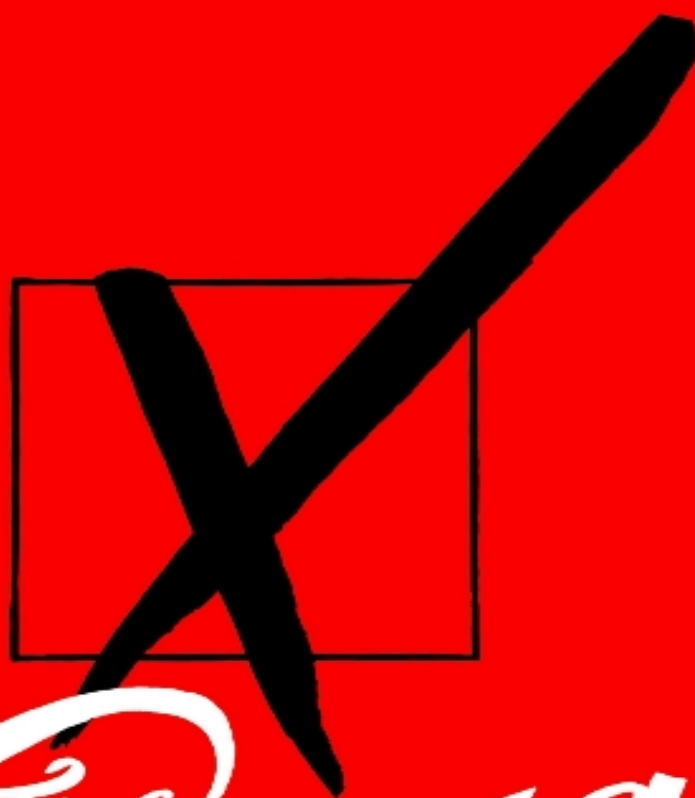


J.K. ROWLING



*The
Casual
Vacancy*

Also by J.K. Rowling.

Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone

Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets

Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban

Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire

Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix

Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince

Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows

(in Latin)

Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone

Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets

(in Welsh, Ancient Greek and Irish)

Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone

Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them

Quidditch Through the Ages

The Tales of Beedle the Bard

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Part One

6.11 A casual vacancy is deemed to have occurred:

- (a) when a local councillor fails to make his declaration of acceptance of office within the proper time; or
- (b) when his notice of resignation is received; or
- (c) on the day of his death ...

Charles Arnold-Baker
Local Council Administration,
Seventh Edition

Sunday

Barry Fairbrother did not want to go out to dinner. He had endured a thumping headache for most of the weekend and was struggling to make a deadline for the local newspaper.

However, his wife had been a little stiff and uncommunicative over lunch, and Barry deduced that his anniversary card had not mitigated the crime of shutting himself away in the study all morning. It did not help that he had been writing about Krystal, whom Mary disliked, although she pretended otherwise.

‘Mary, I want to take you out to dinner,’ he had lied, to break the frost. ‘Nineteen years, kids! Nineteen years, and your mother’s never looked lovelier.’

Mary had softened and smiled, so Barry had telephoned the golf club, because it was nearby and they were sure of getting a table. He tried to give his wife pleasure in little ways, because he had come to realize, after nearly two decades together, how often he disappointed her in the big things. It was never intentional. They simply had very different notions of what ought to take up most space in life.

Barry and Mary’s four children were past the age of needing a babysitter. They were watching television when he said goodbye to them for the last time, and only Declan, the youngest, turned to look at him, and raised his hand in farewell.

Barry's headache continued to thump behind his ear as he reversed out of the drive and set off through the pretty little town of Pagford, where they had lived as long as they had been married. They drove down Church Row, the steeply sloping street where the most expensive houses stood in all their Victorian extravagance and solidity, around the corner by the mock-Gothic church, where he had once watched his twin girls perform *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, and across the Square, where they had a clear view of the dark skeleton of the ruined abbey that dominated the town's skyline, set high on a hill, melding with the violet sky.

