

Arnold the Butcher (Best Story, Scribble Magazine, Autumn 2014)

“Did you hear Arnold died?”

“Arnold who?”

“Arnold Westland, the butcher. With the shop over there, across the green.”

“Oh, him; mean old bugger, he was. I never managed to get anything out of *him* for the Christmas lights.”

“Well, he was new to the village. Maybe he didn’t feel part of it like those of us who’ve been here all our lives.”

“Yes, but it wouldn’t have hurt him to be pleasant about it, would it? Me and the missus popped our heads around the door one Friday morning and asked him to donate. But he just muttered something about being too busy — and that was the last we ever heard from him. There were ever so many people in the shop too. You’d think he’d have wanted to make a good impression, wouldn’t you?”

“Maybe he couldn’t spare the cash, what with setting up a new shop and all?”

“No, I reckon it was just his nature to be mean. Besides, business can’t have been bad. Since the green got sorted out, there’ve been loads more people shopping here. He used to get lots of trade.”

“Yeah, nice surprise that, wasn’t it? No-one touched this place for years, and then suddenly, out of the blue, the Council finds the money to sort it out.”

“If you ask me, it’s about time we got something back off the Council. We’ve paid enough on the rates over the years.”

“Oh good, our bench is free. Let’s enjoy this sunshine while it’s still here. I might even have a smoke of my pipe. We’ve got hours before lunch, haven’t we?”

Monday 16th: It’s so lonely without Arnold, but writing helps.

My brother used to bring me flowers each Saturday and, of course, made sure we had the best quality meat every day. Listening for his slow steps up from the shop, I would dish up supper and then we’d sit for hours, swapping notes on our day. He rarely went out in the evenings and hadn’t many friends in the village, although he knew lots of people by sight and could tell me what they had for Sunday lunch most weeks. The shop was busy right from the start, but there was always that fear in the back of his mind that people would stop coming. He checked the local newspaper every week, to see if there were plans to open a supermarket nearby.

He wasn't always like that. When we were kids, before my accident, he was a happy little boy. Wherever you heard laughter, you'd find him, and wherever there was mischief, he'd be caught up in it somewhere.

We lived a long way from Devon in those days. Our dad kept the local butcher's shop in a suburb just outside Birmingham. It had been in the family for years, but he couldn't survive against the competition from the big supermarkets.

His customers gradually moved away and finally Dad closed the doors for the last time. We told him it wasn't his fault, but he felt he'd let down the family and the previous generations. He never got over the loss until the day he died. Our mum always blamed his former customers for deserting Dad when he needed them most.

Arnold was in his late teens by then and had been working alongside Dad in the shop, learning his trade. He saw the effect other people had on our family and gradually turned in on himself.

“Has he got any family, do you know?”

“Who, Arnold Westland? I'm not sure. He certainly never had anyone helping him in the shop. Someone told me there's a sister who kept house for him, but I've never seen her. If she does exist, she certainly never put in an appearance while I was there. Why do you ask?”

“I was just wondering whether there'll be anyone at the funeral. It's on Tuesday, a week yesterday.”

“I'll tell you who won't be there — Elsie Evans. Ever since he kicked her little dog, she's not had a good word to say for him.”

“Yes, but be fair; it had sneaked in and pinched a bone from the back room.”

“It doesn't matter! So far as Elsie's concerned, no-one can do anything to her precious Pom-Pom.”

“Oh, I know. It makes me laugh every time I see her parading it around the green in its little tartan coat.”

“But it's nice for the old girl to have somewhere near home where she can walk the animal, isn't it?”

Wednesday 18th: The vicar has asked me to say a few words at the funeral.

After Dad died, Arnold went to work in one of the supermarkets. He wasn't too happy about 'going over to the enemy' as he called it, but we knew he didn't have much choice. He used some of his money to keep me and Mum, and saved the rest until he had enough to buy

this shop. It meant leaving Birmingham but there was nothing to keep us in the old place. Mum had passed on by then, so we moved together. I kept house while he struggled to make the shop a success. He was determined to keep the family name where it belonged — over a butcher's shop door.

“Are you going to the funeral then?”

“What, old Westland's? It's tomorrow, isn't it?”

“Yeah, tomorrow, midday. The vicar's hoping to get a bit of a crowd. Someone's bringing the sister along and it would be a pity if she thought he'd no friends.”

“So there *is* a sister? I told you I'd heard that, didn't I?”

“Apparently, she's got some sort of health problem; she's more or less house-bound, the vicar says, but she's determined to get to the funeral.”

