swiftly because I was naturally in a race with the

pile of ten-pence pieces – and even, perhaps, with the gas supply itself. For this was a winter of wildcat cuts and lingering shortages. Oil was on everyone's mind – or rather the lack of it. Television news showed folk all over Europe going about their business in fantastic contraptions: what looked like armchairs built on tricycles, horse-drawn cars – and, in one Italian case, a Vespa scooter with stabilizers and pedals. Any utility was now fair game to be shut down. It was all a far cry from the broiling summer, when Billie Jean and Jan Kodes walked off with the Wimbledon goods. A far cry, come to that, from the spring Saturday when Leeds, my favourite away team, were robbed of the Cup by a feisty Sunderland.

Apart from the gas, of course, there were the lights, which I'd had to switch on soon after arriving. They could go at any minute, too. And I didn't want to keep Mom hanging about. Petrol coupons were back. She resented any extra journeys, especially one like this. She'd muttered that his perishing fancy woman should be wasting her petrol fetching and carrying for him. But still she'd made the trip, disregarding my offer to take a bus. She wanted to stay in his picture – or have me in there as her representative.

So it was quickly on to "tallboy, misc." Anything more misc would have been hard to imagine. Of all the furniture there, the tallboy was the most apt symbol of Dad's departure from our lives. The drawers were stuffed any old how – clothes, papers, numberless chewed pencils and splintered rulers, the inevitable rolls of insulation tape (which seemed to breed everywhere when he was at home), a scarf here, a glove there, and single slippers pining for their mates. Going drawer by drawer, I imagined the back of his car in the same chaos nearly two years before, on Christmas Eve, when he decamped. And yet he could probably locate and match everything in the tallboy, even blindfolded. Strange that he didn't know where the Fleet Air Arm cap was. I rummaged on, trying not to see that as a marker of his ailing health. The bottom drawer was the deepest; I'd deliberately started at the top in hopes that, when I pulled it out, I'd see the familiar peak and gold braiding winking up at me, snug and uncrushed. Instead, I was stunned to find a showcase of neatness among the debris. Packets were lined flush with each other like bars of bullion. Several had colourful wrapping: snowy trees, leaping reindeer. I was staring at presents – but surely Dad hadn't bought them all. He was on his uppers. The flat announced as much. Perhaps the fancy woman – generous in this as in much else – had paid for and even chosen them. Then I noticed that the wrapping was loose on one or two. Easing them out, I found myself staring at familiar gloves, wallets, key-cases. They were mine: mine to him, over the years. I was studying a history of Christmases, of presents I'd tucked under our fake, unassuming tree after Midnight Mass. Dad had always taken clinical care opening them: a mark of his trade, I suppose, a familiarity with handling the delicate innards of this or that appliance. And now, here they all were, intact. Somehow they'd survived the chaos of his departure while Mom and I were waiting for yet another Midnight Mass to end. I pushed the drawer shut and, for a moment, stared dully at its handles. Hidden away, its contents were like an undeclared love: the kind Dad had been best at, over the years.

There was a low pop from the living-room. It was time to feed the meter again. Time, too, to be going. I didn't hold out much hope for the final places on Dad's list: "paper-rack, side of telly," "larder left of stove," and "sink cupd" seemed like desperate guesses to me.

Just as I got the fire going again, an engine revved outside. Glancing up, I could see the reflection of headlights cruising across the living-room curtains: Mom, turning the car round, signalling that she was ready for the off. I parted the curtains and watched her car as it slid to a halt at the kerb. In the second before they went off, her lights picked out the sign on the opposite corner: "Delfigo Street." Pure Dad, really – to find the only exotic name in a warren of streets called Binns and Steelyard and Tatley. When I first knew of the address, I imagined long days during which he'd doggedly hunted it down, possibly with another list to hand bearing columns of names under various headings: "No Go," "Poss," "Good Enough," "Spot On." Perhaps Delfigo reminded him of his wartime postings. To me, anyway, it had the same ring as Tunis, Gibraltar, Montevideo, places whose sights and aromas he would sometimes recall at wistful length. As I got older, I fancied that he would only be properly at home among bazaars and sand and rocky passes. My formative years had rattled like china to his rendition of "South of the Border," a song that he seemed to regard as an article of faith rather than a dance-hall standard. True, he was no further down Mexico way than he had been all of his post-war life. Still, "Delfigo" was good enough to be going on with: a charm of a name, warding off the realities of the street, its strays and scudding litter, its daubed walls.

All of which explained the importance of this damned cap I couldn't find. Irritation was now taking hold – partly because the search was becoming hopeless, but mainly because I could sense my mother's impatience climbing like a mist up the front of the house. I was determined, though, to do full justice to the list – even try an extra place or two, if any occurred to me. Treating the meter to another coin, I ran from the flat, down the dubious stairs to the front door. Mom saw me and leaned over the dashboard: "Five minutes," my spread hand pleaded into the night. Her reply was to get out of the car and point across the street to a phone kiosk. I still had a couple of coins in my hand and held them out helpfully. She shook her head, pulled out her handbag, and locked the door. I retreated, leaving her to phone the hospital and ensure that the fancy woman would be nowhere near Dad's bedside when we arrived.