All Barry could think of as he twiddled the steering wheel, navigating the familiar turns, were the mistakes he was sure he had made, rushing to finish the article he had just emailed to the *Yarvil and District Gazette*. Garrulous and engaging in person, he found it difficult to carry his personality onto paper.

The golf club lay a mere four minutes away from the Square, a little beyond the point where the town petered out in a final wheeze of old cottages. Barry parked the people-carrier outside the club restaurant, the Birdie, and stood for a moment beside the car, while Mary reapplied her lipstick. The cool evening air was pleasant on his face. As he watched the contours of the golf course disintegrating into the dusk, Barry wondered why he kept up his membership. He was a bad golfer: his swing was erratic and his handicap was high. He had so many other calls on his time. His head throbbed worse than ever.

Mary switched off the mirror light and closed the passenger side door. Barry pressed the auto-lock on the key-ring in his hand; his wife's high heels clacked on the tarmac, the car's locking system beeped, and Barry wondered whether his nausea might abate once he had eaten.

Then pain such as he had never experienced sliced through his brain like a demolition ball. He barely noticed the smarting of his knees as they smacked onto the cold tarmac; his skull was awash with fire and blood; the agony was excruciating beyond endurance, except that endure it he must, for oblivion was still a minute away.

Mary screamed – and kept screaming. Several men came running from the bar. One of them sprinted back inside the building to see whether either of the club's retired doctors was present. A married couple, acquaintances of Barry and Mary's, heard the commotion from the restaurant, abandoned their starters and hurried outside to see what they could do. The husband called 999 on his mobile.

The ambulance had to come from the neighbouring city of Yarvil, and it took twenty-five minutes to reach them. By the time the pulsing blue light slid over the scene, Barry was lying motionless and unresponsive on the ground in a pool of his own vomit; Mary was crouching beside him, the knees of her tights ripped, clutching his hand, sobbing and whispering his name.

Monday

I

‘Brace yourself,’ said Miles Mollison, standing in the kitchen of one of the big houses in Church Row.

He had waited until half-past six in the morning to make the call. It had been a bad night, full of long stretches of wakefulness punctuated by snatches of restless sleep. At four in the morning, he had realized that his wife was awake too, and they had talked quietly for a while in the darkness. Even as they discussed what they had been forced to witness, each trying to drive out vague feelings of fright and shock, feathery little ripples of excitement had tickled Miles’ insides at the thought of delivering the news to his father. He had intended to wait until seven, but fear that somebody else might beat him to it had propelled him to the telephone early.

‘What’s happened?’ boomed Howard’s voice, with a slightly tinny edge; Miles had put him on speakerphone for Samantha’s benefit. Mahogany brown in her pale pink dressing gown, she had taken advantage of their early waking to apply another handful of Self-Sun to her fading natural tan. The kitchen was full of the mingled smells of instant coffee and synthetic coconut.

‘Fairbrother’s dead. Collapsed at the golf club last night. Sam and I were having dinner at the Birdie.’

‘Fairbrother’s *dead*?’ roared Howard.

The inflection implied that he had been expecting some dramatic change in the status of Barry Fairbrother, but that even he had not anticipated actual death.

‘Collapsed in the car park,’ repeated Miles.

‘Good God,’ said Howard. ‘He wasn’t much past forty, was he? Good God.’

Miles and Samantha listened to Howard breathing like a blown horse. He was always short of breath in the mornings.

‘What was it? Heart?’

‘Something in his brain, they think. We went with Mary to the hospital and—’

But Howard was not paying attention. Miles and Samantha heard him speaking away from his mouthpiece.

‘Barry Fairbrother! Dead! It’s Miles!’

‘Sam and I went in the ambulance,’ Miles enunciated clearly. ‘With Mary and the body.’

Samantha noticed how Miles’ second version emphasized what you might call the more commercial aspect of the story. Samantha did not blame him. Their reward for enduring the awful experience was the right to tell people about it. She did not think she would ever forget it: Mary wailing; Barry’s eyes still half open above the muzzle-like mask; she and Miles trying to read the paramedic’s expression; the cramped jolting; the dark windows; the terror.

