

On Sausages and Other Matters of Life and Death

'For me it'd be a sausage every time. A great big juicy sausage; brown skin with little black bits from frying; glistening and sizzling and spitting as you lift it from the pan. Think how the skin resists as you bite, then splits to spill the hot, plump meat: and there's the smell aaachhh that smell'.

Raising his head as though to sniff at a room full of rich cooking aromas, Frogger caresses his belly and groans a groan of utmost longing. Around the room a hum of consideration rises to a murmur of agreement, with only one or two of the oldest ones looking non-plussed.

Bat Girl leans forward on her seat, hands placed together, and counters, 'OK, agreed. A sausage is a wonderful thing, but on a really cold day you need pure stodge, something that tastes great, but warms your every nook and cranny'. Again, there is an echo from the group, 'warms, aye warms', and encouraged she goes on; 'gotta be a lasagne, not your supermarket ready meal rubbish, but homemade, with ripe tomatoes, piping hot mince, layers of fresh pasta and a creamy cheese sauce. Perfect on a wintry day.'

Eagerly she scans the circle of faces, but is disappointed by a mixed reaction, some enthusiastic nods, but more than a few wrinkled noses, dismissive, 'humphs', and a number of the group now look completely confused..... again the oldest ones, as you would expect. Atticus also looks round to gauge reaction. As founder and chair of the group, he feels responsible for its members, for making sure they all keep up.

With a cough, as though to clear his throat, he clarifies, 'Pasta, it's a kind of food from Italy, made from flour and eggs, mixed up and pressed together into a thick paste. You can cut or mould it into different shapes and sizes like.....'. He is interrupted by an impatient Al Atrocious who cuts in, 'like spaghetti', then, catching their blank faces, adds, 'imagine someone hands you a big plate of worms, long white ones, a bit slippery and slimy that you roll onto a fork and eat'. He chuckles at their horrified expressions, and finishes, 'some people sprinkle a type of cheese on top that smells like vomit or unwashed feet'.

Bat Girl rolls her eyes and looks sulky, while Atticus sighs and pinches the bridge of his nose, careful not to push the fingers too far in. 'Choose your battles', he thinks wearily. It's not as though he has an overarching plan here. In many ways this had all been a bit of an accident, sparked by a chance observation one difficult day, when he himself had needed something to keep going.

For Atticus, as for each member of the group, an uncomfortable moment had arrived when he had more time on his hands than he had ever expected, or could really cope with.

Although there seemed little prospect of the situation improving, he had always been a practical, active man, and set about filling his days by exploring the city in which he had spent his life, yet had never taken time to discover.

He began by concentrating on the historic centre and immediate surroundings. Edinburgh's dramatic topography fascinated him, with its stacked layers of people, history and buildings, from the buried world of Mary King's Close, up through the atmospheric stone streets and closes, to the Castle on its plug of volcanic rock. Indeed, one of the few advantages of his reduced situation was the free access that it granted to the city's expensive, and previously unvisited attractions.

For a couple of months this kept him busy, bright and interested, but eventually he began to lose motivation, feeling lonely and worn down, a bit thin. Periodically, a grimness of mood would haunt him, with thoughts drawn to giving up, to letting it all slip away, and at these times his mind would turn inevitably to *the sheets*. Previous encounters with them had left him repelled and terrified, though he was conscious that a dread of ending up, '*that way*', had frequently driven him to fight thought his darker moments.

One particularly aimless and lonely day, while struggling with his thoughts, he noticed a passageway opening off the London Road from which a line of people were emerging. Perhaps it was his mood, but there was something in their faces and appearance that caught his attention. Many were shabbily dressed, some battered and bruised, their grey faces

distorted as though the pressures of life had bent them out of shape. He waited for them to leave, then walked down the passage to find a building tucked away between its neighbours, with a discreet notice by the door announcing a meeting for Alcoholics Anonymous.

