

Keep your eyes open. Always.

OBLIGATIONS and consequences. And if you're unlucky, recriminations. None of it is straightforward, not even the simple stuff. So when it comes to the not-so-simple stuff, look out. Those who over the years sat around the table at Great Parva community council meetings dealt with it in their own way. Some didn't, of course. Some were too stupid to realise what was going on but ignorance, as they say, is bliss. Jeremy Kincaid was one such, scrambled eggs for brains and the personality of a used bus ticket. He had worked as a solicitor but wisely dealt purely in conveyancing and wills.

The wisdom was that of the senior partners who many years ago realised Jeremy's limits and had set him to work on the bread and butter stuff. His father and grandfather had been with the firm, Jeremy played a good round of golf, and the bread and butter stuff was difficult to get wrong. He lived in a very nice Georgian manor house just off the common. His wife died shortly after he retired, of breast cancer, but his circumstances and his Georgian home persuaded several of county widows to fall in love with him. Deborah Mearden won the raffle so to speak, and now Mr and Mrs Kincaid are useful members of the community council. There's no nothing much wrong with Jeremy, though there's nothing much right, either. Mrs Kincaid is not quite as dim as her second partner in life, but also not quite bright enough to see how Councillor Forsyth can wrap her and Mr Kincaid around his little finger and does so on the last Thursday of every month when the council meets.

The members of the community council are not entitled to use the title 'Councillor' but Peter Forsyth is also a member of the borough council and can style himself thus. He's a smart one is Peter Forsyth, and he never falls out with anyone, though not always as smart as he thinks. Consequences, see. Keep those to a minimum and life can be sweet.

'That's a lovely blouse, Deborah.'

'Why, thank you, Peter.'

'And it sets off your skin so well.'

'Do you think? I always find it so hard to find the right match.'

'And what a lovely scarf! Just right with that blouse.'

A great deal brighter than Jeremy and Deborah were Alice Spiegel, Jane O'Hooley and Denis Snell. And it would be a week with two Mondays in which Alice, Jane and Denis would allow themselves to be wrapped around anyone's finger. However, as Peter

Forsyth very soon realised none of them liked the other two, never had and never would. This usually gave him a clear run in most council matters. Usually, but not always.

The issue was John Pearson. Mr Pearson had served the community as a council member for many years, but he had been ill. John was and had long been the community council chairman. Not the Kincaids, not Peter Forsyth or Alice, Jane or Denis could remember a time when Mr Pearson had not been associated with the council. In the eyes of many in Great Parva Mr Pearson was the council. But Mr Pearson was now dying and the council would need a new chair. For the long periods Mr Pearson was away, the members had taken it in turns to chair meetings and each knew what the post demanded. And all but the Kincaids were keen to hold it permanently. That was also the issue.

Peter Forsyth was kept busy with his borough council duties, but he was sure that the post should be his. To him it seemed to make perfect sense. But how to gain it? The matter needed some thought.

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Whenever the council met early in the evening on a Thursday, three or four folk from the village always turned up. There was also the old man from the Bodenham News (so old he could remember a time when John Pearson was not a permanent fixture). Sometimes a young man or woman from the Mansfield Echo appeared, sometimes the paper had no one present. The village folk who turned up were those who were concerned with whatever issues the community council was then dealing with at a particular meeting, a dangerous swing in the play area, the needs for a bench at the bus shelter. After one such meeting Peter Forsyth took Denis Snell aside.

‘Fancy a pint, Denis?’

‘A pint Peter? Or is there something you want to talk about?’

‘You’re too clever for me, Denis, far too clever. But I also thought we might get a chance to catch up.’

It was lame, Peter knew it and Denis knew it, that was of no consequence. They sauntered down to the Red Rose, found a table in the corner, a pint for Peter and a Britvic orange for Denis.

‘Go on then, spit it out, Peter.’

‘It’s simple. Who’s going to take over from John?’

‘Well, I’m sure you would like it to be you.’

‘Well, yes of course, yes, but to be honest I’ve got too much on already.’

‘So who do you suggest?’

‘Well, I thought Jeremy’

‘Jeremy? Are you serious.’

‘I don’t see why not, he knows the ropes, and if it’s not Jeremy, or Deborah, it would be Alice or Jane and . . . Well, I suspect you wouldn’t want either.’

‘Or me?’

Well, I can’t see Alice and Jane going for it.’

So you want me to vote for Jeremy? Or Deborah?’

