

ONCE UPON A LOST PHONE

BY STRUAN HAMILTON

PREFACE

Albert and Daisy Dolbear are on a pottery course near Land's End, Cornwall and she finds an unremarkable looking old mobile phone in a wood. A friend, Povilus, 'accidentally' finds it has a nasty message on it, threatening and vicious. The woman's voice turns out to be that of Selina, the lovely, eccentric lady leading the pottery course. There are other strange goings on in the village. Secrets being kept and odd incidents which don't seem to add up. Who is the senile old woman with the purple linen gloves she never takes off? Is Maureen, the man eating student on the course, all she says she is? Who is the handsome red haired man who hangs around and who runs off when approached? Selina's little son also gives the game away with peculiar utterings.

Daisy ends up semi-reluctantly investigating and soon the message is clear. These things are somehow connected and all lead to the conclusion that some aspects of an infamous crime from 60 years ago are only now coming to be understood. Will the past rear its ugly head and destroy lives today?

The story is told with Struan's ability to get inside the heads of his heroes and the major players in the tale reveal their self doubts. Motives are dissected, clever means for getting information are devised and humour is never far away in this book which will keep the reader guessing just what on earth is going on. Be prepared for twists and turns and some hilarious one liners to keep you amused. Colourful characters abound and maybe we can recognize ourselves in them.

CHAPTER ONE

A QUIET PLACE NEAR MOUSEHOLE

Well, it was something we had always wanted to do but we'd never had the opportunity. So when we saw the advert Albert was keen and the price of the course was reasonable. We'd take the camper van and as it wasn't so far from Plymouth, if the weather turned nasty we could simply make the 60 minute journey home. We could pop over to Land's End for an hour or two also in the evenings. For the sunsets.

I should explain. I am Daisy Dolbear and my husband is Albert, recently retired from civil engineering, and we had always wanted to learn the art of pottery. 'Oh, to potter about,' Albert would say wittily. He's like that. Good with words. On holidays we would always hang around the ceramics shops and gift places and wonder and ponder on how they had been made. Some quite fancy artwork goes into them. We watched clips on Youtube, so we'd an idea but, well, a 'hands on' class or course in pottery was more likely to be useful. The village of Hessop, a quiet place near Mousehole had a small centre where they ran 5 day courses with 'hands on' practice. 'Difficult to make pots and vases with your hands off them,' chortled Albert. Accommodation was available nearby but that was no problem for us. We had the camper van. We and our good friends, Joy and Bob Rickard, have had the camper for quite a few years and the memories we've made gadding about the countryside are so very precious to us. Our little white west highland terrier, Judy, comes with us and loves it when we stop and explore places and she can sniff around and even chase hares. Not that she'd know what to do with one if she caught one. Run away probably.

We could never have guessed what awaited us in the next momentous week or two. Very contradictory things, not making much sense. We never knew who was who and so we were led up the proverbial garden path more than once. That week our son Russell, a policeman, aspiring to be a sergeant, was away in Spain with his police pals and he was not around to call on for support. Not that he would have liked us getting involved. He sent a few texts from Malaga but we didn't say anything about what was going on when we replied.

We planned the food and provisions meticulously. As Albert likes a lot of space to turn around in when he sleeps he took the 4-man tent, while I was to be more cozy in the camper. Less draughty. Judy liked to park herself in the tent with Albert and annoyingly lie on his feet all the time.

Bob and Joy came down with us for the day before the course started and their adopted Thai son, Oliver, now 18, drove Joy and I down in his jalope while 'the boys' went in the camper. More like spluttered down. He had difficulty stretching his legs in front while we had to be patient in the back with the small space we had. But it was all very jolly in the jalope, as he named it, as we finally arrived in Hessop. I forgot to mention that as soon as Judy saw Oliver, whom she adores, in the entourage we couldn't tempt her into the more spacious camper. So she sat in front with him, nuzzling into him like a love sick teenager. She's been like that with him since puppyhood.

'Not much of a place, is it?' said Oliver as he helped take out stuff from the boot when we arrived on a slightly blustery evening. 'A telephone box, a small pub, a dozen cottages and an electric substation.' Then he helped set up a small picnic area for us while Bob and Albert got other things organized. The little stove, the awnings and Albert's tent. The breeze was pretty soft and warm and it was a cozy place, surrounded on three sides by bushes and trees and the woman in the nearest cottage assured us the owner of the land wouldn't mind 'People like us' in a campervan. Nice to be so highly regarded. 'If only she knew,' said Oliver jokingly. And in a very well done Cornish accent he added, 'tis 'eard there is strange goings on in these parts. City dwellers do hold their covens thereabouts.'

