

Rochester

by Philip W Baker

Chapter 1

Edward G (Eddie) Silvester was born in Croydon and attended Dulwich College in South London after his parents moved to Knights Hill at West Norwood.

The school was founded in the 17th century, became a registered charity and has a long history. At one time it took children aged from 2 years to 19 years. More recently the board established a section named DUCKS for girls and boys 0-7 and a junior school for boys aged 7-11.

Once Eddie told his English teacher that he liked Agatha Christie novels. That was after the teacher, who had the nickname "Beef", asked the class what books and authors they preferred. Beef was trying to get a feel for whether the boys read anything at all and, perhaps, if one or more of the boys was worth culturing as specially gifted.

The preference for an author of over sixty detective novels seemed to settle OK with Beef. He asked another boy, whose forename initial was P, what the P stood for. "Ptolemy, sir" said the boy and a short discussion of silent letters began.

Eddie recalled that another English teacher had touched on the same topic and said to his class "We are talking about silent letters. Do you like dirty jokes? How about the P in swimming baths!" Which briefly elicited some childish giggles.

After leaving Dulwich Eddie attended a grammar school. With a liking for literature and a great thirst for reading he completed a first degree and later a Masters in English Literature. He became a teacher himself and was fussy about where he worked.

The old buildings with character and lots of carved woodwork were his dream environment. Secondary modern schools with emulsion painted walls and flat white ceilings were boring and dull to his artistic mind, even though they may be cost efficient, energy efficient and fire safe.

Vaulted ceilings, porticos, cloistered buildings all held great appeal. So did modern authors such as John Grisham who wrote descriptively about old buildings in Italian cities such as Bologna.

Eddie looked up the oldest school in England, which historians reckoned was the Beverley Grammar School in Yorkshire. But when he saw pictures on the Internet he realised the school had been "modernised" and lost all its appeal.

Colleagues advised him to stay in the South, saying the coastlines were better, it was warmer, pay scales may be higher and the channel tunnel was a quick route to mainland Europe.

Eddie knew that. Men had died excavating for that tunnel and the best way to honour their contribution was to use it.

He had been on a coach day trip to Bruges via the tunnel but was disappointed. He found the squares to be drab and depressing, the canals filthy, public lavatories hard to find and the constant threat of rain.

He noted many shops sold raincoats with large shoulder pads, like ridge tiles, presumably to stop rain running through seams and soaking underlying clothing. He shuddered at the thought of a soaked shirt collar and no refuge to allow it to dry out.

But, some years earlier, before the 'Chunnel' was completed he went on a cross-channel ferry day trip to Ostend and walked along the sand beach in bright sunshine. Compared with sad old Bruges that was Utopia.

After the channel tunnel started operating most ferry companies went out of business and Kent went into long-term depression.

Despite that, however, children still had to go to school to receive education and teachers were needed.

Eddie Silvester secured a position at the King's Rochester, an independent preparatory school at Boley Hill in Rochester, Kent, not far from the River Medway.

The school motto was *Disce aut discede* ("Learn or leave") and Eddie agreed with that in principle. You go to school to learn and if you are not learning, regardless of the reason, you may as well not be there.

What Eddie learned very soon after joining the staff was that parts of the historic buildings had been "tarted up" to align with more recent thinking. The library had a suspended tile ceiling and he dreaded to think what the "suspenders", usually thin steel cables had been fixed to, or how they were fixed. "Yukk!"

In his mind he recited some depressive maudlin lines from Shakespeare; "Now is the winter of our discontent..." and "Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune ... or to nip down to the Dog & Duck for a couple of swift halves..." Ad-libbing the last bit to pull himself out of the gloomy thoughts.

Another aspect of the library layout was the arrangement of bookshelves. They seemed to be ninety degrees out of place.

A few years earlier Eddie had met two business partners from Hastings who had been buying up small laundrettes and putting their brand on them. They told him that one they had contemplated buying was nicely positioned but the rows of washing machines were parallel with the window so passers by who looked in could not see what was going on behind the machines.

