

Chad's 90th

A LESSON

BY NED CARSON

CHAPTER 1

Something Happened

This is for all remaining friends and associates of Chad Manderton. I don't know whether you've heard from him or not since he turned ninety last July, but in case you haven't I've taken it upon myself to prepare this ... what shall I call it? A newsletter? An update of some kind. But as you can see it's much longer than anything you would normally expect to receive in that kind of vein. It's a one-off, not the latest instalment in a series. It attempts to cover in some depth one traumatic episode and its lasting effects. And you may be wondering why it's a bystander bringing you the news, not Chad himself or Kathryn. I wouldn't normally poke my nose into the affairs of others to this extent. Was it curiosity or concern? Undoubtedly elements of both. And I can't say I've satisfied the former or assuaged the latter. If you're completely in the dark and would like to remain so then by all means stop here. If, like me, you're a witness to the change that has taken place or you've heard something about it then I feel you should be privy to the information I've pulled together, inadequate though it is. The before and the after is clear. The during, the actual point of impact still seems somewhat nebulous despite what I've been told. I encourage you to draw on your own association with Chad and put out your own feelers if you are left as I am afterwards, still perplexed and dissatisfied, experiencing a tiny taste of his own trauma at the body blow he received. Just don't expect to encounter the ebullient Chad of old. Or to be successful in finding out any more than me.

I couldn't have gone further without getting too involved and losing what little neutral perspective I have. As to the unanswered questions, I won't seek to influence your suppositions by putting forward my own. I wasn't there. It was a purely family occasion. From what I gather it was in a grand house with rooms of palatial proportions but not great in number; four bedrooms accommodating eight adults and perhaps one or two more with the use of camp-beds. The house party was already being planned when Chad and Kathryn visited us the previous Autumn. The four of us have been friends since the 1980s, not long after Rima and I became engaged. Kathryn was a mature student about twelve years older than my fiancée on the same postgraduate course. At around the same time Kathryn also met Chad, about twelve years older again but unquestionably her pre-destined soulmate. As you've seen for yourselves, they're the model to us all of an utterly devoted couple, both before and ever since their marriage some twenty-five years ago, sharing their thoughts on every subject and merging their delight in every keen interest and pastime. Since they both retired I doubt they've ever spent more than a couple of hours apart. At the time of their

visit they were looking forward to the big occasion the following year, spending a whole week with Chad's daughter Linda, his son Pete and their partners, and for at least some of the time Linda's two grown-up children Duncan and Cora as well as Kathryn's sister Frances. The prospect seemed to lend their conversation and general demeanour an even greater animation than usual during their stay.

If I mention a few things about Chad that you already know it is only to pay tribute to the huge personality we all recognise before moving on to what happened, to recall for a minute the times that we spent with him and his equally remarkable wife in that exquisite garden flat in Granville even when the shadow of the extortionist above was creeping over it. I invite you to call to mind and keep in your hearts the memory of the man who until so very recently retained his familiar swagger and panache. All of us who met up with him in his 90th year as he approached the momentous milestone were impressed as ever by the picture of health he presented; extremely honed down to the bare skin and bones it's true, but in a way that spoke of a deep-seated, even unconscious, mission to minimise weight and therefore the load on his life-sustaining organs. He and Kathryn have always cooked delicious meals of the most nutritious ingredients with a leaning towards Middle Eastern cuisine, burning off any excess calories with exercise, not according to any fitness programme, but as with children at play a by-product of their adventurous pursuits. Through the pandemic when their back-packing travels and other activities were curtailed they made a more conscious effort to keep their limbs and lungs in good working order with far-ranging daily walks. While Rima and I were thrown off balance by the enforced idleness and found ourselves putting on the pounds Chad and Kathryn seemed to painlessly tweak their lifestyle to cope with the challenge and remain as free from the perils of weight gain as they did from infection by the bug itself. Indeed by the time we caught up with them again Chad seemed even more wiry than before. His third dimension was approaching that of the life-size cardboard cut-out that had been made of him to mark his fiftieth birthday and stood for many years in a corner of his living room. But his own constitution was iron. To look at him you might think he would be blown over by a stiff breeze but you would be quite wrong. He strode steadily through the elements under his floppy all-weather hat, with Kathryn hand in hand at his side, herself an exemplar of rake-thin fitness all her adult life.