'Oh, Oliver, you and your imagination. I think actually there's more for Albert and Daisy to fear from the locals. The slobbering village idiot, the spiteful intrigue that goes on among these inbred locals. The stories that could be told,' said Joy, only semi-seriously.

As they finally got the tent up Bob came over and added, 'I don't think there are many parts of England these days that are like that anymore. We're all so ruddy well connected, transport-wise and communications-wise. Dark and foreboding corners of England's green and pleasant land are practically impossible to find these days.'

'Don't you believe it,' insisted Oliver laughingly. 'Aunt Daisy, I would keep the door of the camper well locked at night. And uncle Albert should give Judy lessons in mortal combat, just to be sure.'

Then the food was organized, sizzling burgers, mustard aplenty, salad and cheesecakes now fully thawed, from Marks. Judy was running around, nostrils dilated and she joyfully snatched anything given and then ran off as if guarding it from us.

'So, Day One is the basics of spinning and softening the clay,' said Bob, looking over the brochure. 'Is the class held in that cottage we passed near the bridge?' Albert nodded.

'They've converted it into a pottery centre, with the ovens in an outhouse at the back. The owners, the Alexanders, Selina and Clark, live in the cottage next door, so I gather. One cottage has two small apartments and others can stay in the pub and they were glad we didn't need accommodation as most places are full in August.' Albert, succinct, as per usual.

‘Did you see that red faced man who I nearly ran over just before coming into the village?’ said Oliver, munching away on a burger. ‘I almost expected him to have bloody rabbits on his shoulder. He looked like a poacher from a D.H. Lawrence novel.’

‘Don’t swear dear,’ said Joy distractedly as she scrubbed a dish or two, taking care not to spoil her lavender linen trouser suit.

‘He was talking about the rabbits which had blood on them Joy,’ said Bob, winking at Oliver. ‘Had the rabbits actually existed, which they didn’t but you know what I mean.’ We had to think this over for a second or two. ‘And by the way, Oliver, what are you doing reading D.H. Lawrence?’

‘Oh, dad, don’t worry, I never finished it. Too boring,’ Oliver said as he pulled on a jumper. The breeze was getting up.

‘Thursday is baking and firing the pots and things. What’s the difference?’ asked Bob looking up from the flapping brochure.

‘Come along on Thursday and find out,’ I said brightly but not really meaning it.

‘Does this mean that after the course you’ll assail us with your creations and expect us to be grateful and comment on them effulgently no matter how ghastly they are?’ said Bob handing back the brochure to Albert.

Joy, who was also putting on a sweater told Bob he was being unkind. ‘Maybe they’ll discover a hidden talent for it, who knows.’

‘Will you make me a chamber pot Aunt Daisy? I’ve always wanted one,’ said Oliver tongue in cheek I am sure.

‘Whatever for?’ Bob almost barked out.

‘Oh, not if I get caught short in the night. No, I believe they can double up as soup tureens and I can plonk it on the table and serve you green pea soup.’

‘Oh, very droll,’ said Joy as she got things ready for leaving us. But we all smiled nonetheless.

Bob and Joy got into the jalopec just as the sun was starting to get low on the horizon. A dog barked in the distance but Judy paid no attention as she went around hoping to find any grub that had fallen to the ground. A young lad and a girl came into our glade, hand in hand and when they saw us they about turned. We looked at each other, said nothing but laughed gently.

‘See you mid week,’ said Joy as she kissed me. Bob had his civil engineering job to keep him in Plymouth during the week and Joy had her commitments. Family and a paid manager of a charity shop, part time. As Bob and Joy drove off, Oliver tooted and we felt quite alone. A silence came over us. Albert unzipped the tent, Judy arrived back from somewhere, sniffed around and then got into the tent. A car revved up a short distance away. A cow mooed. Sounds of the country. Nothing ominous in that. Albert brushed his teeth a few feet away. Judy started to snore gently. All the fresh country air no doubt.

A good night kiss from Albert and in he went, shifting Judy to the corner of the tent. He zipped the tent up, the sound shrill and reassuring. He moaned as he rummaged around and tried to find something. Then it was peace.

I walked about the glade to see if there were paths into it through the bushes and trees. No, it was pretty thickly surrounded. Then I found a space with a small path between two scrubby bushes. There was a

chocolate wrapper underfoot and a page from the Sun newspaper. Then I saw it. The mobile phone. Small, worn and cheap looking. There was dirt on the screen and it was as dead as a dodo. I wondered if it was worth trying to find the owner. Had it lain there for a long time? Impossible to say. I cleaned it with a serviette left over from the picnic. It was still grubby. I put it on a shelf inside the camper.

