

The Peile Dining Club – a short story by J.B. Doe

50 years ago

"Please do not take offence if this note does not apply to you but I am trying to contact the one person it does concern" said a rather exasperated Domestic Bursar to a resident of Peile who had just turned up at the door.

It had been a long term, and although only week four of Michaelmas, Philippa had reached the end of her rather long tether and was feeling frustrated and angry at the reputational damage caused by the incident that had occurred the week before.

"It was nothing to do with me, I did not attend the party, I was at a play at the ADC. I have witnesses!" repeated the undergraduate. Philippa Anstey smiled and then dismissed the student, reassuring them that they were not being accused of anything.

It all started with a party. It always starts with a party thought Philippa. One minute they were there and the next moment they were gone, and no one saw anything? A photograph had been taken a few moments before the incident that identified two people but more were surely involved.

It was November 1972 and Elvis Presley's "Burning Love" could be heard floating over the lawns at Newnham, which seemed so jarring against the resting herbaceous borders, red brick grandeur, and white framed windows. First thing on a frosty Monday morning Philippa had written a note to the residents in Peile to try and ascertain what had happened the week before. There were a few people "in the frame" that were thought to be the organisers of the illegal party but there was no hard evidence and without someone owning up the matter would not be resolved.

Both James Bateson from Trinity and Dorothy Balfour had been identified as attending the party and were obviously up to no good as the photograph had been taken on the roof of Peile; a place strictly out of bounds and quite inaccessible.

Now a trail of undergraduates was coming one by one to the Domestic Bursar's office to be interviewed by Philippa and Head Porter, David Smith.

"I cannot believe what happened. Such reckless behaviour. It was such a shock to find them all on the roof; they could have had an accident. It was bad enough that the Centenary candlesticks were taken but imagine having to inform the families should one of them have fallen." said David, as much to himself as to Philippa.

"I know! How did they get up there and how stupid to have a party!"

Next into the room was Dorothy Balfour. "Thank you for coming Dorothy, do take a seat. You know why we have asked you to come? Can you tell us what happened on Tuesday evening?"

Dorothy looked pale in her knitted, oversized colourful crochet knit jumper and flared jeans. She was carefully considering her words. Philippa and David sat quietly letting the awkward silence wash over them like a tide coming in.

"Well... it ... well..." pause. "Well, OK, I did attend a party on the roof of Peile..." another long pause.

"We know that! We have the photograph to prove it!" snapped the Head Porter.

"Yes, that was unfortunate...." long pause. "So we have this club, the 'Peile Dining Club' and we arrange interesting places to host dinner parties. This time we decided on Peile roof. I know it was stupid and we meant no harm. Anyway Jim, that is James from Trinity, arrived late on after attending the Formal in College Hall and must have snuck out with the candlesticks after the dinner. He was trying to impress me, as he wanted to go steady, and I wasn't interested. Boys from Trinity are so full of themselves, bragging about their sets of rooms and gas fires! I don't know what happened to the silver, I really don't. He had just pulled them out of his bag to show me when the Duty Porter shouted up to us to get off the roof and we all ran off."

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The questioning continued and resulted in tears and apologies from the student.

“Thank you for your time, we shall contact James’s Tutor at Trinity. For your attendance at this party, you must do some work in the gardens department. Report to the Head Gardener this afternoon to be given your instructions”.

Two weeks later

“Well at least we know who took the candlesticks” reported Philippa to the College Council. “But the individual from Trinity says he left them on the roof in a bag when they all abandoned the party and there is no way to prove otherwise, as by the time the Duty Porter arrived at the scene, the rooftop was empty, well apart from some items of fancy dress and half-drunk bottles of wine!”.

“That is very disappointing” replied the Principal, Jean Floud, “Especially as we only got to enjoy the candlesticks at one Formal Hall this term”.

Present Day

Dora Lenis came rushing into the Archivist’s office. “You won’t believe what has happened?” said a rather excited Dora, the College Curator. Without pausing for a response, “a parcel has just been delivered to the Lodge for my attention, and inside were the two Centenary candlesticks that went missing over 50 years ago!”. There was a note included in the package that read. “I am very sorry but 50 years ago my mother attended a party in Peile. I won’t go into the details but somehow these candlesticks ended up in her possession, hidden in a storage trunk wrapped up in a crochet jumper for all these years. It was only when we were clearing her house that we found them. I enclose the candlesticks, with a copy of a photograph that was found with them”. Best wishes, Jane MacPherson, daughter of Dottie McCormack (nee Balfour).

Dora smiled and said “I cannot believe the timing of this, as they have been returned just in time for Newnhams’ 150th Anniversary celebrations. And what a celebration that will be!”