The more remarkable though was his undimmed mental acuity. Retaining broad and deep interests, embracing social and technological change, even absorbing its terminology

and feeding it into his own active vocabulary, he had no idea yet of retreating into a corner out of the limelight. At any social get-together he was a fully engaged, not to say leading participant in the conversation, offering opinions based on up-to-date knowledge and impeccable reasoning. Nor did his ever-increasing seniority slow his reactions or noticeably diminish his ability to interject at an opportune moment a witticism, or to retrieve and recount from the decades of memories a relevant anecdote. Year by year we expected the onset of a slowdown, a gradual disengagement, a diminishing of alertness that we think of as inevitable with advanced age, but he kept confounding us.

We were between heatwaves in mid-August last year when Chad and Kathryn came for their most recent visit. The weather was changeable but still predominantly warm and dry. There were the usual relaxed pleasantries when we picked them up at the station, but instead of these leading naturally into an ever-widening stream of catch-up and banter, as would have been our wont in the past, the flow of talk slowed up during the car journey and even occasionally ran dry. The sense of restraint was particularly noticeable in Kathryn, who would normally be enthusiastically picking up on Rima's every snippet of news and responding in kind with her own. Was it simply age catching up with them at last? Perhaps they were quite sensibly conserving their energy for the more extensive conversations we would be having over the course of the next couple of days.

Once we were at home and settling down in the living room Rima asked the question that surely they had been waiting for.

"It's been a busy summer for you hasn't it. How did the big event go?"

They seemed to exchange a grim look before Chad said. "We'll leave the full story for later."

Over dinner we talked of this and that, steering clear of an already established taboo subject of a lawsuit between themselves and the owner of the three other floors in the building above their garden flat, who had for years been conducting a quite vicious campaign to force them to sell up. It seemed to be a case of might is right, whereby for the want of sufficient reserves to continue the fight they were going to have to finally concede defeat and be uprooted at their extremely advanced ages from their matrimonial home, where Chad himself had lived for the past fifty years. This much they had let us know. It was already a couple of years since Kathryn had got so upset about the travesty of justice being

so brazenly perpetrated on them that she simply couldn't bear to hear anything more about it, leaving Chad to take the flak and deal with it as best he could.

At least their appetites seemed unaffected. We still marvelled at the decent sized portions they put away of each dish without suffering an iota of the physical expansion that their contemporaries would have experienced. Then again who else at their age would attend the Proms of an evening and walk the three miles back home as the two of them had done the previous week? Now they were full of anticipation over the spectacular concert they had booked for the 24th, featuring the prodigious Mahler symphony number 2 conducted by Sir Simon Rattle.

I felt a tinge of wistfulness over our quitting the metropolis two years earlier for full-time residence in this small market town. The really big names and highest calibre performers in any of the arts would never come here. But it was really a childish wish to have everything. There was plenty worth seeing in all sorts of venues, not just in Wimpleton but within twenty miles in all directions. We'd been to a couple of excellent concerts in village halls that I'd enjoyed as much anything we'd ever attended on a grander scale. In terms of the overall experience, not having to trek across London and be crammed in amongst boisterous young crowds, we were well satisfied with the exchange.

When the main course had been cleared away and Rima was fetching the dessert Chad himself obliquely addressed the forbidden subject.

"We're thinking of where we might want to live. More importantly where Kathryn would be happy after I'm gone."

"So it's really come to that point," I ventured. A cloud passed over Kathryn's face.