I got ready for bed and heard the comforting sound of snoring from Albert's tent. As I lay there, trying to see the moon but failing, I decided to get up and lock the door. I asked myself why. Oliver's jokes about nutty locals were not the main reason. If there was a phone lost here it meant that people did sometimes come this way. That young couple who bolted on seeing us, for example. Anyway, I was curious to know what to do with it. Someone's life was in the phone. Their contacts, their messages. How must they be feeling about losing it? Was it recently? I would ask at the pottery centre and they could advise about where to leave a notice. At the pub? Back into Mousehole, two miles down the road? I would see what they said.

Next morning the sun got Albert up and I heard him rummaging around. He was sure to try the back door of the camper so I gently unlocked it. But to no avail. He heard the click.

'Daisy, m'dear, you locked yourself in? I didn't think you'd pay attention to those stories of Oliver's. You know how he loves drama and acting. Anyway, pass me that towel, that's the one... I'm going for a little swim. Sleep on, we've loads of time.'

That was Albert, always thinking of me and my beauty sleep. I guessed that Judy would go with him and as there was no rustling sound I knew I wouldn't have to open a tin or packet for her just yet.

It would be an exaggeration to say that 'sleep fled' from me but I tossed and turned a little, breathing in the fine fresh air. Then I recalled the mobile phone on the shelf. I fingered it and all sorts of questions arose in my mind. Well, I have always felt slightly guilty about being more than usually curious than other people about things. Albert simply calls it a healthy interest in the world round us. I am not so sure.

So I wondered if I would advertise its being found in the village and then forget about it. What if someone claimed it? Then that would be that. Nothing more to be said. Would I be disappointed? I tried to kid myself I wouldn't be but I know myself too well to deny it.

I decided I would discuss it with Joy. That's the thing about friends who have known you through decades. Who helped you through bad times, who babysat and sometimes fell out but always we got over it and carried on. Yes, I would call her later on if the signal was alright from Hessop.

The strengthening of the sunshine, the distant sound of the sea were all I needed to get up and join Albert at the beach. Bracing and marvelous, setting us up for the day. The course didn't start until 10 so it was a relaxed breakfast with lots of the goodies we'd brought with us still in the mini fridge.

Judy was all sandy and kept shaking herself to dry off which infuriated Albert. It was her holiday too. Once we were downing the last of the coffee I told him about the mobile phone and he showed some interest but not much. 'Actually, it's called throwing a pot, not spinning. If mine turn out horrible I'll probably throw them too... a phone you said, here in the glade?'

'Yes, I was going to ask at the centre and put up a notice. Of course, it's impossible to say how long it's been there. Months or more. But maybe someone will come forward. If not, then in Mousehole. A shop there. The police station in Penzance will hardly think it's worth it to find out its owner.' I was later to regret my altruism, if indeed it was that. A petty, prying instinct might be more like it.

‘Yes,’ said Albert vaguely, ‘I suppose the pub here might put the word around. Actually, it’s quite surprising there is a pub here at all as it’s a bit of a dead end. There can’t be more than 50 people living here. Hessop’s not exactly a tourist magnet. The beach is nothing to write home about.’

‘But alright for diehards like us.’ I paused then added, ‘But that’s why it’s good here. Get away from visitors.’ Which sounded snobby but was quite true.

We walked the three minutes to the pottery centre and as we gazed over the blue sea and green fields, England at its best, Albert asked if I had remembered the mobile phone I had found. I was glad to see he was taking an interest. When we arrived we were greeted by Selina who was rather like a middle-aged 60s character. Tie dyed and bangles. Mascara aplenty. Patchouli in evidence. Very firm handshake and said they often had people with dogs so there was a special yard out back for Judy to play around in. There was another dog there, a timid and shivering spaniel but Judy just sniffed it and left it in peace while she explored the yard.

‘Oh, before I forget, we found a mobile phone in a glade where we have the camper van. Looks like it’s been there for a while,’ I said trying to gauge Salina’s response from her face. Couldn’t be bothered or willing to help?

‘Hm... could ask around. The pub could put up a notice. They’ve done that before. Best bet...’ she said as she took us into the workshop, ‘would be the village shop. They have a notice board.’ She pointed at things and explained what they were and it was all fascinating. Her prattle was a little mechanical but informative.

