

Meanwhile, Lois's father Colin was sitting in a pub called The Bull's Head in King's Norton. His boss, Jack Forrest, had gone to the bar to get three pints of Brew XI, leaving Colin to make halting conversation with Bill Anderton, a shop steward in the Longbridge underseal section. A fourth member of the party, Roy Slater, was yet to arrive. It was a great relief when Jack came back from the bar.

5 'Cheers,' said Colin, Bill and Jack, drinking from their pints of Brew. After drinking in unison they let out a collective sigh, and wiped the froth from their upper lips. Then they fell silent.

'I want this to be nice and informal,' said Jack Forrest, suddenly, when the silence had become too long and too settled for comfort.

'Informal. Absolutely,' said Colin.

10 'Suits me,' said Bill. 'Suits me fine'.

Informally, they sipped on their Brew. Colin looked around the pub, intending to make a comment about the décor, but couldn't think of one. Bill Anderton stared into his beer.

'They brew a good pint, don't they?' said Jack.

'Eh?' said Bill.

15 'I said they serve a good pint, in this place.'

'Not bad,' said Bill. 'I've had worse.'

This was in the days before men learned to discuss their feelings, of course. And in the days before bonding sessions between management and workforce were at all common. They were pioneers, in a way, these three.

'Well then, you two – have you worked it out yet?' said Bill.

20 'There's a reason for this evening, you know,' said Jack. 'I didn't just pick you out at random. I could have got any personnel officer, and any shop steward, and set this evening up for them. But I didn't do that. I chose you two for a reason.'

Bill and Colin looked at each other.

25 'You have something in common, you see.' Jack regarded them both in turn, pleased with himself. 'Don't you know what it is?'

They shrugged.

'You've both got kids at the same school.'

This information sank in, gradually, and Colin was the first to manage a smile.

30 Jack's face had relaxed into a look of satisfaction. 'You know, this tells you something about the country we live in today,' he said. 'Britain in the 1970s. The old distinctions just don't mean anything any more, do they? This is a country where a union man and a junior manager – soon to be senior, Colin, I'm sure – can send their sons to the same school and nobody thinks anything of it. Both bright lads, both good enough to have got through the entrance exam, and now there they are: side by side in the cradle of learning. What does that tell you about the class war? It's over. Truce. Armistice.' He clasped his pint of Brew and raised it solemnly.

35 'Equality of opportunity.'

Colin murmured a shy echo of these words, and drank from his glass. Bill said nothing: as far as he was concerned, the class war was alive and well and being waged with some ferocity at British Leyland, even in Ted Heath's egalitarian 1970s, but he couldn't rouse himself to argue the point.

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40 Perhaps it had been a mistake to invite Roy Slater along. The thing about Slater was that everybody hated him, including Bill Anderton, who might have been expected to show some solidarity with his putative comrade-in-arms. But Slater was the worst kind of shop steward, as far as Bill was concerned. He had no talent for negotiation, no imaginative sympathy with the men he was supposed to represent, no grasp of the wider political issues. He was just a loudmouth and a troublemaker, always looking for confrontation, and always

45 coming out of it badly. In union terms he was a nobody, way down the hierarchy of the TGWU's junior stewards at Longbridge. It was all Bill could do to be civil to him, most of the time, and tonight he was expected to do more than that: honour demanded that the two of them put up some sort of united front against these alluring management overtures. It was enough to make him suspect calculation on Jack's part. What, after all, could be more effective than to divide the opposition by pairing up two shop stewards who famously

50 couldn't stand each other?