This was of concern to women who may be alone and could be assaulted without witnesses. But if the machines were at a right angle to the window the chance of witnesses was much higher and the laundrette may enjoy better custom, especially at night in bedsit land.

But the capital cost of relocating all the machines and pipework did not compute so they passed on the opportunity.

That chat had caused Eddie to think about layouts in supermarkets, in convenience stores, and of course, libraries. In shops, theft, also called 'shrinkage' and 'shoplifting' was a common problem and some shop layouts were better than others. Libraries also attracted thieves and could be sites of assault, smooching, and other between-the-shelves activities not strictly to do with books.

He disagreed with the layout at the school but was a new boy unlikely to be able to change anything. Nevertheless, the library was very popular and normally very busy.

That was, before the lockdown.

During the first quarter of 2020 AD the Covid-19 coronavirus struck Britain and the school was closed.

Eddie made a note in his diary and used the AD initials. As a literary scholar he like to pay attention to detail in bibliographies, etc and used conventions such as AD and BC as a matter of course. He was not religious but the school founders were so it seemed appropriate to stick with the old convention.

Chapter 2

Instructions from the Government were made very clear in public broadcasts and through The Media.

Schools were o close until further notice. But it was incumbent on senior "management" to ensure school premises were safe and kept safe.

John Carpenter was the well-established senior caretaker at the school and lived in a small lodge provided by the school. He boasted that he used to be a master plumber, had never been unemployed in his life, and often used the school swimming pool around midnight when nobody else was around. Some listeners doubted the wisdom of someone his age taking a plunge with no lifeguard or other help to hand, but decided to say nothing.

Getting the pupils and staff off site was not easy, especially with the new social distancing rules to comply with. So rooms were not checked thoroughly for more than a week after the closure notice was issued.

The Head had given Carpenter his brief over the phone and told him to do a "walk through" covering every metre of the premises, make notes and take photos and or video recordings as necessary. He was to wear respiratory equipment, shower thoroughly after each trip and keep away from the swimming pool. John thought the head didn't know about his moonlight dips, but the head wasn't the head for nothing.

Among other things the Head had a masters degree in physics and knew a little about waterborne viruses.

The former master plumber had seen some leaks in his time but this one got the prize as far as shock and horror were concerned.

The body, the corpse, the cadaver, the stiff was lying on the library floor with a piece of what looked like tubing protruding from its neck. The blood, which appeared to have run through the tube, was everywhere. Or at least it covered a very large area and had congealed.

John Carpenter didn't think he was squeamish but suddenly found he was. The respiratory mask didn't help and he almost threw up in it. No time for photos of that, or any note-taking. He turned, hot-footed it out of there, into the nearest toilet, then called the Head using his mobile phone and waited for help.

The local police had also been briefed by superiors about personal protective equipment and care. The precautions hampered the investigation to a point but the scenes-of-crime officers and forensic scientists were used to being very careful.

Yes, it had been considered a suspicious death and probably murder!

With the school and its library shut down there was no CCTV recording to consult. Investigation would be down to conventional police work - plod.

Eddie got to hear about the fatality but didn't know the victim. Assuming it was murder he wondered what the motive may be.

From the extensive reading he had done he had learned that classic motives for murder were the four Ls: lust, love, loathing, loot.

An equation someone has published was $\text{Crime} = \text{Opportunity} * \text{Motive}$

Out of curiosity he had looked up information on where the most recorded murders occurred in the modern world. It was Tijuana in Mexico.

There was a table of homicides per 100,000 population per year in different countries and a list showing the number of cities by country represented in the table

Country	No. of cities
Mexico	19
Brazil	10
Venezuela	6
South Africa	4
United States	3
Colombia	3
Honduras	2
Jamaica	1
Guatemala	1
Puerto Rico	1

Hot blooded Latinos? Maybe more to do with drug cartels, but who knows!

The US cities listed were St Louis, Baltimore, Detroit. "Places not to Holiday", thought Eddie.

The post mortem on the corpse established that the victim had suffered a lacerated carotid artery caused by a metal tube puncturing the skin and cutting into the artery under considerable velocity. In other words the victim was stabbed in the neck with a bit of pipe and died through blood loss.