Whether it had it been then, immediately, that the idea came to him is lost to memory, but finding the door open he had made his way inside and discovered a community hall advertising rooms for rent. There was a janitor on duty, but he was busy cleaning, so Atticus was free to explore undisturbed until he found the group's meeting place in an attic room on the top floor.

It was a pleasantly proportioned space with high ceilings pitching up across open trusses and a couple of large dormer windows through which poured warm light from the afternoon sun. The room had a brisk simplicity, its walls and roof were painted out white, while the old floor boards had been stripped back to a silvery grey timber then coated in varnish. In the centre, washed in sunlight, stood a ring of twelve chairs, and a glance at a timetable confirmed that these, with daily use, would be left out overnight.

During the next few days, as the idea grew and clarified, his earlier energy returned, and he felt firmer and sharper. On his previous wanders through the city, he had noticed many people that shared his downcast situation. They would often cast a baleful eye at one another, sometimes managing a reticent nod, but it felt as though there was something difficult or shameful in their circumstances, and they did not approach or speak. However, Atticus had made a decision: he was going to break this unspoken rule.

He acted quickly, though early attempts went badly.

On the first occasion he spotted a man starting down the steps of Fleshmarket Close, and followed behind, waiting until they were between flights before calling out. The man stopped and turned slowly to face him. A moment of absolute silence followed, while Atticus took in a pair of empty eyes in a sagging face, then a lipless slit of a mouth opened and gasped as

though winded. Its hands rose to cradle then claw at the side and top of its head, until the figure dropped to the pavement, where it curled into a ball, and began to judder, and weep.

As the sound of its distress filled the narrow close, Atticus looked around in panic and embarrassment, though no-one else was near. He instinctively reached forward, then hesitated, before retreating quickly back up the steps to the Mile, where he stood for a moment, deeply shaken.

It was several days before he had the courage or opportunity to try again.

This time, while walking in Prince's Street Gardens, he saw a woman approaching. Catching sight of him, she stopped and looked around for another path. He however continued forward, with hands outstretched, in what he hoped was a gesture of peace. Despite this, she looked increasingly stricken, coiling with a tension that burst out in a string of vitriolic curses which pinned Atticus to the spot with the sheer force of their rage. Then, suddenly, she stopped, turned on a spiky heel and sped away.

In the stunned, rueful aftermath, he was surprised to hear a chuckle, as an amused voice addressed him. 'That didn't go your way son.' He'd been so intent on the woman that he had not noticed the oddly dressed man sitting among green bushes on a nearby park bench. This stranger was watching him with a keen eye, and showing no sign of discomfort. Where others might have risen and moved away, instead he gestured to the bench at his side and said, 'Come and sit son, come and tell me what's on your mind. The name's Brodie, William Brodie, but you can call me Will.'

Now it was Atticus's turn to feel disconcerted and uncomfortable. He stood in silence studying a man who appeared to be in his 50's, if you wanted to count that way, and dressed in the discordant manner which so often marked them out. The stranger wore a heavy, well tailored coat over a waist coat, and trousers that bunched to his calves, revealing thick socks and buckled shoes. A strangely shaped hat crowned a thick head of curly hair, over a wide friendly face from which a pair of deeply set dark eyes looked sharply out on the world. He

was broad, appeared physically strong, and though his hands were large and square, Atticus was struck by how they moved in elegant and precise gestures when he spoke.

A while since his last conversation, Atticus found it difficult to gather his thoughts, but feeling the importance of this chance, forced himself to talk by beginning simply. He introduced himself. He gave a little of his history, and described his wanders through the city. Hearing this, the stranger looked excited, and responded that he too took great delight in exploring this old town; describing how, over the years, he'd developed an unrivalled knowledge of its great streets, and recounted, with glittering eyes, that he was one of few who been privileged to enter many of its fine houses.

