

Rochelle and Dave

By Dante Harker

A wave of excitement rushed through the mass of people in the waiting crowd as, at 10:02 am, the doors finally opened on the UK's premier, and only, Crime and Punishment Expo! The crowd resembled penguins in the zoo at feeding time; bobbing heads, bodies clambering forward, arms discreetly and not so discreetly doing what they could to get their owner nearer to the arena's doors.

Dave and Rochelle didn't have to rush; they had been here hours, and when the security guard finally pulled open the huge glass doors, they were the first in line. Even when they stepped inside Birmingham's cavernous National Arena, the pair took it easy. They had come here for one thing, and one thing only, to see Jessica Fletcher, and she wasn't due to arrive until 2 pm.

'Can we go and eat now?' Rochelle whined. The nineteen-year old's distinctive northern accent distorted her words so when she said 'go' it sounded as if the word had extra 'o's and her 'now' had been pronounced 'narr', with the final 'r' being dragged out for several seconds to emphasise her need for food. She had taken Dave by the arm and,

using her considerable bulk, she'd ushered her similarly-proportioned boyfriend through the mass of cooing fans and off into a safe corner.

'Can we just work out where in the arena she will be first? It won't take a minute.' On the walls around the entrance hall were a variety of posters advertising the prestigious guests who were signing autographs that day. Dave's gaze leapt from one to the next, trying to find his heroine.

'But we've been queuing for hours!' Rochelle said, this time she managed to sound like a spoilt ten-year-old child.

'Yeah, 'Elle, but your mother made you a whopping breakfast before we left, and I got you a burger to eat in queue!'

Rochelle wanted to whine further, so what if her mother had made her beans on toast for breakfast? And, of course, there were the cheese and ham sandwiches she had been packed off with, and already finished on the train – while Dave had been away in the loo. And so what if she'd had a burger? She was soooo hungry! Still, sensing this was a losing battle she said, 'fine, yeah, anyway, let's go see what time 'Mrs, "everyone dies the moment I enter the room" is on.'

'It is what we're here for,' Dave replied. He was getting increasingly annoyed that he couldn't find any 'Murder, She Wrote' posters, surely given that Jessica Fletcher was the star of this murder mystery extravaganza, the show's poster should be everywhere.

'It might be what you're here for! It's you who loves that old show. Me, I only came for the day out. Plus, it was fun getting my dad up at stupid-o'clock to drive us to the train station this morning.' Seeming to speak without the need to take a breath, Rochelle dropped her tone into something deep and gravelly, mimicking her father's, and said, 'I don't know why you have to go all way 't Birmingham, 'Elle', there's nowt there you can't get here!'

'Except Jessica Fletcher of course; you can't find her in our scrod- bucket of a town!' Dave snapped, his annoyance at not being able to find any posters was reaching the boil.

'Where the fuck are the posters? I don't understand, surely, she's the star?' Dave began pointing at the various posters and said, 'look, there's that no-name from CSI and the one who died five seasons ago in, oh God, what's the name of that stupid show?'

'Crime and Punishment,' Rochelle offered her voice quieter now. Partly because most of the other attendees had gathered up timetables and maps, and made their way out

of the entrance hall, and partly because she had started to feel nauseated. She knew that if she didn't get to the toilet soon, she would lose her breakfast, the sandwiches and that burger. And if that happened she really would feel hungry!

'That's the one, "Crime and Punishment", and look, they've even got people from "The Bill". Who wants to see them? It's only watched by old grannies – where is she?' Dave demanded; a question that gave Rochelle a means of escape.

'I tell you what darlin', why don't you go and ask someone while I nip off to the loo?' Dave liked that idea; he nodded an ok and then stalked off to find out what the hell was going on.

In the toilet cubical, Rochelle fought to get her dark blue leggings down past her knees. The lycra cut into the acres of fat on her thighs and gave the impression of string tied around bags full of congealed yoghurt. But with little choice, rather than sitting down, she dropping to her newly bared knees, pulled back her streaked blond hair and with retch after retch she said a second 'hello' to the partially digested contents of her stomach.

