

**ManWords
(Thoughts About
a Gas-Ball).**

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Clifford hated God. Or so he had always assumed. You know the kind of God - the neighbours' anthropomorphic papier-mâché version. However, the God *he* liked to imagine - the wibbly-wobbly, otherworldly, gas-ball one - Clifford had always suspected to be pragmatic and reasonable. He was after all, to coin a religious dogma, created in His own image. So, as well-intentioned as they might be, any reference to God on his doorstep, over a trestle table of cakes at the Community Hall or from behind a placard in the High Street unleashed the worst of his belittling condescension.

Clifford squeezed the last of the tea from its bag with the back of a spoon and placed the shrivelled husk in a small saucer on the kitchen windowsill. The puddled stains described *Tolkeinesque* end-paper maps. Clifford considered how many teabags had died this way. How many glugs of water had passed through the internal filtering system of his paper-sack body and wondered at the creased Order of Service in his hand. He really had no idea why he had brought it home with him. On past occasions it might have been to gloat at the irrelevant blatherings of the words within. He considered for a moment how the grinning face on the front would grin no more. Not

that it had grinned much in life. This digitised reproduction of his friend - no, stuff it, acquaintance - was indeed something of a collector's item. Clifford lifted the print close to his eye until the pink cherub face was a blancmange blob of teeny-tiny dots. He should cry shouldn't he? In the privacy of his own thoughts he should compare the course of his life to the dead man's and wonder at his remaining physical presence surrounded by chair, table and mug, and then consider the remnant ash-flakes of the deceased fluttering to no more. That wasn't his concern. Crying wasn't something he felt he could do today. Other thoughts had taken over the reins. He tried to concentrate on what they were. It wasn't easy to focus when at the heart of it all was a nagging sensation that he had fundamentally missed a very significant point. Not just today, or at the service, but for the last seventy-eight years. He peeled the tail of his tie from the wedge of his belt and rolled it like Stan Laurel into a Swiss Roll beneath his chin. Another fine mess. Maybe the bastards had a point about God, after all.

The service had been described as 'an appropriate send-off' by elderly relatives outside the church. He considered for a moment the ludicrous nature of that phrase. 'Appropriate' might have been something that celebrated the dead man's misplaced arrogance, miserable misogyny and disgusting choice of parlour trick. Clifford laid the Order of Service on the table and placed his tea mug upon it. Then lifted it back up. It had made a ring around the words; *'he leadeth me beside the still waters'*. It was the phrase that had distracted him during the service. The thought of water had always calmed him. In the church he had looked around as everyone else closed their eyes, bowed their heads and cupped their hands to their crotches. Since school assemblies he had never closed his eyes when called to prayer. A reasonable God would appreciate his independent judgment, he had always reasoned. Headmaster Pritchard had been a stickler for convention and let a single weeping eye rove amongst the boys, searching out miscreants and sinners. He had never caught Clifford. Clifford ground the base of the tea mug back and forth, gouging a damp line deeper into the page, until words like *runneth*, *anointest* and *restoreth* were a ground-up pulp of mashed paper fibres. Man makes up words, man prints words, man is supposed to believe words. They are just ManWords. No better than his words or his neighbours' words. That is what he always thinks. That is what he always thought.

And when the words were gone from the page. He regretted it. Clifford folded the Order of Service into a boat. The dead man's fat face filled one side of the sail. He

might take it to the park and set it sail beside the ducks. It could be fun to watch the miserable sod float past them as they pecked at their soggy breadlumps. ManWords have something to say about daily bread, he thought, and about Boatmen punting bodies towards the mouth of Hades. ManWords have a lot to say about everything, Clifford mused. The fridge began its morning hum. He stood up and placed his mug in the plastic sink bowl. He would normally rinse and dry then and there. But today wasn't an ordinary day. Today he felt knocked from his axis. Parts of *Psalm 23, The Lord is My Shepherd*, were still visible on the stern of the boat. They were words that for over seventy years had sat insidiously amongst the cleated folds of his brain. They were words that had filled space he could have reserved for other stuff – the Latin names of plants, capital cities, Derby winners - pub quiz questions that could have brought the admiration of colleagues and free pints. Certainly more rewards than any happiness-bothering, worresome ManWords of prayer. Thank you Pritchard for instilling your mantra of fear. And yet what had be felt in the church? On reading those words, properly for the first time in his life, he had felt an ominous nagging swamp him: Like it did when we worried whether he had left the hallway light on. He would return to check a light – the implication merely an over-spinning metre – but rarely did he check his preconceptions of mortality. Should he not - the pragmatic, reasoned voice in him questioned – double-check what he believed? Maybe stop for a moment and actually *think* about those words. Those ManWords: *'He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; he leadth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul; he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for thou art with me.'*

Wouldn't it be good to dispel the shadow-worry of death that malingered about him for a while? It did plague him. Of course it did: At ten past two in the morning when the Tom next door rattled the lid from his bin and left him staring at the ceiling wondering at the thump of his heart and the ease by which the next beat might never come. Or on the bus, just last Tuesday, when he looked out of the smeared window and wondered why he had even bothered to go into town when, if he was honest, he knew all he was doing was sponging up another wasteful day. Bringing him one day closer. One day. Oh God - *oh Gas-Ball* - how depressing. *'For thou art with me.'* In moments like those how he would love to believe that a *Thou* was with him. Clifford placed the folded card boat on top of the fridge. It stopped humming. He felt

a warmth pass through him. He needed a wee. A wee would be a fine distraction from a very bothering line of thought. He looked at the boat. His dead acquaintance – alright, friend – smiled at him. He might go out tomorrow, Clifford thought, and find a green pasture with a stream gently running through it and lie down. Then he might walk home the long way, by the church, just to see. Just to ask.