To quantify the velocity needed to cause such damage with a tube of such dimensions would require careful experimentation.

The pipe was brass and brass is an alloy of copper and zinc. Traces of soft solder were found on the surface and ends of the pipe.

One police officer picked up gossip that the person who found the body used to be a plumber and plumbers use solder. What if he done the murder then pretended he'd stumbled on the body to appear innocent and cover his tracks!

The police decided not to release too much detail about the death and simply referred to the victim as JD.

Journalists speculated that it could be John Doe or Jane Doe but no amount of pushing succeeded in revealing any more identity details. Some suggested that the body may have been so badly damaged by whatever the cause of death was that it was impossible to identify.

The lockdown and social distancing rules made it harder to get near the school or to probe the way The Media normally does.

In the police and forensic laboratories, though, more information was coming to light.

"They said it was soft solder, what does that mean, sir?!" asked one young officer during a briefing.

A scientific adviser said "There are different types of solder used for different purposes. They melt at different temperatures. Silver solder is a hard solder and gives a very strong joint but to get it to melt on steel, for example, means heating the steel to a bright red colour.

Soft solder, the type used on water pipes and the like, contains lead and melts at a much lower temperature than silver solder. There is even a type called match solder which can be melted using a normal safety match.

The solder on the tube found in the victim's neck was identified as soft solder and the tube may have been fixed to something else, perhaps using a soldering iron or blowtorch to heat the metal. If you think that solder like that can be scraped easily with a knife or other such object it gives a clue as to why it's called soft solder.

In homes and other buildings many central heating pipes and water pipes are made of copper and soldered joints are common, mostly because they are cheaper and more convenient to use than screwed joints. It is less usual to find brass tubing with soldered joints and so far we don't know where the brass tube came from. It is smaller in diameter than most central heating pipes. There is what is called microbore tubing but that is usually bendable soft copper, not brass."

"Sir, if you don't mind me asking, was the tube parallel or tapered?" asked another young officer.

"Slightly tapered, why did you ask?"

"Well, I was in a school band and some of the instruments were made of brass tubing, I wondered if it may have come from something like that, being as the victim was found in a school and all!"

During the briefing detectives were told to get the exact dimensions of the brass tube, the grade of brass if possible, and to keep investigating that angle.

Details of various instruments were looked up and one officer watched online videos of how instruments were made to get some clues.

Eventually they thought they had identified it.

"We think it was part of a lead pipe from a brass trumpet" said the Inspector leading the briefing. Our own bandmaster told me it's spelt L E A D the same as the heavy metal but it is pronounced LEED as in dog lead."

"Pity, could have been the lead pipe in the library murder just like a Cluedo game!" said one of the team then looked sheepish and shut up as his remark received a scowl from the senior officers.

"The lead pipe is the pipe that the mouthpiece goes into and is normally made of two or more pieces soldered into each other. They taper very slightly all the way to the bellmouth end." said the Inspector, finishing his explanation.

"We don't know why a piece of that length was knocking around in the school. So, we need to find out where it came from, how it came to be in the library, and how it got into the victim's neck" said the Inspector.

"The lab techs have some data on the kinetic force that was used so talk to them if you need to get more scientific!"

For those of you who can't wait, a hollow nose bullet requires about 76 metres per second velocity to enter a human body but the brass tube didn't need anywhere near as much as that, even though the diameter of both may be about the same. That is partly because the tube was hollow and the bullet solid!

You might want to think of throwing a knife, using a catapult or jamming a spear into someone to brainstorm how the tube might have got there. Even if it could have been fired from something somehow, maybe using compressed air or an explosive."

"Any gunshot residue on the tube, guv?"

"No, Trotter, but worth the thought!" replied the Inspector.

The school had a music department and evidently turned out some pretty good instrumentalists. The head of the department was Mark Troughton and had been sent home because of the lockdown. Two officers were tasked with phoning him and arranging to meet in a safe, socially distanced way to ask some key questions.

Eddie Silvester had met Mark briefly but had met very few other staff owing to the short duration between him starting then the evacuation and lockdown.

