

The Reversed Decision (Runner-Up, Writers Reign, June 2012)

“To be honest with you — and I bet that’s not something you thought you’d hear a politician say — I was beginning to think maybe a career in the church would have been a better option.”

Jeremy Fortesque-Smythe was addressing the Annual Dinner of the South-West Health Authority. They’d asked him to speak about his famous change of heart which had cost him his Ministerial career, but had made him a hero in his home county. “But I’d bullied my younger brother down that road and two potential Archbishops in the family was one too many.” There were polite chuckles around the room. “So I went into law instead and from there, naturally enough, into politics.”

“As Conservative MP for Devon South-East, I’d been happy on the opposition back benches, sniping at the poor buggers on the other side of the House.” He didn’t mention the long weekends back home; the first class travel; expense account; drinks on the 3:40 from Paddington to Exeter, but his wistful smile told its own story. Life had certainly been good.

“Then came that day in May 2010 when our lives were turned upside down. Now we were in charge; we got the blame for everything,” and to make things worse, his old school-mate David had promoted him to the front bench, with a Health portfolio requiring some very difficult decisions. “Yes, the church definitely looked like a better option at that point.” The laughter swelled sympathetically.

“It had been a particularly hard week. I’d had to announce hospital closures in several cities, including our own dear County General. I’d come home early on the Friday in order to meet with a constituent.” He’d been relaxing over dinner in an exclusive, well-hidden restaurant on the edge of Dartmoor. His companion for the evening had driven herself home. He’d hoped for an invitation to join her, but none was forthcoming and Jeremy wasn’t one to force the issue.

The Maître d’ had looked slightly askance when he realised Jeremy was going to drive himself home, but was far too well-trained to make a comment — for which Jeremy thanked him with an extra large tip. With all the late-night sessions in the bar of the Palace of Westminster, he found his tolerance to alcohol had risen considerably of late.

“As I drove away from the restaurant, the beech trees along the drive leaned in towards me, waving me on my way.” By the time he’d passed through Mortonhampstead, the gentle waves had turned into agitation. The sky was banked with cloud. There was no sign of

the moon and stars that had shone so brilliantly when he'd started the journey. In the distance, he could hear thunder rumbling over the purr of the engine.

“As I drove along one of the single track sections, I was blinded by a fork of lightening, then another and another. The third one was right in front of the car and as it hit one of the trees, the trunk cracked apart.” In slow motion, Jeremy had watched a branch fly towards his windscreen. He'd wrenched the wheel, pulled sideways to avoid the hurtling debris and collided with the bank at the side of the narrow road. There was a crash of glass, a moment of terrific pain — then silence in the darkness, apart from the noise of the storm.

“When I came to, I was pinned behind the steering wheel. I managed to reach into my pocket for my Blackberry.” Raising the handset towards his face, he'd groaned when he saw the signal indicator was missing. “I was alone, on an empty road on Dartmoor, behind the wheel of a smashed-up Jag — and my phone was dead.” The laughter had stopped now.

Oliver Williams had been on duty for eighteen hours and was not sure he should be riding his motorcycle across the moors in the dark, but he'd had such a difficult day, he just wanted to get back to Sally. He didn't know how he was going to tell her about the closure. They'd only just moved down from Lincoln and she was so happy here. It was going to be difficult finding another job, but there was no way they could afford to move again. He'd have to take anything he could until the right job came along.

Slowing down at the approach to a tight bend, he saw glass shards, strewn across the road, reflected in his headlights. Then he spotted the car. It was a 1960s Jaguar Mark II *featuring the powerful XK twin cam in a classic British exterior* his subconscious told him, dragging up the text from the back of the cigarette cards he'd studied for hours as a child. Only this one wasn't looking classic at all. It was lying at an angle against the bank, half blocking the road, surrounded by fallen branches. A tree leaned drunkenly towards it, as though checking if everything was OK.

As Oliver wheeled his motorbike closer, his headlights illuminated the face of a man, trapped behind the crumpled dashboard. His eyes were closed. Blood streaked the cheeks of his strained white face. Oliver realised it was a face he knew. Just a few hours ago, he and his colleagues had watched Sky News in the Relative's Room. They'd known an announcement was coming; they'd hoped it wouldn't affect them — but no one had been really surprised to hear that South Devon County General Hospital was at the top of the list for closure.

Oliver stood and looked down for a long moment at this man who had destroyed his happiness.

I could get on my bike and ride away —no one would ever know I'd been here.

But then Fortesque-Smythe might die.

Well, if he does, will it matter? There would be one less politician to make a mess of other people's lives.

I could hold him prisoner until he changed his mind — my Kathy Bates to his James Caan.

Yes, and I wouldn't even have to tie him down; the steering wheel's done that for me already.

On the other hand, I could just sit with him and see what happens — leave it up to fate, like.

At that moment, Fortesque-Smythe opened his eyes and gave a start when he saw the young man staring down at him.

“Help me,” he murmured. Oliver's moment of indecision was over. His training and upbringing kicked in.

“Hold on, mate,” he said, pulling a phone out of his pocket and grimacing at the missing signal indicator. “I'll need to nip to the top of the hill to get better reception, but I'll be right back.”

“I have to admit, when I first saw him leaning over me, in head-to-toe black leather, I thought it was the Grim Reaper coming to collect me,” Jeremy had told this story many times before and knew how to make this moment seem dramatic, “but it was a young paramedic from Country General heading home. He stayed with me until the ambulance came and popped in to see me next day when his shift was over.”

After two days in hospital, Jeremy was declared out of danger and was transferred to Holmwood Nursing Home for a further eight days of convalescence. Finally discharged, he'd phoned County General and left a message for Oliver, inviting him and Sally to dine with him — but there had been no response.

“I started getting my mail sent down from Westminster as soon as my doctor said I could start working again.” The first delivery included an anonymous packet, containing an annotated map of Devon. The sender had put a cross on the road where he'd had his accident and then circled the site of County General. Across the top of the map in red pen were the words: *Good job we were still there, wasn't it Minister?* “And, Ladies and Gentlemen, the rest, as they say, is history.”