



One

I have always been a writer.

I wrote my first novel at the age of six. It was seven and a half pages long and concerned a penguin, who happened to have the same name as me, and a lady hedgehog, who happened to have the same name as my schoolteacher. After overcoming some minor difficulties and misunderstandings they became firm friends and lived happily ever after; but their relationship was, understandably, entirely platonic. At the age I was then, hedgehog-meets-penguin struck me as a plot with greater possibilities than boy-meets-girl.

Little has changed. Today I am three writers and none of us seems to be able to write about sex.

Perhaps for that reason, none of us is especially successful. Together, we just about make a living, but we do not appear on the best-seller lists in the Sunday Times. We do not give readings at Hay-on-Wye. The British Council does not ask us to undertake tours of sub-Saharan Africa or to be writer in residence at Odense University. We do not win the Costa Prize for anything.

I am not sure that I like any of me but, of the three choices available, I have always been most comfortable being Peter Fielding. Peter Fielding writes crime novels featuring the redoubtable Sergeant Fairfax of the Buckfordshire Police. Fairfax is in late middle age and much embittered by his lack of promotion and by my inability to write him sex of any kind. When I first invented him, sixteen years ago, he was fifty-eight and about to be prematurely retired. He is now fifty-eight and a half and has solved twelve almost impossible cases in the intervening six months. He is probably quite justified in believing that he has been unfairly passed over.

Under the pen-name of J. R. Elliot I also write historical crime novels. I am not sure of J. R. Elliot's gender, but increasingly I think that I may be female. The books are all set in the reign of Richard II because I can no longer be bothered to research any other period. It is a well-established fact that nobody had sex between 1377 and 1399.

As Amanda Collins I produce an easily readable 150 pages of romantic fiction every eight months or so, to a set style and a set formula provided by the publisher. Miss Collins is popular with ladies of limited imagination and little experience of the real world. A short study of the genre had already revealed to me that doctors were the heroes of much romantic fiction – usually they were GPs or heart surgeons. I decided to choose the relatively obscure specialty of oral and maxillofacial surgery for mine. Oral and maxillofacial surgeons have a great deal of sex, occasionally with their own wives. But they do so very discreetly. My ladies prefer it that way, and so do I.

The three of us share an agent: Ms Elsie Thirkettle. She is the only person I have ever met, under the age of seventy, named Elsie. I once asked her, in view of the unfashionableness of her first name, and the fact that she clearly has no great love of it, why she didn't use her second name.

She looked at me as if I were an idiot boy that she had been tricked into babysitting by unkind neighbours. 'Do I look like a sodding Yvette?'

'But why did your parents call you Elsie, Elsie?'

'They never did like me. Tossers, the pair of them.'

My parents did not like me either. They called me Ethelred. My father's assurance that I was named after King Ethelred I (866–871) and not Ethelred the Unready (978–1016), was little consolation to a seven-year-old whose friends all called him 'Ethel'. I experimented with introducing myself as 'Red' for a while, but for some reason it never did catch on amongst my acquaintances. Oh, and my second name is Hengist, in case you were about to ask. Ethelred Hengist Tressider. It has never surprised anyone that I might prefer to be known as Amanda Collins.

It is possible that all agents despise authors, in the same way that school bursars despise headmasters, head waiters despise diners, chefs despise head waiters and shop assistants despise shoppers. Few agents despise authors quite so openly as Elsie, however.

'Authors? Couldn't fart without an agent to remind them where their arses are.'

I rarely try to contradict remarks of this sort. Based on Elsie's other clients, this is fair comment. Many of them probably could not fart even given this thoughtful assistance.

Elsie does in fact represent quite a number of other authors as well as the three of me. Occasionally we ask each other why we have settled for this loud, plump, eccentrically dressed little woman, who claims to enjoy neither the company of writers nor literature of any kind. Has she deliberately gathered together a group of particularly weak-willed individuals who lack the spirit either to answer her back or to leave her? Or do we all secretly enjoy having our work and our characters abused? Neither answer is convincing. The real reason is painful but quite clear: none of us is terribly good and Elsie is very successful at selling our manuscripts. She is also very honest in her criticism of our work.

'It's crap.'

'Would you like to be more specific?'

'It's dog's crap.'

'I see.' I fingered the manuscript on the table between us. Just the first draft of the first few chapters, but I had rather hoped that it would be universally hailed as a masterpiece.