During the interview the police officer asked Mark about musical instruments and what happened if any got damaged, broken or scrapped.

"We rarely scrap anything" he replied. The school technicians can do some simple fixed but if it's more complicated we use a local music store called Nevada which has some repair guys, or send stuff to the manufacturers. The highest casualty rate is electronic keyboards because they are very popular and take a bashing."

"Have you had any woodwind, brass, or string instruments repaired recently?" from one of the officers.

"As I recall, there was one violin with a split and the caretaker said he could fix that with some adhesive, one trombone had a broken water valve so we sent off for a spare by mail order, and someone dented a trumpet. Has this got anything to do with the unfortunate occurrence in the library I heard about?"

"Just trying to get an idea of who might have been in and out of the school recently. Routine enquiries, you understand!"

"Yes, yes of course" said Mark, concerned he may have asked an inappropriate question.

"You told us about the violin and the trombone, just to complete the loop so to speak, what about the trumpet?"

"We asked Nevada if they could do anything about a dent. I've seen video clips where people use a ball bearing fixed to the end of a rod and tap it into squashed or dented tube so the dents are pushed out from the inside. It might take more than one size of steel ball so it can be done in stages, but we don't have any facilities at the school for such things.

Nevada said they would send someone along to have a look first but I don't know if anything happened about it before the lockdown. I was more of an usher trying to get the kids sorted."

"So if someone from Nevada did stop by who would know about it?"

"Most probably the caretaker, or site manager as he likes to be called these days!"

"Thank you Mr Troughton, you've been very helpful."

Next stop was Nevada, but the shop was closed, of course. The officers called the station and got keyholder details so they could follow up the dented trumpet idea.

The owner, a man named Cliveden, said he employed a couple of technicians who were good at electronic stuff and recently took on an Australian on a trial basis. The Oz guy as he called him seemed very good at metalwork so he asked him to call at the school on his way back from another job by the river and see what he could do. He hadn't heard from him since but had other things on his mind with the shop closed and a pile of bills to settle.

All the details were passed on by the officers and those still at the school asked the "site manager" John Carpenter what he knew about the Oz guy.

"He asked if we had a workbench or vice or anything so I showed him my "repair corner" in the boiler house and told him he could use anything there as long as he was careful."

The boiler house had been through changes during the school's history, not just the boiler but the fuel. The rooms had been heated with wood fires at one point, then coal. Later a central heating system was installed using boilers that burned wood, then coal, coke, then oil, and now, natural gas.

The place was quite tidy, automatic controls were evident and the "repair corner" had a bench, vice and a variety of small tools. Carpenter said there was no large workshop in the school and the facilities for the Design & Technology subject were minimal. Any small repairs were down to the caretaking staff with more complex tasks given to contractors. John Carpenter stressed that the budget was tight and they tried to keep all expenditure to a minimum.

They found most of a trumpet on the bench, plus some pieces of round section steel, some sticks of solder, soldering flux, fine emery cloth, and a small gas blowlamp which belonged to the school.

No van belonging to Nevada was found anywhere on the premises but near some bushes at the edge of the car park a constable found a piece of wood measuring approximately 75mm x 50mm x 1200mm long, with a piece of round steel jammed in a hole at one end so it stuck up from the wood at a right angle. The end of the steel had been filed to a round shape rather like a hemisphere or half a ball. It was handled carefully and taken into evidence.

Photographs were taken in the area and footprint details were recorded.

The lockdown continued to make things difficult for the investigators and it all took longer than it would have in earlier "normal" times. Officers not only had to think about what not to touch and keeping their distance from each other, they couldn't even go into a toilet room if there was already someone there because of the virus threat.

The staff who eventually took the victim's body away had been fully trained and briefed and wore full compressed air breathing apparatus for the duration.

No other signs of interest were found on or in the corpse. No defensive wounds, puncture wounds, no drugs, alcohol, interference, no dentures, or anything sinister. Only the neck wound.

One of the officers had asked "If the tube was tapered was it the wider end or the narrow end that went into the victim?"

