

A Nice Cup of Tea by Pete Barrett

Len and Hilda were a very ordinary couple. They were retired and in their sixties and lived in a small one-bedroomed bungalow. Len had worked for forty years as a warehouseman before he retired and Hilda had worked as a dinner lady at the local school on and off for almost half that time.

In the summer months, Len used to take great pride in his garden and allotment which were always in perfect condition. His skill as a gardener was such that he provided the two of them with fresh vegetables virtually all the year round.

In the summer when the salad crops produced a surplus, he would put a sign up outside the house offering tomatoes, lettuce, cucumbers and so on for sale at a reasonable price. From this he made a little money to buy those little extras that make life worthwhile: chocolates, magazines and the occasional bottle of wine.

The only small cloud on the horizon was that, in the winter months, when it was too wet and cold to work outside, Len used to become bored and frustrated and, to be honest, not very pleasant to live with. In the winter he'd sit at the window staring gloomily at the bare trees under a grey sky counting the days till spring. And it was on one of these short winter days that Len chanced upon an idea that would eventually turn the cold months from an ordeal to be borne, to a passion that could compete with his love of the soil.

A woman had moved into the house across the road. She was common looking and had three scruffy unpleasant children who, in Len's opinion, looked up to no good.

It was definitely not the sort of family they wanted in their quiet suburban neighbourhood, so Len took it upon himself to keep an eye on her. He found the ideal place to watch her, crouched down at the living room window, peeping over the radiator and under the net curtains where, with the light off, he could observe the comings and goings without fear of detection.

He noticed that the woman left the house each evening around six dressed in high heels and a low cut blouse. Her destination was obvious. Len thought about reporting her to the authorities but, while there was plenty to be suspicious about, there was nothing he could pinpoint as illegal. The woman was too sharp to ply her trade near the house. She obviously went off to some other neighbourhood to stand on street corners and offer herself to men.

And the children were scruffy

Len became frustrated at his inability to influence the situation until he chanced upon an idea that would, at a stroke, give the ordinary man in the street, like himself, a chance to strike out at the immoral and unworthy who were dragging the country down.

He would write this woman a letter and, knowing how nasty and vicious some people could be, he would make it anonymous.

So Len bought a notepad and pen and sat down and wrote down all the objections that he had to this woman which were, in short, that she was a common prostitute who didn't deserve to live in a nice neighbourhood like this and that her children were neglected and should be taken into care. He added a PS that she should stop wearing one particular red leather miniskirt because it was causing men to have lustful thoughts and leading them into sinful activities, although he didn't specify which particular sinful activities he had in mind.

After he'd written the letter he realised there were several ways that it could be traced back to him and, while he was in no way ashamed of what he had written,

he did not want this woman's hulking tattooed boyfriend at the door in his vest shouting and making a fuss. Not that he'd actually seen such a boyfriend but it did not take much imagination to know what he would be like. So he rewrote the letter in green crayon using capital letters and was rather proud of the result – it looked somehow more intimidating than the original, which he threw in the bin.

He posted the letter in a distant post-box, and, after he estimated the letter must have arrived, looked for signs that his handiwork had taken effect. He was pleased to see the woman looked a bit sheepish as she left the house. Len quietly congratulated himself on a job well done, deciding that he should write more letters to people who needed sorting out. In fact, he felt it was his public duty to do so.

However two days later, Hilda confronted him. She had found the old copy of the letter and was very annoyed. Hilda, rarely one to anger easily, was furious with him. What was he thinking of? What did he think he was doing writing such things? It was a disgrace. Didn't Len realise that people like that had boyfriends who carried knives and could come round and stab them to death in their beds at any moment? How could Len have been so silly? Honestly.

After a while Len managed to calm her down and when he explained, over a nice cup of tea, the careful precautions he had taken to avoid the letter being traced back to him, her anger subsided.

Hilda then made Len promise he wouldn't send any more such letters. Not without her having the opportunity to add her own points and to correct any spelling errors.

Hilda and Len began working together on letters to a variety of local people and this kept them busy for a week or two, but gradually their enthusiasm began to wane.

The sins of the locals were trivial and uninteresting – a shoplifting offence here, an indecent exposure there. Nothing really to get their teeth into, although the dwarf transvestite bus conductor at number 42 did provide an interesting challenge.

It was in this lull of activity that Hilda came up with an idea that was to prove what they refer to these days as a quantum leap in the scale of their correspondence. Hilda liked to read glossy magazines about famous people and their lives, but she had come to believe that the carefully posed pictures presented a rather idealised view of the way these people lived. If you read about these people in the News of the World and the People a different picture began to emerge. The glamorous wedding of this year often became the sordid divorce of the next. The high flying career of the Hollywood star often ended up with a period in prison, a spiral of drug abuse and even premature death.

Hilda decided that these would be the people they would write to next. They had some difficulty in finding the addresses, but with a little ingenuity and a visit to the local library they managed to piece together enough for the letters to find their victims. In fact, once the letters started to flow, Hilda proved very adept at finding out how to reach these famous people – sometimes at their home, sometimes at a London theatre, or at the BBC, or wherever they might be at the time.

In no time at all they were sending up to a dozen letters a week and finding it hard to keep track of what they had sent to whom. It was then that Hilda noticed some adult evening courses in using computers. Slowly at first, because they found the new technology somewhat intimidating, they embarked into the up-till-then unknown world of information technology and within weeks they had discovered the wonder of the home computer.

Soon their front room was filled with VDUs, printers, mice, scanners and

things of which, up until six months ago, neither of them would have heard. The two sprightly sixty-year-olds would find themselves up at dawn and, after a nice cup of tea, they would be beavering away in the computer room as they called it, flooding the world with letters filled with such anger and hatred that they were often wondering where it was all coming from.

Len bought his stamps and posted the letters at least two miles from home so that they could never be traced back to them, although they did start to sign their letters 'From Hilda and Len' because it seemed such a waste to make the letters completely anonymous. However, with printed pages and envelopes untouched by human hand, they felt they had created a cloak of anonymity which would allow them to carry on as long as they liked without detection.

But they were wrong. One fateful day, halfway through their morning shift, there was a loud knock at the door.

It was a bright Wednesday morning and Len and Hilda were having their elevenses consisting of a nice cup of tea and a chocolate Hobnob. Hilda, initially unperturbed, sat sipping the last drops of her tea while Len went to answer the door. Moments later he was back but now his face was drained of all colour and there was a shake in his voice as he said, 'It's the police. They've come about the letters.' Behind him the doorway was filled with the bulky shape of two policemen and Hilda let out a gasp.

There was no point in lying because the evidence was all around them. Letters in different stages of preparation littered the room. There was no getting away from it – they were caught red-handed and there was nothing to do but confess it all over a fresh pot of tea.

'I suppose we'll go to prison then,' said Len finally.

'Not for me to say, sir,' said the policeman. 'That'll be the magistrate who'll decide that.'

'We'll be in all the papers,' said Hilda but, at least, she reassured herself they hadn't done anything shameful such as shoplifting or exposing themselves in the park.

'How did you find out, you know, about us?' she asked the policeman.

'Find out what?' he queried.

'About the letters. How did you find out it was us?' asked Len.

'We didn't,' replied the policemen blankly.

'But you came to arrest us,' said Hilda.

'Oh, no, no, we didn't come here to arrest you.'

'But you banged on the door.'

'Oh, I see. No. We didn't come about the letters. I think your Len must have misheard me. We came to get some lettuce, you know, from the garden. Still be alright to have a lettuce and a few tomatoes, will it?'