"We don't want to go into that," Chad reminded me. He went on to talk of his two main considerations in terms of their next home – proximity to the sea but also to friends for when Kathryn was left on her own.

This was quite surprising. What of the Proms and all the things that seemed to have attached them to London and their particular part of it since we had known them? Kathryn had indeed been posted elsewhere during that time before finally moving in with Chad, but without putting down roots, and Chad had never lived anywhere else in the UK. "Have you been looking anywhere then?" I was bold enough to ask.

"Not really, we can't until we know where. Outside of London everyone's scattered in ones and twos all over the country. Like yourselves here."

“And we’re nowhere near the sea.”

Rima returned with the pudding. “What’s this about being near the sea?” she asked.

“No, I was just saying that when we move, which we have to,” Chad answered, “the only place that really appeals to me is somewhere on the south coast. But the friends we had down there have all gone.”

“Isn’t your son down there somewhere?” Rima asked. Kathryn emitted a yelp. Chad put his arm round her shoulder.

“I was going to tell you about Pete,” he said. “but I don’t know if Kathryn can bear it.”

She shook her head quickly and violently, as if trying to get water out of her hair. Delicately we stepped back from the minefield. I returned to the entertainment theme and recalled the highlights of what we had seen in our local theatre that year, as well as a great variety of musical performances and film screenings in other small towns and villages within half an hour’s drive. Rima went on to recall some of the gardens we had visited, particularly the private ones that were open on one specific day under the National Garden Scheme.

Chad was surprisingly uninterested in our accounts of the plays, given that he had written and produced two of his own within the last ten years, but they were both charmed by Rima’s descriptions of exploring the gardens, the highlights in terms of the flora, the landscaping and amenities. The plants that we hadn’t been able to resist buying and digging into our own burgeoning borders. This might be an activity to look forward to once they had found their own new patch and successfully relocated.

“And you know, the coast is all very well,” I told them, deciding to take a risk and proclaim a pet opinion of my own, “but it cuts down the amount of land around you by a half, so that’s half as many gardens for example that will be within easy reach.”

“That’s an interesting perspective I’ve never heard before,” Kathryn admitted.

“We don’t drive of course,” Chad added, “so we’re limited in our movements in any case.” This led to some discussion about the use of taxis and various forms of public transport. In their time they were two of the greatest independent travellers, making at least one extensive trip a year to a far-flung corner of the earth, researching, planning and arranging every aspect of the venture themselves and making use of every conceivable form of local transport on their unique itinerary. At the very minimum they would also spend some weeks in Spain and Scotland every year, as well as the many shorter trips away such as this one.

That was pre-Covid of course. The pandemic had made them wary of public transport in the extreme. If they had to use it, as in coming to visit us, then they would now go to the expense they would not have felt worthwhile before of a taxi to the station and first class tickets simply to avoid proximity with too many unknown people, potential carriers of the disease. So one way or another, the health risk or the cost of mitigating it, was going to keep their adventurous spirit in check and limit the range and penetration of their travels for the foreseeable future.

The days were long gone when Rima and I, let alone Kathryn and Chad, could chew the fat into the early hours. Our bedtimes loomed and nobody broached the subject of the ninetieth birthday that had apparently not gone according to plan. Rima was better at this sort of thing. She would find an opportune moment to prompt Chad about his promise to tell all.

Those moments, if there were any, passed. No doubt she felt it was up to me. An after-dinner pot of tea came and went. The evening ended with the two of us none the wiser.

"We'll have to get it out of them one way or another," Rima said to me later as we prepared for bed. "They need to let it out. They're brooding on it."

At any rate the villain of the piece was established. Or rather the new villain of a further unwelcome imbroglio to beset the couple in what Chad now, for the first time that I could remember, openly acknowledged as his twilight years. Twilight yes, but certainly not declining. It would have been absolutely out of character for him to put it that way, and it was not the message we were getting. Even the huge upheaval of an enforced move after fifty years in that delightful corner of Granville was an opportunity for broadening his activity and experience, not shrinking back. If his remaining time was short it was going to be full.