Although he had a strange cadence to his speech, the man had an easy manner that invited confidence. Feeling more at ease, Atticus began to address him as Will, and started to talk about his recent loneliness, his fear of the *sheets*, and terror of ending up '*like that*'. Will nodded in agreement, and with a haunted look replied, 'Aye, poor devils, would wish that on no-one', then rubbing a hand on his neck, as though in discomfort, added, 'or very few'.

Atticus paused for a moment, looked intently at the other man, then told him about seeing the group, the room, and his idea of gathering a few souls together to help one another out. Will thought this over, then nodded and looked at Atticus with a freshly appraising eye. 'Think you can get them together?' Atticus shook his head, 'I really don't know.' He gestured to the spot where the woman had been, 'the first tries were, not so good'. Will nodded, then said thoughtfully, 'I've been around for a while and *have* managed to speak to a few; I know a pair of brothers, twins of a sort, who might help'.

With that it began, and thinking back now, Atticus felt that for those solitary souls they first approached, seeing four or more of their own kind gathered together was the key, a novelty that piqued the interest of those not yet consumed by rage, fear or despair. Drawn in by this unusual sight and with careful prompting, particularly by Will, Atticus was surprised by the speed and ease with which they could be prevailed on to join the swelling ranks of the group.

In the end it took just under a week to build up their numbers, and a meeting was set for the following full moon. Atticus now felt driven, and as sharply alert as he had for years. He prepared carefully by sitting in on other meetings, attending quietly as an observer, not participating, nor being expected to. He noted the similarities and differences, and decided on a structure for the first meeting.

As the evening approached his excitement grew, but the night itself began tentatively. It may have been his nervousness, the unfamiliarity of people and situation or the cold blue moonlight streaming through the windows, but the introductions had a chilly, stilted quality. Atticus worried that it was starting to go terribly wrong, when Will leaned forward to interrupt. 'A question. For all. We have these names, given to us by others at the start of our lives. We carried them all the time we were alive, must we keep them forevermore? Might we now choose our own names?' There was a sudden stir of interest and someone asked, 'you mean invent new names?'

'Why not, do we have to *live* by the old rules, if you catch my meaning?'

The room filled with murmured discussion, until someone put up their hand. Atticus was about to point out it wasn't a classroom when the man blurted out, 'Elvis, can I be Elvis?' Immediately, from across the circle, came a reply, 'if he's Elvis I'll be Hendrix'. And so the evening took off, names starting to pour out, some comical, some meaningful, and some poignant. They were tried on, rejected, adapted, and occasionally accepted.

Frogger explained that it was a love of scuba diving that got him in the end, though the oldest ones looked bewildered, and remained wary of the creature who had appeared among them in a wetsuit, mask and flippers. They were still not convinced he was wholly human, but the name stuck. Bond, James Bond, stuck; Bat Girl stuck, and Sticky stuck, though no-one asked why. A young couple who had come along together, looked intently at one another, merged their hands, and in whispers discussed star crossed lovers before deciding on Catherine and Heathcliff.

'What about Supercalifragilisticexpialatrocious?'. There was an uncertain pause, 'don't you mean aladocious?'. 'Nope, know exactly what I mean'. After a moment's thought and some puffing of cheeks Atticus replied. 'Bit of a mouthful, could we have a short version?' Nods of agreement followed, and options were discussed, with Super Cally losing out to Al Atrocious.

Round the room it went, with Atticus in turn choosing the name of an admired character from a favourite book. Only one person was adamant that they would stick with their old name.

'Bert', who without knowing it became, 'Resolutely Bert', when out of earshot. Finally the choice of name came to Will. Atticus looked across expecting a typically sharp comment, but was surprised to see the other looking serious, and if anything a little unsure. Then he rubbed his neck, shrugged his shoulders and said, 'Deacon, just call me Deacon'.