'I can't keep this up,' she said to the empty bathroom once she had finished. After wiping away the remnants of vomit from around her mouth, swilling to get rid of any remaining

chunks in her teeth and the smell, she then splashed her face with water and made her way back out into the entrance hall.

Dave greeted her return; his face bright, his demeanour that of an excited puppy. 'There's no need to worry, follow me.' Rochelle did, though she wasn't worried – not about this at least – in fact, she kind of hoped the "Murder, She Wrote" woman wouldn't show up, then they could go off into the city centre and do some shopping.

'Look, see...' Dave said as he dragged her out of the entrance and into the main hall.

Dave had dressed up for their trip; he had broken out his best trousers. But as an apprentice bricklayer, in a tiny Yorkshire town to many Dave was very much a stereotype. His 'best' trousers only saw the outside of their drawer once or twice a year – mainly Christmas and Easter, or for the odd wedding that might come along. And this particular pair of trousers was now a few years old and judging by the fatty overhang, they had been bought when Dave was still a size-38 waist.

Originally, Dave's mother had laid out a crisp white shirt for him to wear with the black trousers, though it had quickly become clear that he would need to leave the trousers' top button undone and wear a belt to keep them up – which put

pay to a tucked-in shirt. So, in the end, he had gone with his favourite green polo shirt. Which though it looked smart, it barely covered the bottom of his belly, which protruded out like a hairy beach-ball, and from the side the shirt made him look like a large, and probably dull sounding, bell.

The main hall was a vast square cavern. Its domed roof was made out of diamond-shaped pieces of frosted glass, which made it seem like everyone was standing on the inside of a fly's eye. Lining the outside of the square hall were hundreds of vendors: comics, action figures, books, puzzles, collectors' cards, posters – a fan's wet dream.

On the inside of the square, there was a second tier of stalls, these formed a broken circle; effectively two semicircles, again containing stalls, with two parallel rows running down the centre of the hall, breaking up the circle. On the far wall, opposite the entrance, there was a long podium above which posters of the attending stars had been placed. From where they were standing it was hard to make out any of the other star's faces. Still, Dave wasn't concerned about anyone other than the woman who was going to take centre stage. And her poster was clear enough, a huge, ten times' life-size head shot, dominated the hall. It looked down on proceedings like Zeus watching over ancient Greece.

'Wow! Could they have got her head any bigger? Surely they could've shown her body too? That thing's frightening!'

Rochelle said; she was trying to scan the room for any sign of an eatery, but with little success as her eyes kept being drawn back to the iconic figure holding court in the hall.

‘How perfect is that? Right up there where she deserves to be!’ Dave said, his face a picture of star-struck awe. Oblivious to the grunts, moans and the small scene made by a woman with a pushchair, Dave stood right in the middle of the main thoroughfare. His 6’4 frame held enough fat to keep a chip shop in business for a week and, as he’d chosen to wear clothes just slightly too small, he looked like a skinny man with bags of potato’s strapped to all sides. To the people trying to pass him in the centre of the pathway, his bulk was like trying to pass a dump truck on a single-lane highway.

‘I tell you what she deserves – hanging! If a woman like that had been around a hundred years ago she would have been burned as a witch – so many dead people – she’s like flies round shit to a dead body!’

Dave looked down from the poster and said, ‘crude and nasty. That’s my girl, always there with a heartfelt word! Now shut up for a minute and let’s get a closer look.’ Then noticing that she was about to protest, he added ‘once we’ve gotten closer, we can go and get some food.’

That did the trick, and a rosy smile broke across Rochelle's perpetually sulky face – a smile that didn't last sadly as two steps further into the hall and a man accidentally bumped 'Elle's' shoulder.

'Watch where you're going, geek!' Rochelle snapped, her round pudgy face screwing up, giving it the impression of an overly ripe apple. The man apologised, though his tiny frame had suffered far worse from the impact than Rochelle's.

That impact was the first of many. The hall was heaving, though Rochelle continued to get bumped into because she refused to give way. And like a baby rhino she barged her way down the central runway, leaving bruised shoulders in her wake.

'I don't see why you need a closer look – that thing must be twenty feet tall!' Rochelle said as they approached the podium.

