

***Winner of the Third Prize in the Adults Section***

**Fooled**

**Tim Bates**

'This is just the beginning of what promises to be a very long day,' I mutter to myself as I close the door. The car is as nearly ready for the trip as a twenty-two-year-old Renault 5 can be. I checked fluids, tyre pressures and general dilapidation last night, and petitioned the gods of motoring to hold it together for as long as their compassion will allow. I set the road atlas on the passenger seat along with a bundle of mixed feelings to keep me company.

The clear blue sky has a fluff of cirrus in the west and trees are in glorious blossom. The dawn chorus is winding down and I feel a surge of spirit in anticipation of setting off on a journey. Then the moment sobers and the gravity of my errand returns with a thud. I pull out the choke and turn the key.

Has it been only a couple of days since the policeman rang me? It seems as if I have been wrestling with this for ages. I suppose that's what happens with a shock. Everything slows to a crawl. People say that a car crash seems to take on eternity. I remember feeling irritated, at first, when he tried to elicit information before identifying himself.

'Hello.'

'Who am I talking to?'

'Well, you rang me, so I'm asking you the same question.'

He drew an audible breath. 'This is Detective Constable Ken Fletcher, of the South Yorkshire Constabulary. Do you know a Derek Owen?'

'Yes, I know Derek Owen.'

'Can you tell me what you know about him?'

My stomach clenched. He had my full attention. 'What is it you think I might know about him? It might help if you were to give me a context.'

'There's no easy way of telling you this. He's killed his father and attempted to kill his mother. I'm talking to you because I have his mobile phone which contains recent messages from you.'

I warmed to the policeman. How difficult it must have been for him to ring people he didn't know, looking for scraps of information about a man he has in custody about whom he knows little more. It must be like trying to focus a camera in the fog.

'Yikes!' I blurted. 'I never would have imagined that. I thought he might have hurt himself.'

'Ah.' The policeman paused. 'How do you know him?'

I told him that I had cast Derek as the Fool in the mummings' play I had directed for May Day. I told him how brilliant he had been in rehearsal, how quickly he had learned his lines and how his facility with physical comedy had sparked the

other actors to reach beyond their inhibitions to play with the script. I told him how Derek had asked me to meet him at Java Tree, five days before we were to be on stage, to tell me that he felt he had to quit the play and that he would be leaving town. He had said that he would go to Sheffield to stay with his parents for a while.

I arrived at the café a few minutes after him, said hello to a couple of friends on the way to his table and sat down. I remember the elephant-in-the-room awkwardness of halting small talk between articulate people with something to talk about that is delayed by ordering and receiving mugs of latté and a general hubbub. Derek talked about feeling overloaded, of being unable to cope, of having taken on too much, of hating to let people down. He felt confused and conflicted. He had lost his artistic direction. He loved the play, he said, but doubted that he would be able to perform. He was afraid he would ruin it for the others and of the chaos this would cause. Many words, but no details.

Where would I find an actor to replace him at short notice? How could I help the others to integrate someone new and to adjust their roles to accommodate the change? A costume? This was a crisis. My anxiety paled beside the crisis I could see in Derek's face. He was developing a thousand-yard stare. The man was in distress, drawing back, decoupling. Abruptly, he shook my hand, rose and walked to the door.

Friends came in. I had a five-minute meeting about another project, paid for the coffees and life went on. I found another actor who played a different type of fool, in a delightful way. The play was a hit and received fine reviews. I felt relieved, but slightly haunted.

A few days later, I rang Derek in Sheffield. He asked a series of questions. 'What are people saying about me?' 'What does anything mean?' 'Can I still make art?' 'Does it matter anyway?' This was unsettling. No, it was alarming. I found the most reassuring and steadying words I had, but they seemed to have no calming effect. After an hour, I asked him to call me whenever he might feel like it. I rang a friend and asked her to call him too. I tried to reach him several times during the following days, but there was never an answer, nor a reply to my messages.

Motoway miles click over with the passing of each minute. The Today programme gives way to Midweek, which slides into Woman's Hour. It's all background noise. I think of measuring my life with coffee spoons, realising that breakfast seems to have been ages ago. A knee is cramping and I've been wriggling in the seat with an increasing urgency from my bladder. Thinking 'bladder' leads to thinking 'fool'.

I'm not plagued by what ifs. Nothing I could have done would have altered the way the Fates spun the thread of Derek's life. I barely knew him, so I can't reproach myself for not having been a better friend. I had imagined that he would have been in good hands with his parents. The temptation to imagine endless scenarios, to hypothesise motives is just so much wheel-spinning.

Soon after, a large blue sign alerts me that I am approaching Manchester. I swoop into the forecourt of a service centre. Some clever clogs has written 'Abandon hope all ye who enter here' on the toilet wall. The line mind-worms me as I queue for indifferent coffee and rummage for the least bland sandwich on the shelf.

Where is the hope in any of this? I could do with the faith I once had that it springs eternal. What can I accomplish in this fool's errand? Give comfort to an acquaintance who will have shocked himself with what he was capable of doing

when he lost his fragile grip on hope? Am I having a laugh? Will he want to see me, or will he be flummoxed by shame and self-recrimination? How would I feel?

I carry my lunch outside to a picnic table as far as possible from the motorway and think of Derek's mum. She must be the most damaged soul in this mess. Derek will have been listening to the instructions of his daemons and submitting to them will diminish his responsibility. Did his mum see that they were taking him over? Did she attempt to stay his hand? Did he injure her? Oh, stop! Speculation is senseless. I can't and don't know what I'm doing here. What good can come of my visiting him?

I bin my rubbish and walk to the car, feeling chilled despite the warm, late spring sun. May as well top up the tank. How did the price of petrol creep up again? I clean the windscreen. I pay at the kiosk.

And now I'm sitting in the car unable to decide. Do I continue driving north, or do I turn around at the next interchange and head back home to all that once made sense?