"I don't quite get it," Rima mused as she pulled back the top of the duvet on her side. "Why not make it as easy as possible, an apartment in the same area, a simple like for like move? They must know a lot more people around there than anywhere else."

"No, you see, that would be a decline, because it couldn't possibly be as good as where they are now with that amazing private garden" (which of course is what the upstairs neighbour coveted). "They want to make a complete break, so that there's no direct comparison. The change itself to a bungalow on the south coast – "

I was interrupted by Rima's hysterical burst of laughter.

"What's funny?" I asked.

"A bungalow! You won't see him dead in one of those. That's not Chad at all."

"But, at his age –"

"No, if it's a choice between having to negotiate a staircase every day or wrestling with the concept of living in a bungalow he'll choose the stairs I'm sure."

"If it was called something else ... anyway, to get back to the other thing they won't talk about –"

"This mysterious behaviour of Pete that ruined his birthday."

"Is that what he said? I didn't even know that much."

"Look, it's not Chad who won't talk but Kathryn who can't bear to be reminded of it. As long as she's there he's not going to say anything. The only way is for me to take her off somewhere while you stay close to him and get the story."

"I think the first part of that plan will be easier than the second," I warned her.

But I was wrong. We had reckoned without the entrenched resilience of their inseparability. All of our suggestions the next morning as to splitting off for different pursuits for an hour or two were met with incomprehension or polite refusal. "All we really want to do is go for a walk," Chad said in the end.

Not a bad idea. It could give us a chance.

I almost invariably found, when out strolling or hiking with another couple, that sooner or later, and usually sooner, I would fall into step and conversation with my male counterpart, irrespective of how well I knew him, while the two women would do the same. The female pairing would generally fall behind, whether due to a naturally slower pace, livelier conversation and correspondingly less energy devoted to forward progress, or relatively more interest in the sights and sounds to right and left than the route or destination, stopping at intervals to appreciate nature close up, and even in late summer and autumn to pick blackberries or other accessible fruit. Charming but sometimes frustrating. The one time that I was consciously willing this pairing off by gender to happen it didn't. By long habit Chad and Kathryn walked as one, physically linked by palms or fingers the entire time, except when obliged to detach to go over a stile or through a gate. Stronger than their fingers though was the bond of their supreme compatibility. They were the two in our hiking quartet who shared an identical degree of interest in everything around them, who unconsciously kept in step at all times.

We came to a kissing gate. Rima went through first, then Kathryn, releasing hands with Chad to pass around the swinging barrier itself. She was now stepping out of the fenced enclosure when he called her back.

"Hey, it's a kissing gate!" She turned back toward him to receive the symbolic gesture on the mouth.

I followed Chad through the gate. The field on the other side was ploughed up. The earth was baked hard and bumpy. Was it an illusion I saw? Rima and Kathryn were chatting away merrily, moving off together. I set off slowly with Chad and soon noticed he was shaky on the uneven ground despite using his stick. This was gold dust we were walking on. But how to get onto the crucial subject and have him hooked into it before the end of this helpful terrain?

"I suppose you did a lot of walking up in Scotland?"

"Nothing as tough as this."

"Really? But there must have been some steep slopes along the cliffs."

"There were slopes, but I found I could manage, taking it slowly and steadily." He stopped walking. I did the same. He turned to me. "Very slowly if necessary going downhill. It's the uneven ground I find tiring. Any kind of mud, wet or dry. We usually try and avoid it."

"I'm sorry."

"No, I didn't mean that." He started off again.

"It's a long time since I've seen Pete," I ventured, "your son I mean, is he still with ..."

I couldn't remember her name. I could hardly be making more of a hash of it.

"Sylvia," he reminded me. "Yes."

What tack should I take? Say something good or something bad about his son, or about the woman I'd only met once or twice? I was shooting in the dark.