'I told you before, whine-a-lot, this is what we came for. I've been saving months for this – I said you didn't have to come along – you insisted.' This trip had cost him more than a week's wage; he wanted to enjoy it. Since boyhood, he had loved 'Murder, She Wrote.' As a young child, he'd sat in his Nan's arms and listened to her do her best to guess who'd done it. His Nan's cunning tactic was to work her way through every character, declaring they were the one. She

would then sleep her way through the middle section, and when she woke, and the murderer was revealed, she could legitimately claim that she was right all along.

Dave missed his Nan; she had passed away two years ago now. His Nan had been at the centre of his upbringing; always there when he had needed her, a place to run when life got too difficult – which with alcoholic and often abusive parents, it often had. He missed her huge Sunday dinners, the house's roaring coal fire – red face, cold back – and the way she made tea in a pot and left it to stew so long that you could almost stand a spoon up in it when it was poured.

As Dave looked up into the face of Jessica Fletcher, her kindly eyes watching over him, and the rest of the hall – keeping an eye out for any clues the incompetent police department were sure to have missed – he felt safe again.

He felt free of the worries that spawned with the onset of adulthood. 'You're twenty now, it's about time you thought about doing the honourable thing with that girlfriend of yours – not wasting money gallivanting halfway across the country to see some TV woman!' These had been his dad's words when he had told him he couldn't do any overtime in the family building firm, as he needed the Saturday off to see his childhood idol.

In his boyhood, playing in the garden at his Nan's the world had offered so much promise. But now, with her gone, and 'real life' upon him, he felt lost.

Somewhere in the periphery, he could hear Rochelle moaning – she did nothing but – but he managed to blank her out as he looked at that warming face. Five years they had been together, met at school, in detention. Dave had got a week for faking letters to get him out of P.E., and Rochelle had thrown another girl out of a window – it had only been from the first floor, which is why she had received a week's detention rather than getting expelled or a prison sentence. By the end of the week, Rochelle was the first, and still, the only girl he'd had sex with – he was her fifth boy.

Rochelle wanted to get married – their names were already on the list for a council house – have babies, watch TV all day long and not have to work. Dave guessed at this last part, but if Rochelle's three older sisters were any indication, this is what the future would hold.

Dave wanted to travel, 'your mind is like a balloon,' his Nan had told him once, 'it might be ok and pretty the way it comes out of the packet, but it doesn't reach its full glory until it's filled. And travel is to your mind as air is to the balloon.' She had also told him that it was bad luck to cut your nails on a Friday and Sunday, that children over two shouldn't have dummies and you should never trust anyone

the colour of night. This last, racist, remark, he had put down to his Nan's advancing years, rather than any actual malice.

Marriage would not allow him to travel, or at least marriage to Rochelle wouldn't – not unless he went first and left her a trail of cake to follow. Plus, there was the another small matter of the new trainee at work – Gavin – shy, handsome, Gavin. This wasn't the time, Dave thought, though he knew he had to make time with Rochelle soon for what he knew would be a difficult conversation – still, not now. Dave, pulling his gaze away from the poster, turned back to Rochelle who was wittering:

'...I never understood what people saw in that show, some old woman roaming the countryside solving murders – stupid. Just think how many people's lives they'd have saved if they'd locked her up at the end of the first episode!'

'Wow, your mouth never stops working does it?' Dave said, but Rochelle was on a roll.

'The police would never let some old granny near a crime scene: "Excuse me Mr Policemen, I've written some murder books, could I please have a look around? I might tamper with some evidence, spot a clue you've missed and give a knowing look to the camera, but I promise to be quick", it's all bollocks.'

Several people from the surrounding stalls were glaring at Rochelle's rant. Dave noticed them, but thankfully Rochelle hadn't and before she could, and cause an even bigger scene, he ushered her off to the food hall.

'You could go shopping you know? It's not that far into the city centre from here.' Dave offered, after ordering two plates of chips and a couple of burgers.