There is a sudden commotion and Atticus is drawn from his thoughts back to the present discussion. 'No. I'm telling you, the thing I miss most is whiskey, in a heavy glass, by the fire with good company'. Tick laughs a wicked laugh, and glances sideways at Tock his twin brother, who scowls in return. 'You're doin that on purpose, just cause I'm under age'. Tock turns and punches his kid brother, the fist sliding smoothly into the others chuckling body.

Although older, Tock had been run over, and killed just before his seventeenth birthday. By a curious symmetry, Tick had been run over and killed just before his 67th birthday. When he stood up, his young, older brother was waiting for him at the roads edge. Now together again, the pair take great pleasure in taunting each other on the relative merits of age and youth.

A lively discussion follows, everyone on safe ground with whiskey. The older ones, who had been dead for many decades, centuries even, often struggled with the inventive oddness of the modern world. Atticus already understood this sense of detached strangeness. After reaching his own best before date ten years ago, he had watched curiously as the streets filled with people engrossed in, and prodding at tiny computer screens. Any conversation on

a subject they all know is especially lively, so it's with disappointment that Atticus notices the first fresh traces of morning light enter the room.

Regretfully, he interrupts to wind up the night's meeting, recapping on the previous week's highly enjoyable trip to the Scottish Parliament. 'While I don't think we influenced the debate, whatever Deacon did, I'll never forget that look on the First Minister's face'. There is much chortling and Deacon grins wickedly.

He reminds them that next week is the annual games night and is about to finish, when Dr Poly Morph looks significantly at him. He'd been hoping that she'd forgotten, but seeing a look of determination, hands the floor to her. 'As I'm sure most of you are aware, I've been carrying out research into different aspects of spirit life'. She looks around the group, perhaps not noticing that all eyes are now firmly fixed on the floor, then continues, 'I'm framing up a study into sexuality in the afterlife, and am looking for some volunteers to assist'.

A long and deeply uncomfortable silence follows, broken by a wary question from Atticus, 'emm..... What would be involved?' The Doctor responds, 'Broadly anecdotal recollections, answering questions on whether you can still feel arousal, how this might manifest itself, perhaps some testing, is there a spirit equivalent to physical, bodily reactions, for example can you still produce.....'ectoplasm?' chips in Al Atrocious, leaving the Doctor looking irritated, and drawing a sharp look from Atticus, who makes a mental note to have a *chat* about behaviour, then suggests that anyone interested should meet with the Doctor afterwards to discuss details.

Dr Polymorph nods in agreement, and glances eagerly across to Catherine and Heathcliff who look miserably at one another. Following her gaze, Atticus thinks she may not have many takers. Some things are too sadly sharp and keen, even for the dead. His suspicions are born out when they rise and mill about to finish discussing their favourite food and drink, while quietly drifting away from the Doctor.

Otherwise, he is pleased to see how well they all appear; everyone sharply defined, with little loss of shape or fading. Thinking about children's drawings of ghosts, like *bed sheets* with gaping holes for eyes and mouth, he shudders. It's strange how close to reality their rough sketches come, and yet how far away they are from the bleak horror of a seeing a person's identity slowly dissolve, first to waves of raw uncontrollable emotion, then gradually to nothing.

In the time the group has been running they have only lost one person. His mouth tightens as he remembers the young mother who came a couple of times to early gatherings. She said little at her first meeting, and during the second cradled her fading belly as she quietly described the weight of carrying an unborn child, knowing she would never see its face or find out if it was a boy or girl. After that she did not return.

He shakes his head to clear the thought, and looks around again. Part of the evenings that he enjoys are the small rituals that have grown up, feeling that these help to bind them together. Tonight as usual Elvis has disappeared almost immediately, though no doubt lingers within earshot. The others glance expectantly towards Atticus, but he makes them wait for a few moments before calling out, 'Has anyone seen Elvis, I need a word with Elvis'.

All faces are now turned towards him, and together their reply rings out.

'Elvis has left the building!'

Even the oldest of old ones happily add voice to the cry, though more than ever, they look a little confused.