

Breaking Point

I fell into conversation with a policeman once at a wedding. He introduced me to traffic snooker. They do it on public holidays because they're *pissed off*, to use the vernacular, to be working. He said you have to nab a red car for doing something, then a yellow, then red again, then a green and so forth. He didn't use the word nab, he had some police-speak. Apprehend, I expect. One of those words you never hear in ordinary speech. Which I thought was ironic, given it didn't sound a very official pursuit. I said 'Good Lord, I'll never buy a red car again'. He said 'No, you're ok with red because there's so many of them, it's pink you want to avoid'. Then he made some mildly homophobic jest, as you'd expect.

It made me think of Sally. She drives a pink car, a ridiculous-looking thing called a Figaro, for some reason. Like a sugared almond on wheels. I'd been gazing out of the window, thinking about my poor old Mum, turning it all over. Again. Poplars. The cost of decent care. What it says about our society. I can't say my mind was exactly on my work.

She parked right outside my window. Her wheels scrunched on the gravel. She jumped out and just stood for a moment, taking it all in. It's impressive, as you'd expect. We're never out of the top five schools in England. Centuries of privilege. You can smell it in the polish.

In she came, looking for me. I'm not difficult to find. It says *Bursar* on the door. And my secretary's not what you'd call a Rottweiler. I say *my* secretary – I just get a bit of her. Sally said 'Which bit?' Saucily. That wasn't that first day. She was very proper then. There's something wholesome about Sally, something that puts you in mind of freshly laundered sheets and cottage gardens.

I guessed at once what she wanted. I'm used to it. You have to put your son's name

down at birth but parents still turn up, convinced all barriers will be swept aside for little Tristan or Freddy or Noah. I've noticed the wealthy dislike the word *no*. One father threatened to expose me as an out-and-out homosexual. Sally said I wasn't even out, let alone out *and* out. I said I wasn't even a homosexual. We laughed. She said 'No-one would care nowadays anyway'. I said '*I* might'. That made her laugh again. She's got this rippling laugh. It comes up from nowhere and keeps coming in waves.

Anyway, she stood there in that pretty chiffon scarf she often wears and tailored grey trousers and neat little shoes – she's got tiny feet – and she told me she had a somewhat unorthodox request relating to her 10-year-old son. That's what she said. Verbatim. I started to explain the admissions policy but she interrupted. I remember she held up one hand, but gently, not imperiously. I could see her wedding band. Her hands are tiny too but capable looking. She said 'I don't want you to enrol Charlie at the school – I want you to *not* enrol him'.

To my shame it did cross my mind that she might be a bit...unhinged. I'd come forward to shake her hand but I moved back then, behind my desk. She took that as an invitation to sit herself down, which it most certainly had not been, and then she sort of unobtrusively took over.

Charlie was very unhappy at his prep school. Daniel wouldn't hear of the local comprehensive. There's a lot Daniel won't hear of, from what I can gather. She said it hadn't done her any harm going to the local school but that Daniel had been to – well, I won't name it but suffice to say it's a very *minor* public school – and he wanted the same for Charlie. I must admit I felt like saying *here is hardly the same as there* but I restrained myself.

But I digress. There's a word we never use except with a sort of self-conscious mockery. Sally says she likes it when I *digress*.

I said, 'Well, not enrolling him shouldn't be a problem, Mrs –'. She interrupted again. She said the problem was that Daniel had to believe Charlie was a pupil here. A day boy. I said I didn't quite see how – she cut across me. She was really rather forceful that day. I don't think I managed to finish a single sentence.

She had it all worked out – what she needed, she said, was a *co-conspirator*. I had to laugh when she said that. She looked so demure. She said Charlie would need a school uniform and a sports kit so she could wash them and hang them on the line regularly. And a couple of things with the school crest on and a set of textbooks for the year and maybe a library book from time to time? Did I think he'd need anything else? And she smiled at me brightly, as though I'd already agreed. She told me later she'd taken to me at once, she said she'd just known I would help. She said she'd liked *the cut of my jib!* We've become firm friends.

I said you'd never get away with it. She said Why not? Daniel might manage to get to one Sports Day and one carol concert over the next seven years. Couldn't I slip Charlie in as a prospective new boy or something? I mean, twice in seven years? How hard can it be? Sally has what I believe the Americans have dubbed a *can-do* attitude.

And then she said it. It was then that two completely unrelated things collided. I really do need to digress here. My old Mum's 84. She's worked hard all her life. She was widowed young, she brought me and my sister up on her own, always loving, always kind, always encouraging. She went without for us and we never heard a word about it. She'd help anyone out – all the neighbours would come to her whether it was a bit of advice or a pint of milk, it was all the same to her. She never did a bad turn to a living soul. But the wheel turns and she'd reached breaking point. Arthritis, infirmity, drugs for sale up and down the street, every second house burgled, a garden she couldn't manage any more...

But you should have seen where the Council wanted to put her. It stank. It stank of urine – and worse – and bleach and stale cooking and misery. And the staff – talk about the dregs. Not a kind word from one of them. I wouldn't have left a dog there. My sister felt the same. So we went to look at Poplars. It's not top-notch, not the sort of place the grandparents here would go, but it's warm feeling. Like people care. Beautifully kept. Happy staff, nothing too much trouble. A smile for everyone. Nice and close, too – easy to pop in after work. The only snag was – well, you can guess. These places aren't cheap. I'd have broken the bank – but there was nothing much in the bank to break.

Sally said, she said it very carefully, she said 'Of course, the school fees would need to be lodged somewhere'. *Lodged*, she said. 'Perhaps a charity of your choosing, Mr - ?' She said it would of course be greatly appreciated if I could provide her with *corroborative evidence* – uniform and books and such like – but she was perfectly capable of acquiring those items without any help from me if necessary. All she needed was a blind eye to be turned now and again.

Now I've never done anything fraudulent in my life. It's not in my nature. But when she said 'Charlie's at breaking point, you see', it unleashed something in me. I found myself telling her all about Mum...

Sally listened. And thought. She said 'She sounds a lovely lady. Mr Bennet, do let me contribute to the cost of your mother's care.'

I said 'But – !'

She said '*Fraud?* If the money goes from my bank account straight to the nursing home, how are *you* benefitting?'

There was a compelling twinkle in her eye.

'What's it to be, Mr Bennett? Shall we ring Poplars?'

I really did feel all of a flutter, as my old Mum would say. I said 'Well, it would certainly take care of the next seven years...' She said it would almost certainly take care of the next ten as she was pretty sure she'd be having a similar conversation with some crusty old Oxbridge don when Charlie got to 18. We might need some A Level results...

'He's just not academic, Mr Bennett' she said. 'He's like me. We're not stupid but we're more...*practical*. We may break the rules, but we crack the problems'.

And I nodded. I could see her point.