'But I don't want to go on my own, can't you come?' Rochelle replied, in her customary whining tone. Taking their completed orders they worked their way through the throng of people who, though it was still before 11 am, had decided they were in need of fast-food. Rochelle raced a much smaller woman to a newly vacated seat in the window – she didn't win, but that didn't stop 'Elle took the table's other seat and glared at the women until scurried away.

'So, can we go shopping?' Rochelle asked again, Dave having failed to answer her the first time round.

'You can, I'm not! You know how much I've been looking forward to coming here – I don't know why you have to ruin it.'

'Oh don't start that again, you always say I ruin stuff – I'm sick of you treating me like shit.' Rochelle took a bite of her

burger and chewed. The mushy slopping sound she made with each over enthusiastic chomp, grated on Dave's already fried nerves.

'How do I treat you like shit? I spend all my money on you, and what I don't, I have to save up cos you want to buy "pretty things" for our flat. That's if the council ever give us one, which I'm sure they won't given we're bound to be at the bottom of the list!'

This was how it always started, for the last year now; they had not been able to spend more than a few hours in each other's company before the arguments set in. Rochelle didn't understand why all her friends were either married or at least living with their boyfriends, while she was still with her parents. At this rate, she'd be stuck working, part-time, in 'Superdrug' for the rest of her life!

Dave knew what he wanted, to travel, and to work out why he had feelings for Gavin – sweet, handsome Gavin – and the last thing he wanted to do was get married.

Rochelle finished stuffing her burger into her mouth and then added a couple of chips. Dave could see from the look in her eye that she was stalling for a second to give herself time to think of a suitable response. Before she had fully emptied her mouth, her reply came to her, Dave braced himself and as her first words shot from her mouth, so did small lumps of

the burger.

‘Well, I’m sure we won’t be on the bottom of the list for long; at least not in seven or eight months.’ Rochelle, as subtle as an Eastenders plot line – her favourite soap.

‘What?’ Dave snapped, though he had heard her clear enough.

‘I’m pregnant! In a couple of months, we’ll be at the top of that stupid housing list!’ Rochelle’s voice raised as she announced the news, it was as if she had been waiting for the right moment to tell him, and now that she’d found it, she felt that everyone should be in on her secret.

‘How the hell can you be pregnant?’ Dave asked, wiping a small lump of chip off his cheek.

‘Shit Dave, I know you’re a bit slow at times, but I thought you’d at least know where babies come from!’ At her sarcasm Rochelle looked around to see if anyone was listening in, she wanted someone to collude with, have someone appreciate her superior wit. No one was interested and anyone who was, quickly looked back to whatever action figure, or comic they’d bought, not daring to catch her eye – a storm was coming.

‘Yeah, you smart bitch, I know perfectly well where babies come from – I mean, I thought you were on the pill?’ Dave was reacting rather than reasoning. He couldn’t think. She couldn’t be pregnant. How could he have a child with her? He didn’t love her, wasn’t sure he ever had, he wasn’t even sure he could ever love a woman.

‘Well you know I don’t take it all the time – it gives me stomach ache.’ Rochelle had always seen Dave as a fish caught at the end of a line, over the years she had done what she could to reel him in. She’d gone from a size 28 to a size 18 and back up again, but it hadn’t made a difference. But now, she felt like she had the reel in her hand and she was bringing home her catch.

‘I never knew that you’ve never told me that! Surely if you weren’t taking it, we should’ve been using something else.’ Dave felt like he had been dumped in a giant oven-top kettle. At the start of the day he had felt warm and excited, just the odd bubble here and there as he’d argued with his dad about him going today. But then the boil started, ‘Elle’s whining, her need to be fed continually, like a baby walrus, and now this. Now the kettle boiled away, the bubbles all around bashing him against the sides. And Rochelle’s voice was like the screeching whistle announcing the kettle was about to explode!

Slamming her fist on the table Rochelle snapped: 'Like you'd ever wear a condom, and anyway, it's not like we have sex that often – you're always too fucking tired. So I thought we'd be all right! And you don't even sound like you want this baby?'

Before he gave himself enough time to think through his reply, Dave just sort of screamed, 'I don't!' And if that wasn't enough to wipe the smug look off of Elle's face, he added 'why the hell would I want a child, I'm twenty, I don't want to settle down, plus there's Gavin!'