As I climbed the stairs, I visualized the cap in the hope that such concentration would call it forth from wherever it was lurking. It had defined much of my life with Dad, being as natural a part of him as other men's moustaches or Brylcreem. At home, it had hung smack in the middle of the hallway pegs – amidstships, he would have said, keeping the coats and scarves steady on either side. I had a dim sense that, once upon a time, Mom had liked to see it around the place, reminding her as it did that her boy in Navy blue had survived, had returned over the border and kept his promises to her. But things had turned sour. I could remember her asking him why the hell he'd kept it. Shouldn't he have handed it back with everything else? How many other men, long demobbed, still walked about in bits of uniform? If he wanted a memento of danger and misery (as if anyone in their right mind would), weren't his medals enough?

"Medals," Dad would spit. "We didn't want bloody bits of tin after the war. We wanted money."

“Well, you should have pawned the bloody hat, then,” Mom would cry, at which Dad would retreat to the top of the garden and sit on an inverted oil drum, his coat about his shoulders, staring at the ground and stroking his chin.

Now and then, as I got older, I made cack-handed attempts to keep the peace. I'd often ferret around in his workshop, fascinated by its intimations of wizardry, by tools whose purposes remained mysterious, even after all of his explanations. One time I found a stone in a clear plastic box, weighing down a pile of sandpaper. When I asked Dad about it, he said he'd chipped it off the Rock of Gibraltar: 'A sliver of Gib,' he called it, his eyes going vacant.

“Couldn't you carry that around with you?” I ventured nervously. “After you've pawned your cap, I mean?”

He tensed up then, and I braced myself for a rebuke – all the more terrible from Dad because it was so infrequent. But he checked himself and instead threw a shadow punch at my shoulder. His smile, when it came, was as distracted as his eyes. I can only guess, now, at the pictures in his head at that moment: importunate vendors on the streets of Tunis, maybe; the camaraderie of the mess deck; unlit bars selling rum-flavoured potions. Other fancy women – fancier by far than anything that Binns Road or Steelyard Lane could cough up. Women who were born in a place called Delfigo.

As I entered the flat, I heard giggling: not from behind the badly painted doors on the other landings, but from Paignton, ten years before. Here was the real problem with the cap, the cause of the rows and Dad's need to ponder bushes and weeds in the garden. The cap didn't stay on its peg. It appeared on his head in the most unlikely, inappropriate places. Sometimes I would imagine a cartoon scenario, with Dad walking out of the house and the cap springing onto the floor behind him, mewling its abandonment until he turned and stretched down, at which it would bowl along his arm, hop on his shoulder and take its rightful place. Paignton was notorious in all of this. Mom had gone off to scour the shops; Dad had sent me packing with money for ice-cream and the injunction to “look about a bit, find some kids your age.” The money had been generous, enough for a double-scoop, flake and raspberry syrup. I found some kids, too: rat-faced beachcombers who wanted to part me from my treat. Haring back towards Dad, I found him in the same spot, surrounded by a trio of girls, two ponytails and a bouffant. They were giggling to beat the band, as well they might: there was the cap, far back on his head, riding his curls like a pontoon at anchor. I didn't think he'd brought it with him; I certainly didn't think it was in the beach-bag he'd been swinging all morning. I thought of that cartoon caper again: it must have scuttled into the boot of the car while no one was looking.

I stopped yards from him. If I'd run straight up, though, he wouldn't have noticed. He only had eyes for them, intent on their reaction to his yarn:

“So I said, 'Mr Bannerman, hard a 'port.' Hadn't a clue what I meant. Fresh out of naval school, see, just a load of book learning, never been near a boat since he was a kid at Llandudno. 'Hop to it, Mr. Bannerman,' I says. 'Do you want us sharing the hardtack with

Davy Jones?' So he points to starboard and looks at me, face full of hope, like I was supposed to pat him on the head and fix him up a night with Betty Grable. . . ."

It was a good impression, I'll grant him that: all those plummy lieutenants and captains he loudly despised at home, in the pub, wherever friends or family were in earshot, were now speaking as one through his tilted mouth. At the time I was nonplussed, but I cottoned on later: here were three eyefuls – typists on a spree from Kettering or wherever; of course they liked a sailor, it was culturally decreed, but a sailor who was also a bit of posh – well, bull' s-eye. Assuming this, Dad doubtless saw himself as a true son of Empire, first cousin to Monty or Tedder, perhaps, wooing three sun-kissed maidens from Delfigo with his salty knowhow.

Sadly, they were never to learn how the feckless Mr. Bannerman made out. Skull and crossbones were closing in: "Get that off your head at once, you clown," yelled Mom, marching up from the opposite direction. The maidens scattered, showering Paignton front with their laughter. That evening, they would no doubt regale three smirking consorts with their tale of this old geezer, probably drunk, who was parading about in some daft hat he'd filched from an arcade. Just then, I felt something cold on my hand; the remaining ice-cream, forgotten as I lurked in the shadow of John Mills, had melted from the cone. Since I went unremarked by Mom and Dad, I slipped round a nearby shelter, dumped the cone, and occupied myself by licking my hand while they traded mouthfuls until, having no garden to hand, Dad stalked off to the Maid of Devon bar.