"He's had a few," I said. "I mean we only met occasionally at your flat, and once by chance at a concert and ... I suppose we met Sylvia two or three times. She knows a lot about plants as I recall."

"Really? I don't," he said. The energy required to keep his balance and make progress across the rutted earth must have been partly to blame for his terse rejoinder.

We were coming near to the end of the field, where Kathryn was anxiously waiting, preventing Rima from moving her on. They could probably see that Chad and I weren't talking. My wife had done her bit with aplomb. I'd let the side down.

"Oh well," I sighed.

"If you really want to know the story I can show you the emails."

"Oh ... no, I don't want to pry. We're just sorry that your ninetieth birthday seems to have been spoiled."

We were now almost at the gate. Chad sort of turned and winked at me and said, "I'll send you them."

The elderly pair were re-united and the uncomfortable subject went underground for the rest of the walk and the remainder of their stay.

The next morning we dropped them off at the station for their return journey. When we got home I checked my inbox and saw several emails from Chad, a set of four, all sent to me early that morning before breakfast. I opened the top one. It just said "Please read the others in the order sent. Chad". It was all very unusual. I don't think I'd ever had an email sent by Chad to myself alone rather than the pair of us. All arrangements and general chat outside the visits themselves was generally the province of Rima and Kathryn.

Since it had been a matter plaguing both of us for the past few days I called Rima to come and read Chad's emails with me on the big screen. I opened the bottom one of the four, since it was the earliest sent. It was even shorter than the top one. It just said, "See the attached". The attached was a pdf print of an email from Linda to her brother Pete on the 11th of August.

Once we had recovered from that we went on to the next one up, written by Pete on the following day. We gaped at each other several times during the reading. How on earth could it have come to this? Finally there was Chad on the same day with a no holds barred summing up. I suppose you could say we were gobsmacked.

"Unbelievable!"

"Worse than I imagined."

So that was what had happened. But -

"These emails are from just a few days ago", Rima pointed out. "The day or so before they came. No wonder they were so upset."

"But the actual events were more than a month before."

“So?”

“No, I don’t mean they wouldn’t be upset. On the contrary, if it’s been going on all that time one way or another ... It’s bad luck on Chad to have both his sons going off the rails.” (I suppose many of you will not know about the terrible business with the younger one, Max. That’s another story.)

“Children! Who’d have them?” We didn’t.

But these weren’t children. Pete was around the same age as us. Over the past few years, while we were winding down in London and buying a house up here he was doing much the same, with his latest partner Sylvia. I put it like that simply because that’s how it seemed to us since divorce from Lily. We’d missed a few of Chad and Kathryn’s New Year’s Day gatherings in the previous eight or nine years and each time we went Pete was there with somebody different. It was twenty years ago or more when we’d first met him and Lily, and even gone out with them ourselves, but those occasions had petered out. Probably our fault for being too busy. So, although we always enjoyed his company when we occasionally met him at Chad’s, and once by chance at a concert, he remained a bit of an unknown quantity.

Like all dramatic news that doesn’t directly concern you and you don’t feel you can do anything about, the mysterious trauma of Chad’s 90th birthday gradually ebbed out of our minds as the days passed. I wondered if I should delete the emails and put the subject to bed completely. It was unnecessary really, since they were now a long way down in my inbox. In fact they were now on the second page. I found and opened the one written by Pete again, forwarded by Chad. So there was his email address, which Chad hadn’t erased when forwarding. We must have used it, what, fifteen years ago, when arranging one of those two evenings out with Pete and Lily.

I slept on it.

“Look you know,” I said to Rima the next morning. “I’m sure we had email contact with him ourselves a long time ago when he was with Lily when we first met him, but anyway we’ve got his address now from Chad and he must have realised we could use it. He didn’t say not to.”

“But why on earth would you?”

“To find out more.”

“Is it our business?”

I hummed and ha-ed. “If you don’t think so I don’t have to do it.

“No, do it if you want to. I’m not sure what *it* is though.”