Before answering they wanted to know why he asked that.

"Well, if it was the narrow end I wondered if there had been a tip of some kind, like a pointed bullet that came dislodged and stayed in the victim, like if the whole thing was some kind of ammunition round. We even hear of ice bullets that melt after penetration."

"OK", came the response, "The body was x-rayed and there was no other object. The ME used a borescope in the wound and there was no sign of any other damage apart from the ring-shaped wound caused by the tube, or pipe as some may call it. If you think of pushing a hollow pastry cutter against some pastry dough you get a ring and some of the pastry goes inside the cutter.

The outflowing blood would have washed any ice or water away but there was no sign of dilution of any of the blood that was collected and analysed. We know it had congealed but the scientists have ways of detecting such things and were certain there was no ice bullet.

But you were right to raise it, so don't be discouraged."

Chapter 3

Tim Bradley, the Oz guy, had not been sure he would stay in Britain and was attempting to leave by boat when the local police found him.

Every year many Britons go to Australia on a "trial" basis. The flow probably started after world war two when the Australian government was trying to increase the country's population and families took up the "assisted passage scheme" offered by the UK government.

Many returned to Britain because of the heat, uncertainty of ongoing employment and the hostile terrain. Some sold everything they owned just to pay for a boat ticket back home and lived with relatives when they got there.

Tim thought the same way. "I'll give it a try and if it doesn't work out I'll head back to Oz!"

He felt comfortable until the virus struck England, then the school evacuated everyone and he thought if he didn't move quickly he may never get out.

But there was something else.

He had enough cash for a while and booked a ticket on a passenger carrying freighter from Southampton.

The police were provided with a description, photos and other information after the Nevada van was assumed taken without permission. Police at seaports and airports were issued with a BOLO - be on look out - for this person and detain for questioning.

Rochester to Southampton is about 130 miles and would have taken perhaps four hours of continuous driving in a small van. But that wasn't important because Bradley had been found and detained.

He wasn't so easy to miss because he was very tall, slim but muscular, had frizzy blonde hair, was jokey, and had what some described as a "soppy grin".

Tim was taken back to Kent in a police vehicle, detained under the PACE Act, examined by a doctor, and asked to make a statement.

One looming charge was theft of vehicle but it went deeper. There was a dead body and he had been at the school at the calculated time of death.

During many hours of questioning, with frequent breaks and checks on his wellbeing, Tim expounded the whole story.

Yes, his boss asked him to go to the school to look at a damaged instrument. Yes, he spoke to John Carpenter who said he could use the boiler house facilities. Yes, he thought he could push the dent out of the lead pipe with the stuff that was there, so he got on with it.

He added some detail.

Tim said he laid a ruler next to the trumpet and photographed it with his mobile phone so he could put everything back correctly. The length of tube in musical instruments affects the tone and has to be right so he wanted a record of how it was when he started.

Using the blowlamp he melted the solder and pulled the sections of the lead pipe apart.

While the bits cooled down he made a "contraption".

He found a length of wood and some round steel, drilled a hole in the wood and clamped a piece of steel in the hole with a wood screw.

Then he filed the end of the steel to round shape to use as a "dolly" or "drift" for pushing the dent out. Because the tubing was tapered he thought he might need more than one piece of steel, and in different diameters, so he could work from both ends.

He clamped the wood to the bench with the steel "pin" pointed upwards, then slid the piece of lead pipe over it, held a small piece of wood over the end of the pipe and tapped the wood with a hammer to "dress" the dent outward.

During a brief pause an officer asked why Tim didn't just clamp the piece of steel in the vice and do the job there.

Tim told him he was thinking ahead. He might have similar jobs to do elsewhere and they might not have a vice, but if he had something he could carry around in the van he could have a mini mobile workshop and maybe conjure up some more business for Nevada, provided John carpenter let him keep the wood and so on.

"Very enterprising!", said the officer, actually admiring the initiative, "Please carry on."