Rochelle's mouth dropped open. In there, Dave could see half masticated lumps of chips and burger clinging to her filling encrusted teeth. 'What the fuck do you mean "plus there's Gavin"? Who the shitting hell is Gavin?', then as if a distant memory had hit her in the head with a spade, Rochelle's face contorted as she spat out, 'are you talking about that manorexic freak at your work – don't tell me you have a thing for him! What are you, some kind of fucking queer?'

Dave wasn't sure what he was, he'd been trying not to think about it, but he couldn't have Gavin talked about that way.

'He's not a freak, and if manorexic means skinny then not everyone wants to be the size of a blimp you know!' Dave's voice had risen to the same level as Rochelle, and he knew

that more and more heads had turned their way. He looked for the door, looked for an escape route – but all the time in the back of his mind was the reason why he had come here – to see Jessica Fetcher – and he could not go without meeting her. Still, he knew what was coming and it wasn't going to be pretty.

'How the fuck can a man like you be a homo? You're a sodding bricklayer for Christ's sake!' Rochelle's tongue was sharp and doing its best to draw blood.

'What's that got to do with anything?' Dave asked, hoping that his newly lowered voice would help to lower Rochelle's. But it didn't, as she wasn't listening – her words just kept on flowing.

'And look at you, poofs aren't meant to be fit, the only thing you fit into these days is a bin bag, and you're growing too fat for that. It's like you're growing fat on your fat!'

Dave wanted to retaliate, call her a fat cow but less useful as she couldn't even produce milk. But he knew it wouldn't help, and in fact, very soon she would be able. What he really wanted now was for her to leave him, storm out, and then he could see his idol and face whatever trouble she will cause another time.

‘Look, I’m not saying I’m a poof, or that I won’t take care of you and the baby, it’s just I’ve been having feelings for this guy at work.’ Dave said, trying to build an apology into his tone – it didn’t work.

‘Do you think you’re getting your dirty homo hands near this baby?’ She asked, holding her stomach, ‘there’s no way I’m having you touch the little thing after you’ve been sticking your cock up God knows whose arse – sick! Wait till your dad finds out!’ As full of venom as Rochelle’s words were, somewhere inside her, she felt a sense of relief. All she wanted out of life was to sit and watch talk shows all day long, and at night settle down and watch an evening of soaps. She knew, like her sisters, that she could palm her kid off on her mother. And now it looked like she’d be able to get Dave to pay for it all, without actually having to make any of the compromises that would surely come with living together.

‘You can’t tell m’dad. Shit he’d kill me!’ When Dave had mentioned Gavin, he had seen his revelation as a step forward, a way of moving towards actually telling Gavin that he had feelings for him, but that’s as far as he’d thought it through. His life would be over if his dad found out, he was sure to tell the lads at work and then if he wasn’t in a living hell already, he soon would be.

‘Well, you should have thought about that before you started bumming around!’ Rochelle looked longingly at her empty plate. Her stomach was still aching for more – well she was eating for two – and her hunger wasn’t helping her mood.

‘I haven’t been bumming around, I didn’t even know I had a thing for guys before Gavin started working, and that’s only a couple of months ago.’

Rochelle’s face screwed up still further until it took on the features of a fire-damaged Spitting Image mask, ‘you have a “thing for guys”? That makes me feel physically sick. What’s your mother going to say down church on Sunday, “I’m sorry Vicar, my son won’t be coming today he’s decided he likes cock!” It’s a sin you know!’

Dave felt the heat under the kettle, the flame had been turned back on and the temperature rise started to make him forget he was in a packed cafeteria, surrounded by people all staring at them intently.

‘It’s only a sin if you believe in all that bollocks and quite frankly any fool who believes in a man sat on a cloud shouldn’t be listened to anyway. Plus, I haven’t been to church in years!’

‘Well maybe that’s the problem, if you had, you might have realised that what you are isn’t normal, it’s sick, and whether you believe it or not you’re going to burn in hell.’

And the kettle boiled.