‘This is Albert and Daisy, this is Maurice and Sally. You’re Francois, yes?’ she asked a shy looking lad of 25 or so. He indicated he was. He was goatee bearded and in a collarless shirt looking quite like I imagine a 1960s Sorbonne student might look. My imagination. He wore a scruffy green kitted hat too. ‘And this is Maureen from Folkestone. That’s us all this week, a smaller class so you’ll get lots of ‘hands on’ practice. That’s a joke my husband never fails to crack.’ There was a slight sound of laughter all round and Albert looked at me remembering what he’d said.

The workshop was festooned with macramé, examples of ceramics, which were eccentric and others gaudy. Some looked weird and painful to look at. Modern art gone mad. But then there were several forget-me-not flowers glazed on some which were elegant and primroses on others.

So we all sat down and the course started. We were certainly getting our money’s worth as Selina sallied forth on what was clearly the love of her life. She said she’d been a teacher in ‘her previous life’ and I wasn’t sure if she meant reincarnation or was being flippant. Techniques, tips on everything and enthusiasm oozed out of her. Then there was a coffee break with flapjacks which her son, Angel, had made and they were eagerly consumed. ‘Sorry about the burnt bits at the edge,’ he said. ‘The aga is acting up.’ Of course, it had to be an aga. He was about 12 or so, thin as a rake, blonde and freckled and he said it was a vegan recipe. He had on an outside ‘Black Lives Matter’ teeshirt which was floury and finger printed.

‘Just a phase he’s going through,’ Selina said to me at break time.

‘The Black Lives Matter or being a vegan?’ I asked sincerely.

‘No, the BLM is fine. We’re all for that. The veganism. He was heartbroken when a serious vegan told him that eating honey was akin to keeping bees in slavery so he’s wobbling in his beliefs,’ she said, sotto voce. ‘But he’s a good kid, really.’

I thought it unlikely that the phone belonged to anyone there but asked in any case. Maurice, a civil servant from the Home Counties, he told us, was dismissive and said that it was really cheap looking and was probably deliberately thrown away. His wife, an over dressed woman with a strong personality, and matching strong perfume, concurred. She had asked 'Why?' all the time during the morning session and Selina had grown a little weary of it. Maureen was very chatty, a Liverpudlian, blonde, 40ish and dressed in oddly matching checks. She said to Albert and me that she was getting over a minor trauma in her life. 'Man trouble,' she called it, so had booked up for the course to help her forget him. Albert and I listened gravely and I wondered what the connection between pottery and this getting over a man could be.

Albert 'threw' his first lump of clay and it seemed quite passable to me. Maurice looked skeptically at him and then tried his hand with a really excellent result. He and his wife looked smugly at each other. He said, wiping his hands on the apron provided, 'I don't suppose you've seen a better one than that from an absolute beginner, have you?'

Switching off the wheel, quick as a flash Selina quipped, 'Oh we had a down's syndrome man here last week. First attempt. Amazing. Like he'd been doing it all his life.' She didn't wait to see the look on Maurice's face but we did and it was hilarious to observe. Albert and I walked off, wiping down our aprons and washing up for lunch.

'Is the lunch going to be vegan too?' asked Francois, looking anxious but hiding it well. The French and their reverence for food. I thought I might look up how many vegans there are in France. Not many I thought. 'Is it?' he repeated.

'Lord, no. I gave Angel the flapjack assignment to keep him out of mischief. The lunch is ordered from the pub. Rotten beer and sticky carpets but they've a good cook,' said Selina tartly. 'I can't cook and run the course with my husband away on a sales trip. But the meal will be great.'

And so it proved to be. Broccoli soup, chicken pie and a mass of braised veg. Apple custard to follow. Selina whispered to me that she'd give me some of the leftovers in containers as she'd heard we were in a camper van. 'Just between you and I,' and she winked.

Francois sat with us while Maurice and his wife picked over their meal in the far corner. Francois was a student at Plymouth university and wanted to stay in England for the summer to soak up the culture. Albert said it was funny to hear a Frenchman say that as it was we English who revelled in their culture and didn't esteem what England had to offer so much. And a nice friendly chat ensued. The spaniel was his. I, ever the practical one, wondered how he could keep a dog at university.

'I found 'im on the street and 'id 'im in my room. I was afraid they will find out. A girl was chasing me for to be her boyfriend. So I agreed if she would 'ave 'im to stay in 'er 'ouse. So now I 'ave a girlfriend and Kasper, that's the dog. We go for long walks together,' he said dreamily.

'With your girlfriend too, I take it,' said Albert, stifling a smirk.

'Not always,' laughed Francois. 'Actually, I was wonder about the mobile phone you found. I was thinking that a phone is like person's room, or their car. You know. You can deduct... I mean deduce a lot from examine it.'