'Leave the literary crime novel to Barbara sodding Vine. You can't do it. She can. Or, to put it another way, she can, you can't. Is that specific enough for you or would you like me to embroider it for you on a tea cosy in cross stitch?'

'I've put a lot of work into this manuscript already.'

'Not so that you'd notice, you haven't,' said Elsie kindly.

'But I've just spent three weeks in France researching the damned thing.'

'It won't be wasted. Send Fairfax to France. He deserves a break, poor bugger. Is France the place for him, though? He doesn't seem to have any interests beyond police work, Norman fonts and local history.'

'He's a crack addict, a drag artiste and he played for Germany in the '66 World Cup. My gentle readers suspect nothing as yet, but it's all in the next book.'

'It had better not be. Your gentle readers take that loser Fairfax very seriously and do not appreciate irony in any form. Sergeant Fairfax is your bread and butter, and twelve-and-a-half per cent of your bread and butter is my bread and butter. If Fairfax starts hankering after fishnet tights, send him round to me and I'll sort him out.'

This also was true. Elsie would sort him out. I once tried to give Fairfax an interest in Berlioz (I must have been reading too much Colin Dexter). Elsie had the blue pencil through that before you could say 'Morse'. 'Don't bother to develop his character,' she said. 'Your readers aren't interested in character. Your readers aren't interested in atmosphere. Your readers aren't interested in clever literary allusions. As for allegory, they won't know whether to fry it in butter or rub it on their piles. They just want to guess who did it before they get to the last page. And don't give them more than ten suspects, or they'll have to take their shoes off to count them.'

Perhaps I should have said that if there's one thing that Elsie despises more than her authors, it is anyone foolish enough to buy our work. But again, I would hesitate to contradict her.

To tell the truth, I rarely try to contradict Elsie on anything these days. That was why, sitting in my flat that evening, all those months ago, I knew that the first draft would remain for ever just that. But it was worth one more try.

'You could take the manuscript back to London with you,' I suggested, 'and read it properly.'

'The problem,' she said tartly, 'does not lie with my reading, and my waste-paper bin in London is already quite full enough, thank you. Do you know how many crap first novels there are out there?'

'No,' I said meekly, not having counted them.

'Too many,' said Elsie, not having counted either, but with a great deal more confidence in her opinions. 'Now, how was France?'

I sighed. 'Totally redundant from a literary point of view, apparently, but otherwise very pleasant. I stayed in a charming little hotel. I sat by the Loire and drank the local wine – Chinon mainly, but sometimes Bourgueil. I absorbed a great deal of extremely authentic atmosphere. The sun shone and the birds sang. I met nobody who had ever read one of my books. Bliss.'

‘Useful research.’

I sensed the irony in her voice – not a difficult achievement, since Elsie and subtlety are not even casual acquaintances. ‘My characters were going to spend a considerable amount of their time sitting by the Loire drinking wine,’ I said. ‘I pride myself on accuracy. I had to research it in depth.’

‘Bollocks. Did you have sex with anyone?’

‘No.’

‘I thought the French shagged anything that moved.’

‘Not in Châteauneuf-sur-Loire. Possibly all manner of depravities were practised in Plessis-les-Tours or Amboise, but I never went to either.’

‘Well then, next time, try Amboise. Hang loose. Get laid. Write it up in your next book.’

‘Not my next book. As you well know, I don’t do sex. And, though I cannot be absolutely certain in this matter, I don’t believe that I have ever hung loose.’

‘Is that why your wife left you?’

‘My ex-wife,’ I said. ‘To be pedantically accurate, my ex-wife. Geraldine and I were incompatible in a number of respects.’

‘The main way in which you were incompatible is that she was screwing your best mate.’

‘Ex-best mate,’ I said. ‘He is my ex-best mate.’

‘Then the cow walked out on you.’

‘You make it sound rather abrupt and uncaring. She stayed long enough to write me a very touching note.’

‘All right, she’s a literate cow,’ Elsie conceded generously. ‘She’s a fair woman in some ways, though not many. ‘Is she still with the chinless wonder?’

‘Rupert? No, she left him a while ago.’

She narrowed her eyes. ‘You seem better informed than you should be, Tressider. Don’t tell me you’re still in touch with the old slag?’

‘I must have just heard it from somebody. Why should you think I’m still in contact with her?’