‘Listen here you rancid, hog. Like you’re ever going to get a place in heaven, apart from the fact you’re gunner be an unmarried mother – a big fucking no-no – you’ve had more pricks in you than a pin cushion. And I don’t think God lets whores in heaven!’ The look on Rochelle’s face told him he’d gone too far, her face and the shocked expressions on everyone around them. This included the counter staff on the other side of the room who had stopped serving to listen.

Without thinking Rochelle whipped her arm up and smashed her palm across Dave’s face. The slap hit him like a horrific storm crashing waves against the rocks. The violent movement forced Rochelle’s enormous thighs into the underside of the table which sent their empty plates tumbling to the floor. The white crockery shattered, the noise of which echoed around the now whisper quiet cafeteria. And as the plates broke so did Rochelle. Tears vented forth and as she got to her feet and tried to speak, she could manage nothing but a blubber.

Everyone had stopped eating, they were waiting for Rochelle’s next move and she knew she only had two real

choices – cause an even greater scene or save her dignity and run for the door.

She wiped her face, sucked back the tears and never one to let an audience down she bellowed, 'YOU SICK. FUCKING. QUEER. I CAN'T BELIEVE I LET THAT NASTY LITTLE KNOB OF YOURS INSIDE ME WHEN ALL YOU REALLY WANTED WAS TO STAB SOME FUDGE! WELL, YOU'LL REGRET THE DAY YOU EVER MET ME, I PROMISE YOU THAT!' Rochelle's face shone red, her eyes demented and then with one last lurch forward, sufficient enough to make Dave think she was going to hit him again, she thundered from the room.

Of course Dave was already regretting the day he met her. And now, as a hundred eyes rested on him, all desperate, he was sure, to see him break into tears, too. He calmly got up from his seat, looked around for a different exit – well away from Rochelle – and then after finding one, he left the room. All the time he kept his head held high and his hand away from the tormenting pain that throbbed from the strike on his cheek.

Once he'd made his escape, he found the nearest toilet, locked himself in a cubical and cried. He cried, cried, and then cried some more. His tears were for his lost childhood, his Nan and how he knew his world was going to change forever. He knew that by the time he made it back home that

everyone would know he was gay, even if he wasn't a hundred percent sure himself. Rochelle would make sure his entire world knew what an evil person he was; a pariah of the highest order.

Dave felt like his tears would never stop, but then this was the first time they had ever been allowed to start. At the death of his Nan, his father had told him to 'suck it up, men in our family don't cry.' And he hadn't, he'd been strong, done the manly thing. And when he'd realised what the strange feeling was whenever Gavin spoke to him, feelings he knew he'd been capable of for many years, he didn't cave in, even though he knew how much they could potentially change his life.

But now, sat here, in the dank-smelling toilet, reading messages off the wall written by the rainbow-loving brigade he was soon to join, he had no choice but surrender.

And he was going to be a dad, a realisation that sent another stream of tears rolling down his cheeks. He didn't know what to do, he wanted to sit here forever, to die here.

Then in the background he heard the muffled sound of a PA system. The words 'Murder, She Wrote' – he listened intently, and though the words weren't entirely clear he managed to make out, 'starting early,' 'question time', and 'five minutes' – enough words to stem the flow of tears.

‘Shit, shit, shit, must look a mess’, Dave said to the empty cubical. New baby, evil girlfriend and home-life ruined or not, Dave thought, there’s no way he was going to miss what he’d come here for.

After two minutes in front of the bathroom’s mirror, he’d managed to reduce the puffiness from around his eyes. At least now he didn’t look like a psycho fan who’d been crying at the thought of seeing his idol. The crimson hand print on his left cheek was another matter. He cupped cold water to it in a vain attempt to bring down the bruising but like his battered ego, it was here to stay. Still, no matter, Jessica Fletcher awaits.

Back in the main hall, ten rows of chairs, 25 chairs per row, had been set up facing the central, spotlit podium. By the time Dave arrived, most of the chairs were filled. Fortunately, they had filled from the front backwards, which allowed him to sit where he’d already intended, at the far back corner. He knew people were going to stare – he was the queer who’d got his girlfriend pregnant – but he could at least force people to have to turn around if they were going to do that.