“Nor am I.”

“Well perhaps you’d better clarify your mission before you embark on it then,” she advised me.

“Hmm ... okay let me try to. We do know him. We don’t know Linda or I would be thinking the same about contacting her. We’d probably never have seen him again, or at the most very rarely even without this happening, but ... unless he’s completely bonkers, which even Chad says is not the case, there must be some explanation, perspective ... I’m certainly not trying in any way to make things better. But I don’t think doing just this would make things worse.”

“But what’s in it for him? Why would he even respond?”

“That’s exactly it. He’ll respond if he thinks there’s something in it for him and not if there isn’t.”

“And what will you do with that response?”

“I don’t know, I haven’t really thought about it. It’s best not to plan things too much in advance.” This further inadvertent reference to Chad’s 90th made us both grimly laugh.

Rima must have been curious herself to know a bit more or she would have grilled me harder.

During the next week I wrote, revised, scrapped, rewrote, expanded, contracted, deleted, resuscitated and finally hit the send button on an email out of the blue to Pete Manderton, apologising of course for my presumption but harking back to our many agreeable encounters over the years by way of excuse and wondering how he was. I decided it was best not to request or suggest anything at all. Just to let him know as casually as possible that I knew about the family split, but to steer clear of expressing any view of it, even the most bland or obvious. If Pete were to give any response at all it would be entirely of his own volition.

What was I expecting? The most likely and safest result was nothing at all. At least I’d have made an effort, but it hadn’t come to anything and that was it. Much better than some other possibilities – an intemperate rant, painful to read even if it yielded a few nuggets of insight, or a shorter caustic rebuff making me feel like an idiot, or an unholy composite of the two, an extended haughty point by point masterpiece of self-justification. Yet that was surely what I was also hoping for. Anything to fill in the details, in effect to confirm Chad’s

synopsis by referencing the same issues and incidents, though from a wildly altered perspective. And wasn't I as always being too timid, not daring to really imagine the worst, an expletive-ridden tirade encompassing me and Rima as targets for venomous retribution? What about a maudlin wallowing in self-recrimination, brought on by a sudden realization of the awfulness of his behaviour? Then it would be up to me to deal with the dripping mess. I checked my inbox frequently in those first few hours, breathing a sigh of relief at silence from the sleeping bear I had poked.

Which of course was absurd, since if any of those things were coming they would take a bit longer to emerge. From a day to several weeks. Only after that length of time could I breathe more easily. I might be lucky and get away scot-free. My unsolicited message might be siphoned off into spam, or classified by Google as a promotion rather than of primary interest and thereby still escape his attention. But if I had emailed him before, those many years ago? I spent a while the next day searching for those dinner date arrangements of the past.

Yes, there was a small clutch of emails from eighteen years earlier about our two meals out with Lily and Pete. We had chosen a restaurant in turn in our respective neighbourhoods. Oh yes, and then there had been another time at their house. But his email address was different from the one I'd indirectly obtained from Chad. So there should be no previous connection pushing me onto the primary inbox tab.

A week went by. It was looking good. Nothing triggered off yet by my dubious initiative. But now that the threat was receding my relief was turning to disappointment. The diplomatic effort I'd expended on those few banal lines had been for nothing. Why should he object, or be upset at my well-meant intervention? Putting aside the birthday celebration issue he'd surely be as pleased to re-connect with us as we would if it were the other way round. It might in that case be a perfectly polite response, but one that gave nothing away. What would I do then?

It was a lovely mid-September day. We decided to go for a walk as soon as we had finished breakfast and tidied up. For an unplanned ramble such as this we would leave the car at home and stroll just ten minutes to the edge of town where a footpath took us through a narrow meadow into the open country beyond the railway line. The weather forecast, a light breeze and sunny intervals, was spot on. It was baking hot or distinctly cool depending on whether you were basking in one of the intervals or not. We stepped carefully

over a half-broken stile into a more sloping and picturesque grassy meadow, home to a couple of oak trees and dotted with rolled up bales of hay. I took out my phone to capture the pastoral scene. Before putting it away I checked my emails. There was one from Pete Manderton. I opened my mouth to tell Rima but it came out all garbled. She was speaking over me with an announcement of her own. We both stopped in our tracks, laughing.