‘Because you’re a prat, that’s why. I’d like to think that you were too sensible to go within a hundred miles of her. Normal people in your position – not that I know many normal people in my line of work, of course – sever all ties with their ex. Making a wax effigy and sticking pins in it is also said to be good. I could get you some wax if you like. There’s this Nigerian bloke down the market. He does pins too.’

'I think that it's quite possible to be friends with a former spouse,' I said. 'Geraldine and I must have had something in common, after all. We had a number of happy years together, though admittedly she was simultaneously having a number of happy years with somebody else. Life's too short to be bitter over these things.'

'OK, Ethelred, stop just there, before I sick up. You've just never learned to hate properly, that's your problem. Stop being nice and start wishing she was rotting in hell. Clearly I'm not saying that you should have to do it single-handed. Geraldine had a very special and remarkable talent for making enemies, and there'll be lots of others wishing hard along with you for her early and preferably messy demise. But on frankly, if she ever turns up murdered, just remember that it is your absolute right to be considered the prime suspect.'

'But that's hardly likely to happen,' I pointed out.

The doorbell rang.

It was a policeman.

He smiled apologetically.

'I have some bad news, sir,' he said. 'It's about your wife. May I come in?'

Two

I rather like policemen.

I am not one of those authors who write of bumbling incompetent flatfeet who have to be aided by keen-eyed amateur sleuths. Why should I? The amateur detective never existed. I do not know of a single genuine case (and I have now studied many) in which an elderly spinster living in St Mary Mead has afforded the police the slightest assistance. Real cases are not solved by flashes of genius, but by large numbers of people gathering and sifting even larger quantities of information. Criminals are caught by house-to-house inquiries and by tedious hours of studying security-camera pictures frame by frame. Or you get lucky and a close and esteemed colleague grasses them up. The police, in my experience anyway, rarely take the trouble to gather all the suspects together in the drawing room of a country house to announce the result.

But there is a long and particularly English literary tradition of gentleman (and lady) sleuths from Sherlock Holmes, through Lord Peter Wimsey and Miss Marple, to Brother Cadfael. I would hesitate to knock anything that makes money for honest and deserving writers, but it's a load of twaddle, frankly. In my novels, as in real life, the police investigate murders; the public do their bit by getting murdered. Though one may criticize the Sargent Fairfax novels for many things, perpetuating the myth of the amateur detective is most certainly not amongst their faults.

It was not, however, a fictional Sergeant Fairfax from Buckford standing at my door. It was a flesh-and-blood police constable from the West Sussex Police.

'You'd better come in,' I said.

The delicate question of whether Elsie should remain for this possibly awkward interview was quickly solved.

‘You two just carry on. Don’t mind me,’ she told us both; and she settled back in her chair, arms folded, daring us to evict her. I looked at the policeman; he looked at me. We noted each other for the cowards that we clearly were and proceeded to make the best of a bad job.

He gave an officious cough, half in Elsie’s direction, and said, ‘I am afraid that I have to tell you that your wife is missing.’

‘My ex-wife. We were divorced some years ago.’

‘Your ex-wife, of course. For the moment she has simply been reported as a missing person. My apologies for putting this so bluntly, but we have good reason to believe that she may have committed suicide.’

I remained, though I say it myself, admirably composed.

‘I am very sorry to hear that,’ I said, ‘but I can’t see what it has to do with me. Not after all this time.’

‘When did you last see your wife, sir?’

‘My ex-wife?’

‘Your ex-wife.’

‘I can’t remember precisely.’

‘Have you seen her in the past fortnight?’

‘I’ve spent the past three weeks in France, officer. I got back yesterday evening.’

He noted this in a small book that he was carrying.

‘Châteauneuf-sur-Loire,’ I said. ‘Would you like me to spell that?’

He raised his notebook slightly so that I would not be able to see what he had written. ‘I don’t think that will be necessary,’ he said, with a nicely judged degree of contempt for the general public that Fairfax would certainly have commended. ‘Do you know of any reason why she might have wanted to commit suicide?’

‘I can’t pretend to know for certain, but she might have had several good reasons. She has perpetual money problems: her first business went bust round about the time we split up. She went into a second venture with her sister. I think I heard that that was in trouble too. She has also just finished a relationship – quite a long-standing one.’

‘And her former partner was . . .?’