As he took his seat a few disapproving eyes caught his, but they soon looked away as a celebritard from a local radio station spent several minutes running through upcoming

star's credentials.

Dave watched as his beloved idol made it to the stage. She looked older than when he'd last seen her on small screen. But that just added to her Grandmotherly charm. Her smile was warm and bright and the whole audience erupted as she said her first hello. Dave watched in mouth-open awe as the actress breezed through question after question. She was witty and smart and even when the most die hard 'Murder, She Wrote' fan asked an obscure question relating to a confused plotline years before, she didn't falter.

To Dave, the question and answer session felt like a dream; each word that flowed from her lips seemed like a lullaby drifting on the wind. Her answers soothed him and her warmth and compassion made the events of the day vanish into the ether.

But soon enough it was over, Dave heard the compere say, 'that's about it folks, there's just enough time for one last question' and as an action without thought, Dave shot his hand into the air, 'you sir, you at the back'.

'Shit, shit, the bouncy compere's talking to me,' Dave said under his breath when he realised what he'd done.

‘Come on son, don’t be shy, come on, stand up, we can hardly see you back there – what’s your question.’ Dave looked at the compere’s eager face and did as he was requested.

‘Oh, you have been in the wars, you poor dear,’ Dave’s idol said as he got to his feet.

‘I’m sure I’ll be ok,’ Dave muttered, as he reddened at the kind words.

‘I’m sure you will, now what’s your question?’ the compere asked, doing his best, and his job, to keep proceedings to time.

Dave wasn’t sure what his question was, he had so many, and so he just took a deep breath and let the words flow from him.

‘Well Mrs Fletcher,’ the audience laughed at the use of the actress’s screen name, but his idol just smiled and nodded for him to continue, ‘over the many years the show has been running, you must have met and worked with hundreds of people. I was just wondering, either on the show or off, what is the best piece of advice you’ve been given.’

‘Well done kid, what a great question to end the proceedings with,’ the compere said, seeming genuinely pleased that Dave had managed to sum up such a good, almost rehearsed, question.

‘That is a good question,’ the actress agreed, then looking up for a second as if to retrieve some gem of knowledge locked away in the deepest part of her mind, she continued ‘year’s ago on the show, I think in the very first season, there’s an episode where I’m debating going travelling, I’d been invited on a book tour but it meant leaving Cabot Cove.’

Dave liked that his idol was talking in the first person, and hadn’t bothered to say ‘my character’ because as he saw it, the woman in front of him was Jessica Fletcher.

‘I remember that there was a heartfelt moment with an old friend – a dear woman who’s long passed now. We were sat in front of a roaring fire – faces warm, backs cold – having a nice cup of tea and she told me a little thing about a balloon. She said our minds were like balloons, they look ok out of the packet, but only through travel do they expand to their full glory.’

At her words fireworks seemed to explode inside Dave’s head. The idea that this wonderful lady would give him the same advice that he’d been given from his Nan was sheer

heaven. And of course he didn't consider for a second that his Nan many have actually got her quote from the TV show, why would he, in his eyes his Nan was perfect, and so too was the wonderful Jessica Fletcher.

The crowd again erupted in applause as the star stood up, took a bow and was then ushered into another room where she was signing autographs.

Dave debated joining the queue for an autograph but he decided that his encounter had been perfect and he didn't want to ruin it if perhaps she only gave him a passing 'hello'. Plus, he'd already bought a signed photo off of Ebay and the compere had said that signings would be limited to the first one hundred people due to time constraints. And by the time Dave had snapped himself out of his delirium there was easily more than that in the queue.

Leaving the arena he felt renewed. His idol's words filled him with hope. The memories they invoked warmed his heart, and gave him the strength to tattle whatever his homecoming would throw at him.

Out in the fresh air, Dave made his way over to the train station but, as he approached, his eyes met Rochelle's. She was a hundred yards in front of him, a king-size Mars bar in one hand a bottle of full-fat Coke in the other. Her face was a mess of tears and smeared makeup; she looked pitiful and

very much alone.