“You first,” she suggested.

“No you. I’m sure it’s more important. I mean my thing can wait.”

“Well okay, maybe it is. I just heard from Kathryn. That concert they were so looking forward to going to – “

“The Prom in August.”

“Yes, the end of August. It didn’t turn out so well. Or something happened. Anyway, Chad’s now in a bit of a state, he’s been in hospital. Kathryn’s in a bit of a state herself trying to cope. But she doesn’t want to tell me much about it. I think she’s just too distraught.”

“Oh dear.”

“I think I should offer to go and stay with them for a while. If they haven’t got anyone else. I mean I’m probably her best friend who’s not too old.”

“Yes of course. I suppose it would be too much for me to be there as well.”

“Probably. I mean just for a few days.”

I hugged her from the side as we walked. “You’ll be just what she needs. I wonder what it is though. It sounds bad. Poor Chad.”

“Poor them. They’ve been through the wars recently.”

We passed through the gate into Bligh Wood, which somehow imposed a silence upon us as we followed the winding, bumpy path over roots and around hollows until we were out in the sunlight again, facing the rough field that sloped up to the highest point of our walk.

“All right, your turn,” she nudged me.

“What? Oh, yes, Pete.”

“Pete who?”

“You know, Chad’s son. I got a reply to the thing I sent.”

“And?”

“I haven’t read it yet. I saw it just now on the phone. I won’t read it now, it could be quite lengthy.”

We were almost half-way around our improvised circuit. I tried to put all speculation aside and give myself up to the joy of being out here peacefully walking with Rima on a weekday in our now almost complete retirement. We were in one of the cloudy spells. The wind was up but the energy needed to climb kept us warm for the time being. On the summit the one bench was taken, but we settled down on the dry grass, looking across to patchwork fields the other side of a hidden stream below. With the wind in this direction there was no sound from the main road back into town. I pulled the thermos out of my small rucksack. As far as we were concerned we'd arrived. The house still needed a bit of work, but nothing urgent. We had several new local friends and there were things going on every day of the week we could get involved in if we wished. Or we could just spend most of our time randomly wandering in the rolling landscape, stopping here and there to admire the view as now.

On the way back we discussed the dates of Rima's possible trip down to London to stay with Chad and Kathryn.

"I won't mention the war of course," she said.

"No, best not. Unless it comes up."

There was a pause.

"Oh go on, have a look! What did he say?"

I needed no further encouragement. In fact I was glad to have her there while I gingerly tapped on the ominous line.

"Here goes ... it's very short ... very nice to hear from you ... notes of everything ... interesting ... memories of others ... it was a great pleasure. He wishes us every happiness too."

Whew, that was that over with! I smiled rather smugly. It could hardly have been much better. Polite and pleasant, but also containing a hope of enlightenment.

"Aren't you going to read it out properly?"

"Here, you can read it." I gave her the phone.

I wondered what the next step could be. I wanted to see the notes he mentioned. They might contain all the detail that was missing from the emails sent by Chad. Of course, whatever Pete produced would be from his own memory, but with any luck it would fill out the skimpy impression we currently had of what on earth had gone wrong and why.

“It looks like the ball’s in your court,” said Rima as she handed me back the phone. We resumed our homeward walk. After a few paces she added “I’d better concentrate on Chad and Kathryn anyway.”

I nodded. I was going against my better judgement really, and my next step would be controversial, perhaps a disloyal one. To try and find out more from Pete than from Chad. It was only because that’s where the chink of light had opened. If I were to push on that door it was best the other side didn’t know anything about it. The less Rima knew as well the better, at least while I was still digging. Our long-standing friends should be able to rely on her absolutely without any taint of what I might be up to in the background.