My heart gladdened on hearing this. Someone was interested. I asked him what he meant precisely. He asked to look at it. I drew it from my handbag while Albert looked on warmly. He knew I wanted to be listened to.

He looked over it intensely and held it up to the light, turned it over and then looked seriously to me.

‘Alright Poirot,’ said Albert, his face puckering up in humour.

‘e was Belgian, but anyway. First of all. The ‘and ‘olds it ‘ere and ‘ere. You see. It’s well used and we can see the person was right ‘anded.’ I was impressed. ‘Now, adult or teen? Judging from the distance between the mark ‘ere and lower down it was either a teenager, not older than 16, I would ‘azard, or a woman. They ‘ave smaller ‘ands.’

‘I am thrilled. It’s amazing,’ I enthused. Albert looked pleased.

‘Oh, and another thing. Did the person text a lot or speak mostly? Now feel the springiness of the buttons. It’s an old phone, several years in use. Find your own phone and see ‘ow springy the buttons are. Now Daisy, I can call you this name?’ I concurred. ‘Check your phone. Is there the same springiness? Do you text much or speak more?’

Albert hid a smile behind his serviette and moved away the custard plates.

‘No, they are quite firm. I never text. Never.’

‘So you see, the user was either a teen who rarely is texting, ‘ard to imagine, or it’s a someone who talks much more often.’

‘Sounds like a woman to me,’ said Albert and we all laughed loudly. Maurice and his wife looked over and almost sneered. Maureen was on her phone texting deftly.

‘If the outside can reveal so much, what about the inside?’ Francois asked.

‘Well, I don’t think we can be so invasive. It’s not very nice. We should just hand it in...’ said Albert, trying not to sound too judgmental.

‘I was meaning the battery. Is it old or new?’

‘Oh, I see. Sorry,’ Albert felt a little silly.

And he then prized the phone open and revealed the battery. It seemed to my untutored eye like it was nothing special. ‘Ah, you see. It’s not original battery. Different make. And it looks very new. Not expertly put in, you see. A woman, I think.’ I didn’t like his chauvinism but let it pass. There was a pause and then Francois broke it by putting on an extra French accent. ‘I am now being Maigret, a much better detective. What can we deduce from the evidence? A woman, most certainly. Does she ‘ave a man in ‘er life? Maybe not. She put in the battery ‘erself. Next. Poor or rich?’ He stroked his goatee and carried on, ‘I think we can say poor. Usually they say that when the battery goes in a phone like this, throw it away. But she replaces it. Aha. Lack of money. My deduction is complete. Classic Maigret.’

‘I am impressed,’ I said warmly. Simple but clever. Of course, he is a dog lover and those people always have something extra nice about them. It sounds naïve to say that but I do believe it.

‘Actually, I ‘ave a charger with me. This afternoon you could charge it up and voila! it will reveal its secrets.’

I was taken aback. Talking like that. Yet I knew that he was just the same as me. Albert looked at me. He wasn’t going to take any part in this. He knew how our curiosity had gotten us into trouble before with the ‘Woman with the Berries’, our previous escapade into detection. Amateurish and with unpleasant results. Like a coward he simply sighed and said he would get ready for another throw before Maurice took over the place and bragged again.

‘Well, is up to you. It will recharge in 90 minutes I think, so it will be easy. Of course, the owner might not ‘ave any money in the account if it was months ago,’ Francois said, cogitating. ‘But then again there might be some.’ He was trying to gently coax me into allowing it to be charged.

I thought I would be really clever and also added, ‘If they lost the phone and didn’t want to wait until they found it they would buy a new phone and then go to the provider and tell them. They would then just pay a small fee and their number would be preserved and used on the new one,’ I said, thinking I was being smart. But a doubt began to creep in.

‘You’re right. So if we do get it working then the other phone would be operational with the original number and so this one couldn’t be used.’

‘Yes, I see,’ I said, not completely sure what he meant.

‘But if we get it working then I can find out what the number is or was, then phone the person from my phone and tell them where we found it. We just ‘ave to ‘ope they ‘ave not emigrated to Timbuktoo!’

‘How can you find out the number?’ I asked, amazed at his cleverness.

‘Is trade secret...’ and he smiled. ‘Shall I give you my charger? Maybe your ‘usband will mind?’

‘Oh, no. He won’t mind. Charge it up. I mean we are trying to help the owner to get their phone back, are we not?’ I said, trying to look innocent.

‘Oiu, madame. Just as you say. Dutiful citizens, are we not?’ And he looked mischievously at me and we both burst out laughing. A soul mate. No prurience. No prying. Just a genuine desire to... whatever. We’ll leave it at that.