He wanted to run off, catch another train, but he knew he would have to face his fate at some point so it might as well be now.

Walking over to his ex-girlfriend, Dave took the empty seat at her side. He half expected Rochelle to move away, or worse, start screaming again. But she did neither. Instead she forced the rest of the Mars bar into her already full mouth, chewed, swallowed, swilled around some Coke, and when it was gone she said, 'I'll be a laughing stock.' Her words were quiet, almost a whimper.

'What do you mean?' Dave asked, matching her voice's level.

'Think about it, people might have sympathy to start with, but soon enough people are gunner say that I turned you queer. Or worse, they're going to say that the thought of you having my baby turned you gay.' Dave wanted to disagree, but the 'people' she was talking about, 'Elle's friends and family, her sisters in particular, could be real bitches. They already mocked her for being unable to 'land her man', so they'd have a field day with all of this.

Dave saw his chance; part of him wanted to reassure his simpering ex, but it was clear her pain could work in his favour.

‘What a nightmare that’d be, you know how nasty your sisters can get at times, they’d never leave you alone.’ Dave’s words caused a tear to run down Rochelle’s face. He knew she’d had enough; it was time for him to be the hero.

‘Of course we don’t have to split up, you know?’ Dave said, offering her a gentle smile.

‘We don’t? But you’re a poof?’ Though Rochelle offered up a valid point, she was taking the bait.

‘Yeah, but only you and me know that. We don’t have to tell anyone and, given you’re having my baby, that changes things a little. Not that we have to stay together forever. Not long after the baby’s born I’ll be a qualified bricklayer and there’s really good money working aboard these days.’

‘You’d go away,’ noting Rochelle’s reservation, Dave quickly continued.

‘I would, but think about it, I’d be in a really good job, earning good money – money that I can send back to you and the bairn. You could lead the life you want, I could do what I

wanted and, after a certain time, you could say that you dumped me because you wanted a man at home – win, win.’

‘But surely people will find out you’re a homo eventually, and what about this Gavin lad?’ It was clear that Rochelle liked the idea, her face had brightened, she was gulping rather than just swilling her drink and she was now just clearing up some loose ends.

‘Well if they ever do find out, and let’s face it, I’m not about to rush and tell my family or anyone else for that matter, then that’ll be years from now, and well after we’ve split up. I could always claim that I couldn’t find another girl to match up to you, so I turned to guys.’ Both parties were getting into the idea; it appeared to be an acceptable solution for both.

‘And what about this Gavin, can you keep your hands off him?’ ‘Elle asked, the last thing she needed sorted.

‘Well, firstly, I’m sure he’s straight, and secondly someone like me would never be able to pull a guy like that,’ Rochelle’s eyebrows raised at the idea of her huge, manly, bricklayer boyfriend talking about another guy. But she knew it was something she was going to have to get used to if their plan was to work. And she wanted it to work; it meant money for nothing, and all the chat shows she could watch.

‘And even if those first two things weren’t enough, the idea that I’d act on anything under my dad’s nose is just crazy, he’d string me up!’ Dave added, of course if Gavin did turn out to be gay, and a ‘chubby chaser’ at that, then what his dad or the rest of the world thought wouldn’t matter, and this new, ill-conceived plan wouldn’t stand in the way of his happiness either. But this latter eventuality was unlikely and, as he’d been hiding his sexuality well enough for the last twenty years, he thought that there was a good chance he could manage it for another year or so. Then he’d be off, filling his balloon and the tiny minds of his mining town would be long behind him.

Dave looked into Rochelle’s bloodshot eyes and smiled, she returned the gesture and the plan was set.

‘That’s quite a bruise you’ve got there, we’ll have to come up with a good story for it on the train home.’ Rochelle said, the sense of quiet satisfaction could just about be heard in her tone.

‘I’m sure we’ll think of something.’ Dave answered.

‘So how was she, the “Murder, She Wrote” woman?’ ‘Elle asked as the train pulled into the station.

'Fantastic!' Dave said as they walked hand-in-hand for the train.

And, as they stepped into the carriage, Rochelle looked back at the arena and couldn't help but ask, 'has anyone died in there yet?'