‘Good God,’ said Howard for the third time, ignoring Shirley’s soft background questioning, his attention all Miles’. ‘He just dropped down dead in the car park?’

‘Yep,’ said Miles. ‘Moment I saw him it was pretty obvious there was nothing to be done.’

It was his first lie, and he turned his eyes away from his wife as he told it. She remembered his big protective arm around Mary's shaking shoulders: *He'll be OK ... he'll be OK ...*

But after all, thought Samantha, giving Miles his due, *how were you supposed to know one way or the other, when they were strapping on masks and shoving in needles?* It had seemed as though they were trying to save Barry, and none of them had known for certain that it was no good until the young doctor had walked towards Mary at the hospital. Samantha could still see, with awful clarity, Mary's naked, petrified face, and the expression of the bespectacled, sleek-haired young woman in the white coat: composed, yet a little wary ... they showed that sort of thing on television dramas all the time, but when it actually happened ...

'Not at all,' Miles was saying. 'Gavin was only playing squash with him on Thursday.'

'And he seemed all right then?'

'Oh yeah. Thrashed Gavin.'

'Good God. Just goes to show you, doesn't it? Just goes to show. Hang on, Mum wants a word.'

A clunk and a clatter, and Shirley's soft voice came on the line.

'What a dreadful shock, Miles,' she said. 'Are you all right?'

Samantha took a clumsy mouthful of coffee; it trickled from the corners of her mouth down the sides of her chin, and she mopped her face and chest with her sleeve. Miles had adopted the voice he often used when speaking to his mother: deeper than usual, a take-command nothing-fazes-me voice, punchy and no-nonsense. Sometimes, especially when drunk, Samantha would imitate Miles and Shirley's conversations. 'Not to worry, Mummy. Miles here. Your little soldier.' 'Darling, you are wonderful: so big and brave and clever.' Once or twice, lately, Samantha had done this in front of other people, leaving Miles cross and defensive, though pretending to laugh. There had been a row, last time, in the car going home.

'You went all the way to the hospital with her?' Shirley was saying from the speakerphone.

No, thought Samantha, *we got bored halfway there and asked to be let out.*

‘Least we could do. Wish we could have done more.’

Samantha got up and walked over to the toaster.

‘I’m sure Mary was very grateful,’ said Shirley. Samantha crashed the lid of the bread bin and rammed four pieces of bread into the slots. Miles’ voice became more natural.

‘Yeah, well, once the doctors had told – confirmed that he was dead, Mary wanted Colin and Tessa Wall. Sam phoned them, we waited until they arrived and then we left.’

‘Well, it was very lucky for Mary that you were there,’ said Shirley. ‘Dad wants another word, Miles, I’ll put him on. Speak later.’

“Speak later,” Samantha mouthed at the kettle, wagging her head. Her distorted reflection was puffy after their sleepless night, her chestnut-brown eyes bloodshot. In her haste to witness the telling of Howard, Samantha had carelessly rubbed fake tanning lotion into the rims.

‘Why don’t you and Sam come over this evening?’ Howard was booming. ‘No, hang on – Mum’s reminded me we’re playing bridge with the Bulgens. Come over tomorrow. For dinner. ’Bout seven.’

‘Maybe,’ said Miles, glancing at Samantha. ‘I’ll have to see what Sam’s got on.’

She did not indicate whether or not she wanted to go. A strange sense of anti-climax filled the kitchen as Miles hung up.

‘They can’t believe it,’ he said, as if she hadn’t heard everything.

They ate their toast and drank fresh mugs of coffee in silence. Some of Samantha’s irritability lifted as she chewed. She remembered how she had woken with a jerk in their dark bedroom in the early hours, and had been absurdly relieved and grateful to feel Miles beside her, big and paunchy, smelling of vetiver and old sweat. Then she imagined telling customers at the shop about how a man had dropped dead in front of her, and about the mercy dash to hospital. She thought of ways to describe various aspects of the journey, and of the climactic scene with the doctor. The youth of that