‘Rupert Mackinnon. She must have been with him about ten years. I’m not sure of his current address.’ He noted these details without comment.

‘I am sorry,’ I concluded, ‘but I don’t think that I can help you much more than that.’ I stood up, preparatory to showing him out. He remained seated.

‘We had hoped that you might be able to tell us a little more, sir. You see, Mrs Tressider left what we assume was a suicide note in her car before she vanished.’

I nodded. ‘And?’

‘She left the car quite close to here – by the beach at West Wittering.’

I sat down again. ‘Bloody hell,’ I said.

‘Quite. That’s a long way to come from North London to commit suicide. I mean, it may be a coincidence, your living in West Sussex and her leaving the suicide note in West Sussex. But you will see why it struck us as odd, sir, if you know what I mean.’

It struck me as many things, though ‘odd’ was perhaps not the first word to spring to mind.

‘So, she never lived down here, did she, sir?’ he continued, as if to clarify for me an interesting fact concerning my domestic arrangements. He narrowed his eyes, leaving an ominous accusation hanging in the air that I did not like one bit.

‘No, I moved here after we split up.’

‘Then there’s the suicide note.’

He showed me a photocopy of a sheet of what had clearly been headed writing paper. The very top of the sheet had been roughly torn off, leaving a jagged edge, but a few letters of the address could be made out, including ‘N1’. There was something before and something after, but you couldn’t tell what, unless you knew the address that had been there. Which I did, of course.

‘Your wife lived in the N1 postal district of London?’ He raised an officious eyebrow.

‘Yes. Barnsbury Street, Islington.’

‘So it looks like her paper. But what we can’t work out is why she tore the top off like that. The wording’s funny, too.’

I took the note with growing trepidation and read it. It was written in lively block capitals, with playful little curls on a random selection of letters. It read as follows:

TO WHOMSOEVER IT MAY CONCERN. DEAR SIR OR
MADAM, I HAVE HAD ENOUGH. BY THE TIME YOU READ
THIS I WILL HAVE GONE TO A BETTER PLACE. FAREWELL,
CRUEL WORLD ETC. CORDIALLY YOURS, G. TRESSIDER
(MRS)

‘I mean,’ said the constable, ‘nobody writes “FAREWELL, CRUEL WORLD” on a suicide note, do they? Not in real life. You don’t even get that in detective stories, for goodness’ sake.’ He gave a contemptuous sniff.

I’ve read (and written) worse clichés in crime fiction myself, but perhaps he read nothing but P. D. James and had higher standards than I did. ‘Sorry, officer,’ I said.

‘Having had only a few seconds to look at it, I really am not in a position to speculate on the wording. You say it was left in her car?’

‘That is correct: a red Fiat.’

I must have shown surprise because he quickly added, ‘It was a hire car, not her own. She’d collected it from Hertz at Gatwick airport a few days before it was found. She’d rented it for a week – paid for with her credit card. She must have driven it down to West Wittering the same day, left the note in it and then . . .’ He paused. ‘Well, of course, we don’t know what happened then. As you will be aware, you have to pay to take your car to the beach there. The gates at West Wittering beach are locked at eight thirty at this time of year. The guard noticed the Fiat on Tuesday when he was doing his final rounds. There are often a few cars still parked there, left by people who’ve gone for a walk along the coast and forgotten the time. There’s a charge for being let out after the gates have closed, but most are usually gone well before midnight. This car was still there the following evening when the guard did his rounds. It was a nice new one too – just 300 miles on the clock – not some dumped old banger, like you get all the time now round here. So he took a closer look and saw this note on the seat. Nothing else in the car, by the way – just the suicide note and the Hertz paperwork. That’s when we were called in. We discovered that your wife had not been home to Islington for a day or so, but her neighbours remembered that you had moved down here, quite close to the Witterings.’

‘I am deeply grateful,’ I said, ‘to her neighbours for pointing this out. Nevertheless, I would remind you that West Wittering is forty-five minutes’ drive at least, even if you don’t get held up going round Arundel.’

‘Bloody Arundel bypass,’ he said with a nod. Then he sucked on a tooth for a bit before adding, ‘You don’t know where she might have left her own car, do you, sir?’

‘No. Absolutely not. What sort of car does she have now anyway?’

‘It’s a Saab convertible. Metallic black with alloy wheels. Nice cars, them Saabs. Good cornering. Decent bit of acceleration. That’s missing too, you see. But it may show up. It could even be in for repairs somewhere, hence the hire car.’