"It seemed to be OK so I thought I'd show it to the caretaker, John, and maybe the music teacher, you know, let them see what was possible and get their approval. I looked for John but he seemed to be ushering kids towards cars or a minibus or something so I left him alone and looked around for someone else. But the place seemed empty like there was a mass exodus or something. no fire alarms or anything, more like nothing.

Then I saw a sign 'Library' and thought that may be a good place for information. But that seemed empty too.

Well, there was a lot of space in the middle and I still had the contraption in my hand with the brass tube on the end so I started swinging it round like a cricket bat hitting a boundary. You know I love cricket, right, and I'm a fun guy so I was having a bit of fun in a place I thought had been deserted.

But someone stepped out from behind a bookshelf and I suddenly felt daft. The contraption hit something which I guess was a book because there was no clunk or hard impact, so I said sorry and walked out."

He continued.

"Because everyone seemed to be leaving the school there didn't seem to be much point in going back to the boiler house so I dropped the contraption by the car park and got in the van. Hell. I thought I'll buy them another trumpet if it comes to it.

I went to Nevada but the shop was locked up and I'd left my phone in the boiler house at the school so I couldn't call the boss, so I went to my digs and decided to get my kit together and go back home."

"Did you know someone died?" an officer asked.

"No, who?" Then an expression of realisation appeared on jokey, fun guy Tim's face.

"The person in the library" came the response.

The officers outlined what had been found but omitted a lot of detail hoping Tim could fill in details if he knew them.

He seemed genuinely shocked and stayed silent for some minutes, probably trying to rerun events in his mind.

"You mean what I thought was a book was the person and the bit of lead pipe stuck in their neck and killed them?"

"Yes! Did you look back or anything?"

"NO, I felt foolish being seen playing air cricket in a library and thought I might be called a trespasser or something, plus I might have damaged a book, so I thought I'd better keep moving in case things got any worse."

"They did!" said the officer, did you know them?"

"No, the only person I knew was the caretaker. What happens now?"

"You will be held here while we conduct some more enquiries and further investigations and we will keep you informed. If you want to speak to a solicitor let us know."

Feedback was given to the Head of the school, who informed the Trustees and others.

Mark Troughton and Eddie Silvester spoke on the phone.

"Who was the person who died?" asked Eddie.

"Someone named Gledhill who worked in the library" Mark informed him.

"Didn't get to meet them", said Eddie, most librarians seem to be women, was that a Ms Gledhill, or Mrs?"

"Uncertain" said Mark.

"What do you mean?"

"You know the police referred to the dead person as JD and wouldn't give out any more details, well there was a reason for that. The deceased person was a midway transgender intender and their actual gender at the time of death was uncertain.

The police were not legally entitled to declare whether someone was male or female unless it was a matter of fact in a registration or other official document. So they had to fudge it until a judge made a decision."

Mark Troughton was a patient and understanding man who for years had taught music to young people. Nothing could be rushed, one step at a time, he knew, was the only way it would work. Likewise with changes in the, law, fashion, and public opinion. The law was becoming ever tolerant and he only way he could deal with it was by observing and being tolerant himself.

He went on “The Head and a few of us knew that the librarian person wanted to change gender and the Head asked us to be discreet and understanding. The school didn’t want any accusations of incorrectness of or malicious persecution of any kind. So it was supposed to be gentle transition that would go unobserved. Someone even proposed a story of having a twin brother and sister working at the school, then one suddenly leaving.”

Eddie Silvester thought in a different way and often searched his mind for passages from literature that may signal things had been done before. He often recited in his mind the statement that "if people don't learn from history they are bound to repeat it."

He wondered if sometime earlier in world history a tranny had been killed somewhere by a tube in the neck, and thought "probably".

During his chat with Mark he said “I was right about the bookshelf layout” and explained what he meant. Mark agreed with him.

The evidence collected by investigators and scientists tallied with what Tim the Oz guy had told police.

As the lockdown continued, social distancing measures remained in place, and court hearings were delayed indefinitely nobody knew what the outcome would be, what gender the Gledhill person would be assigned, or where Tim would end up.

It all remained a mystery!

The End

This was a Covid-19 novel brought to you by Philip W Baker

Copyright © Philip W Baker 2020