What was the next step to be then? I pondered the question after we’d turned off the lights in bed that night. I couldn’t just ask him to send it. That would be pure nosiness. Perhaps that’s what it really was. Who was I to get so interested? Even worse, he might think I was spying for Chad. Might?! Of course he would think that! But then, he’d deliberately mentioned these notes of his. Wasn’t that already a tentative offer? I drifted off the subject onto memories of when we’d seen him.

When I woke up in the early hours I had the solution. You can only go so far with emails. Now that the ice had been broken the way forward was a phone call or a Zoom meeting. If we managed to connect in some way I could eventually work around to the notes and what an impartial reader might make of them, if I could be classed as such.

I preferred the idea of a Zoom call. It would give some of the reassurance of a face to face meeting, but was also less intrusive somehow than a phone call. I didn’t have his number anyway. Keeping to our now unspoken strategy I said nothing to Rima about my follow-up move. Another simple, polite email, ending with the proposition of the call.

The next morning Rima was off on the train to London. In the evening she phoned. Chad was stable but very withdrawn. His movements were now limited. To go any distance outside he’d need a wheelchair, at least for the time being. He couldn’t bear that idea. Which meant that Kathryn didn’t go anywhere either. The impasse couldn’t last. Something would have to give.

It also seemed to vindicate my approach to Pete. Getting Chad or Kathryn to divulge any more was out of the question for now. I felt relieved and then guilty about it. As before, I started to hope there would be no reply to what I had sent the other day. That night without Rima I slept fitfully. During the wakeful periods I took down from an imaginary shelf

the schedules and maps for a series of trips and walks we would do together as soon as she was back, planning in my head the routes and the stopping points. We would be blissfully away from it all, together on the road or the trail, forgetting all about Chad and his problem family.

The next day I was glad to be caught up in a little bit of a crisis that had blown up at my last remaining client site. They kept me on call for just such an eventuality. It took most of the day to work out a solution, then to run it past the relevant parties and write it up. During the afternoon I saw an email from Pete. I ignored it and went back to work. It was later in the evening, after supper and a TV documentary, when I opened his message. He was amenable to the suggestion. I slept on it just in case I decided, perversely, that I really didn't want to intrude after all.

I still put it off the next morning, utilising the excuse of some tidying up of the previous day's work. After lunch I wanted to get out for a walk, but footloose and free, without any unmade decision hanging over me, interrupting my pure enjoyment of the exercise and the view. For this reason I went ahead and scheduled the Zoom call with Pete, for the following Wednesday.

Rima arrived back on Tuesday and she brought better news. "Chad's reconciled to the wheelchair now. In fact I think he might even begin to enjoy being pushed about by Kathryn. That is if it's not too much for her. Anyway they've got some other people lined up to stay with them for a while after me. His daughter Linda's coming down from Edinburgh. And the neighbours John and Penny pop in every now and again."

"I wonder what's happened to the move."

"Oh goodness, I didn't dare ask about that. Surely something will have to give there."

The outlook certainly seemed brighter. Again I felt slightly unworthy, still trying to satisfy my curiosity about the family row rather than rallying round in the current crisis. And fraternising with the enemy in doing so, at least in Chad's eyes, and no doubt his daughter Linda's. Would we perhaps meet her now at some point and be able to get the full story from her?

In the meantime I still hadn't done anything other than re-establish tentative friendly relations with someone I used to know. I couldn't pull back from that now but I would continue to play it cautiously.

I went back to those three emails sent by Chad, written in turn by Linda, Pete and himself. Stunned again by the vehemence in all three of them. Linda was as upset as anyone. She might be just as disinclined as Chad to revisit the pain and open up, especially to a complete stranger such as Rima or me. Pete was hesitant but at least I was inching forward without causing obvious distress. I felt I was on the right path. But I would have to be very careful not to step on a mine.