By now I was kneeling over the paper-rack, waiting for the sounds of insult and Dad's heavy tread to die away. Paignton was the worst, but there'd been other times, of course: some Christmases the cap was never back on the peg; birthdays, his and mine, would see him strolling about the house, cap on straight, inspecting fitments and furniture as though they were bunks and kit. And Mom would always brace herself when a trip to relatives was in the offing, knowing that days of loud disputation would end at some pub where there was a cabaret, knowing too that Dad would board the proceedings like a pirate and take the stage with his cap and his party turn. Once again I saw myself venturing from smelly Children's Rooms in a score of such places and staring at the tables of punters – some with hands to their ears, others looking in shock at their glasses – while Dad took them south of the border, bellowing his love of harbours, heat, the joys of an endless fiesta.

Suddenly I didn't want to find the cap, and I was glad that it wasn't in the rack, the larder, or the sink cupboard. I wanted Dad to make a new, capless start. Perhaps this stint in hospital would be a turning-point; perhaps the fancy woman would vanish back to Steelyard Lane or Binns Road, or whichever unexotic lair she'd sprung from. He didn't have to treat the garden as a place of tactical retreat. He could walk in it for enjoyment's sake, with me, with Mom. Surely all joys and contentment in life did not lie down Mexico way; surely there was still time for him to see that all fiestas end, that it is in the nature of dusky maidens to vanish like a dream. All right, so the present was sometimes a bunting-lined port packed with cheering locals, expansiveness and booze at the ready; but sometimes it was just rain swept and vacant. Still, most folk managed to put in there, accepting that they'd have to take their

chances. That other Dad, the capless one, could do the same. He might even let slip some of the love which I knew he had in him; he might surprise himself.

Again the fire went out. This time, I turned off the knob, gathered up my coat and the remaining coins from the kitchenette and went round switching off the lights. The flat door stuck badly. As I yanked it open, something bounced off my head. Looking up, I saw a high, narrow shelf which I'd never noticed, cluttered with small boxes; at my feet, winking up at me, was the shiny peak, the braiding. There was something else, too: a slip of paper, which seemed to have been dislodged from the lining. Letting the cap lie, I picked the paper up. Dad's hand, all over the place: *I formally declare and instigate proceedings for divorce. My signature* (duly given). *Wife's signature* (blank). Underneath was an explanation, doubtless for Mom's benefit, that some bloke had told him that this was an acceptable way to start the process and any solicitor was bound by law to honour it.

I'd never seen such carefully composed sentences in that hand. I could have lived without them. He'd listened to too many blokes in his time, lacking the sense to leave their wisdom behind with the empties when he left the pub. And how was he going to manage this business? Was I to be removed from the hospital scene, as at Paignton – told to hunt for his paper in the day room, or tell the nurse that his radio phones had packed up (as if they'd dare, in his presence)? Or was I to sit there while he pushed the slip across the sheets into Mom's lap and waited, confident that she would instantly append her neat, sloping signature to it? Perhaps he'd want mine as well, in that same belt-and-braces spirit he used to display in his work. I pictured him lying back on his pillow, a smile broadening under the ashen fluff: just a few squiggles, and then he'd be relieved of so many years and their memories. Then the anchor could be weighed in earnest.

Suddenly the last light went out, and I laughed aloud. Despite my intentions, I'd become so concerned about the gas that I'd forgotten "the magic," as he called it, which was far more likely to cut out. Still, I dutifully flicked the switch; he'd instilled that much respect in me for the unseen wonder of his trade. It was something – that and the hints of a love that never quite left the shadows.

Up to the moment I emerged into the street, I contemplated throwing cap and paper away. There was a scrawny privet screening Mom's car from the front door; she'd never know if I stuffed them in there, and I could always nip back before Dad was discharged and deal with them properly – or find that some nosy tenant had done it already. Even as I rounded the privet, I kept them in my right hand, hoping that some saving, unconscious spasm would push them out of sight for me. As it was, I just dropped them and stared. Mom was in the passenger seat, head over the dashboard, hands clutching it, her sobs deep and almost inhuman. A couple were leaning down at the car; the woman straightened at my approach:

"We helped her back from the phone," she said.

"Think her's had some bad news, pal," added the man.

“Are you her – ?” began the woman, completing the question with an uncertain nod.

“Son, yes,” I confirmed, quietly. They moved away slowly: “Good night, then,” the woman said awkwardly. Gingerly, as if I didn’t quite know what it was, I rounded the car and found the driver’s seat. Only when I turned the ignition did I realize that the cap and paper were still on the front path. There they could lie, I decided: the scribbled pain, the totem of times and places that had held him like a paramour in some lantern-lit dive. Delfigo was welcome to them. It owned them, after all.

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