He asked me a few more questions, feeling no doubt that he owed it to the Council Tax payers of West Sussex to cover the matter comprehensively; but there was little that I could usefully tell him, other than to repeat that it had been a while since I had been in touch with Geraldine and that, much though I wished I could help, I had no idea where Geraldine was or why she should have abandoned a perfectly good hire car on a Sussex beach.

‘So,’ said Elsie, when I had shut the door behind him, ‘what would Fairfax make of that, eh? A woman vanishes close to the residence of her ex-husband. She leaves a cryptic suicide note in block capitals – not in her usual handwriting – and in a car apparently hired for the purpose.’

‘Last Tuesday the ex-husband was busy not having sex in Châteauneuf-sur-Loire, a long way from the place where she vanished.’

‘But why would anyone hire a car to commit suicide in?’ asked Elsie, with her agent’s eye on the bottom line. ‘Why not use your own car? It’s cheaper.’

‘You heard what he said: perhaps her own car was in for a service or something.’

‘Why get your car serviced if you’re about to kill yourself?’

It was an obvious thing to ask, and I wished on I had Geraldine there to provide an answer. I had almost thought of a reply when Elsie decided to answer her own question.

‘I have three theories,’ said Elsie, prematurely ticking off the hypotheses one by one on her podgy fingers. ‘First theory, right? She did top herself, and did it in Sussex to cause you as much grief as possible. But that doesn’t explain the missing-car issue, thus I am obviously not too keen on that one. So (therefore), second theory: she did not top herself at all but is very much alive and is sitting in a pub somewhere laughing at us.’

‘Why should she do that?’

‘I don’t know, do I? Maybe she’s faked a suicide and done a runner to avoid her creditors. Or maybe she’s done it all for a giggle.’

‘All right then: she’s killed herself or she hasn’t. That’s still only two theories,’ I said.

‘I haven’t finished,’ said Elsie, with a dismissive wave of her fat little hand. ‘I’m the detective for the moment. At best, you’re just a suspect.’

‘Sorry,’ said the suspect.

‘Theory number three: perhaps somebody’s murdered her and made it look like suicide.’

‘That’s possible,’ I said with a slight but carefully judged shrug.

‘No, it isn’t – it’s just wishful thinking,’ said Elsie, sighing deeply. ‘All these little twists and turns are Geraldine to a T. Take that missing car, alloy wheels too: the whole business of switching cars would seem totally unnecessary to anyone except Geraldine. So would that note: “I’ve gone to a better place.” You bet she has. She’s done a runner. I won’t believe she’s dead until I see the body – and possibly not even then.’

‘There may never be a body,’ I said, pulling the discussion back to the suicide theory. ‘The currents off that beach are pretty strong. She could have been swept right out into the Channel.’

‘Only if she could be arsed to go into the water,’ said Elsie, staring out of the window at the buildings opposite in the fading light. ‘And at the moment, there’s nothing to suggest that’s what she did. I’d lay a pretty large bet that she is still out there somewhere, warm and dry, spending somebody else’s money.’ She seemed to be casting her glance at Peckham’s the butchers, just opposite my flat; but there was no sign of Geraldine wildly buying chops and Peckham’s Celebration Sausages with her ill-gotten gains – only Tony could be seen inside the shop, moving briskly, meticulously sweeping and washing everything down prior to closing.

It was a peaceful scene: a Sussex village at dusk, with the summer moving gently towards autumn. Flint-walled houses with warm mossy roofs, one more pub than was strictly necessary, a post office and an Indian take-away, all cradled within the smooth and now darkening slopes of the South Downs. For most of the inhabitants, another uneventful day was about to be followed by another peaceful night. The Worthing-bound traffic on the bypass was no more than a distant murmur. A number of birds had, quite properly, decided that it was time for their evening chorus. Everything was just as it should be. This was, after all, a place where retired people came from London to grow old and die quietly in their beds, not a place for bizarre suicides in low mileage red Fiats.

‘Look,’ I said, ‘let’s leave this to the police, shall we? It is fortunately their job to find my wife, dead or alive. I agree that Geraldine would be perfectly capable of faking a suicide purely for the fun of the thing. But I shall leave my wife to the police.’

‘Your ex-wife,’ said Elsie.

‘My ex-wife,’ I said.