‘Well, Jeremy. I should think Deborah’s too busy with the gardening club and the old folks’ lunches. And its not a sinecure, there’s real work involved.’

Thus one ball was in play and Denis taken care of. Denis had no time for Alice or Jane, and both knew neither Jeremy nor Deborah could handle the job, so Denis would conclude that just left Peter Forsyth. The two talked of this in that, inconsequential stuff, before they lapsed into ever longer silences, finished their drinks and left.

. . .

‘Alice! Is this a bad time?’

The look on Alice’s face when she opened her front door to find Peter Forsyth on the doorstep meant it was always a bad time for Peter Forsyth to call.

‘No. Come in,’ but Alice did not take Peter Forsyth into the sitting room. They remained standing in the hall.

‘I’ll be brief. It’s about John Pearson and the fact that . . . well, he won’t be around for much longer and someone will have to take over. And I wondered whether we could compare notes.’

‘Compare notes?’

‘Yes, it will have to be you or Denis or Jane or one of the Kincaids and I don’t think Deborah Kincaid would really have the time. So what do you think? Denis, Jane or Jeremy?’

Alice who had survived Auschwitz as a six-year-old and come to England as an orphan in 1948 had learnt to keep her own counsel.

‘I’ll think about it.’

‘But you agree the only choices are Denis, Jane and Jeremy? Or you of course, but would you get Denis and Jane’s vote? Me, I’ve got far much on at borough level, so that is me out.’

‘As I said I’ll think about it.’

They stood for a moment or two in the hall. Then

‘Well, I’d better be on my way, Alice, thank you for sparing me the time.’

The look on Alice’s face meant who would prefer not to spare Peter Forsyth any time, ever. But Peter Forsyth didn’t care.

‘That could be another in the bag,’ he told himself as he made his way back to the village.

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‘I won’t beat about the bush, Jane, I never liked to. I’ve been speaking to Denis and Alice ...’

‘Oh, God what have they been saying? You can’t believe the half it, you really should take care, Peter. What’s it all about now?’

‘Well, I went to see them, so ...’

‘... so they filled your head with all kinds of nonsense about this and that and I don’t mind telling you it does worry me ...’

‘I wanted their views on ...’

‘... and I’m sure you got them, and what was it this time? The bus schedule, long grass in the graveyard, Denis has got a bee in his bonnet that and Alice, well Alice ...’

‘It was about the election for community council chair.’

‘What election? I didn’t know there was one.’

‘Well, there will be one soon because it’s almost certain John Pearson will have to step down ...’

‘... and about time, too, I don’t mean to be unpleasant but as far as I’m concerned he’s been ill for far too long, and it would have been only decent to make way for someone else some time ago ... no, that sounds mean and I don’t mean to be mean, I like John I’ve always had time for him but ...’

‘It will have to be you, Denis or Alice. Or of course, Jeremy, but ...’

‘Denis or Alice? Or me? I don’t want it and ...’

She didn’t say it but neither Denis or Alice would get her vote, ever.

‘So Jeremy?’

‘What about you?’

‘No, I couldn’t, it would be silly, I’ve really got too much on. Not me, sorry.’

‘Well this needs a little thought. You say Jeremy?’

‘I’m not saying anyone, I’m just trying to map out the possibilities.’

‘Do you honestly think Jeremy would up to it?’

‘I don’t see why not . . .’

Jane scoffed.

‘Don’t you? Well, I’ll think about it. When’s the election?’

‘Oh, nothing’s fixed and we mustn’t jump the gun, John hasn’t even retired yet.’

‘Well, no, not yet, but . . .’

‘Well, from what I hear, it will have to be soon, but there you go. As in a sense we all must sooner or later.’

. . .

John Pearson died in his sleep not three weeks later. The Kincaids, Denis, Alice, Jane and Peter Forsyth thought a memorial bench by the church would be appropriate. After all John had served, Great Parva for many years. A subscription was opened. Then there was the question of the vacant seat on the council. No one ever stood for election to the council, so a new co-option would again take place.

‘Tom Harris seems keen. Or what about Ginny Breock?’

But it was Tom Harris who was asked to fill the vacant seat.

At his first meeting, the main item on the agenda was to choose a new council chairman. The result distressed Peter Forsyth. Neither he nor Jeremy Kincaid or even Deborah was elected. Tom Harris got five of the seven votes. Peter Forsyth as not pleased.

‘With due respect to Tom here, he has no experience of this kind of thing at all!’

‘No, he hasn’t, but he’ll learn,’ Alice told him. ‘I’m sure he will, we all do in time.’