“You know, I wondered why he'd had that lift added to the back of the building. I thought he was planning on adding another cold room up there. Is there going to be a wake afterwards?”

“In the *Cardinal's Hat*, I think.”

“Well, in that case, it would be rude not to, wouldn't it; even if he was a bit of a skinflint.”

Monday 23rd: I'm still not sure what I'm going to say tomorrow.

The village was rather dilapidated when we arrived. Opposite our shop was the old village green. No-one had worked on it for years and it was very overgrown. I spent a lot of time looking out of the window, wishing the view was better.

“Here, there's an article about Arnold Westland.”

“Lovely service wasn't it? I'm so glad we went. And that sister of his was charming.”

“Yes, I noticed you spent a long time chatting to her.”

“It's such a pity she's stuck in that wheelchair.”

“Did you find out what's wrong with her?”

“She got knocked off her bike when she was a teenager. And the driver didn't even stop to help her!”

“Damn boy racers. They're a real menace, aren't they? So they didn't catch him?”

“Oh, they did. Arnold was riding with her and he got the registration number. Actually it turns out it was an old guy, someone our age.”

“And so she’s been in the wheelchair for what — forty-odd years?”

“Must be that. Mind you, she told me Arnold had a fair bit of conversion done in the flat, so she can get around okay, do the cooking and so on. She’s going to let the shop out, if she can find another butcher to run it, but hopes to stay in the house. She said it feels like her brother’s still with her.”

“It’s odd how we never knew she was up there. All the time we’ve been sitting on this bench, she could have been watching us.”

“Oh, I don’t think so. She told me she was a writer; she’s had several novels published apparently. She spends most of her time at the computer, working on her next book or writing some sort of online diary. Called it her blog, she did. Funny sort of name, I thought.”

“I wouldn’t know. I don’t have anything to do with computers, nasty things. What’s wrong with a pen and paper, that’s what I always say? Well, anyway, I was reading you this bit about Westland...”

Thursday 26th: your comments and messages have been such a comfort.

Many of you have asked where ‘Tales from the Village Green’ came from. Well, one day, while I was staring out of the window at the overgrown patch of land, looking for inspiration, a van drove up and out jumped a couple of young men in work clothes. They pulled gardening tools from the back of the van and started clearing up the village green.

Every day for the next month, I watched their progress. Soon the grass was cut and the flowerbeds were planted up and in full bloom. The old pond was cleaned out and started attracting birds. People began using the green to sit in the sun or pause for a chat. From then on, my days were full of interest and activity. Suddenly, I had all the inspiration I needed.

I see the same people most days and almost think of them as friends now. There are two old boys from the sheltered housing place who stroll over to get the paper each morning. If it’s nice, they’ll stop and sit on one of the benches for a while, watching the world go by. One of them never stops talking — and often seems cross about something. The other one is much calmer, and smiles quite a lot. In fact, he was at the wake yesterday and we had quite a long chat. That’s where Village Green’s Joe and Frank came from, although I don’t know him well enough to tell him that yet.

Then there’s the old biddy with the little dog. Arnold was petrified of dogs, ever since one bit him when he was a kid, but this one always made him laugh. We used to watch him in

his little tartan coat and could almost feel the embarrassment radiating from the poor little fellow. That's where I found Ernestine and little Mitzy.

Of course, some of the characters are complete fiction, but if I get stuck for ideas, I can often find them just the other side of the window. I never did find out where the Council got the money to have the green sorted out. But I know it made such a difference to my life, and to the life of the people in the village. The paper said it was an anonymous donor. Arnold used to laugh and say it was probably someone who'd fiddled their taxes and was feeling a bit guilty. 'They'll get found out in the end' he used to say. But I know he didn't mean it. He knew how much the green meant to me and was as grateful as I was. Every time I watch people enjoying the sunshine, or see the ducks swimming around in the rain, I say a quick prayer of thanks for the generosity of that mysterious donor.

“Well, what on earth...”

“What’s the matter now? Has old Bert been writing letters to the paper again? What’s he said this time?”

No, I haven’t got to the letters page yet. See, it’s this notice here, at the bottom, next to the article about Westland’s funeral.”

“Read it to me; I’ve left my specs in the breakfast room again.”

“Well, it’s the report on last month’s Town Council meeting. It seems they’re going to have a little naming ceremony on the village green next month. You’ll never guess what they’re going to call it?”

“The Green? Village Green? Duck Pond Green? Oh, I give up; what are they going to call it then?”

“Westland Green! Well, I ask you. What’s that all about?”