

Borrowed Time

by Kim Graham

Runner Up: Body in the Library category

Scarlet Stiletto Awards 2023

Borrowed Time

It's no laughing matter, thought Rose, what were they thinking? The sisters had arrived for their weekly visit to the library and Lily and Violet's shoulders were twitching as they attempted to stifle their giggles and as for Vi's quip about living on borrowed time; well, that was a totally inappropriate response to finding the body of Clara Withers slumped over the borrowing desk.

Lily nudged Violet and frowned. 'Not funny, Vi'.

Violet quirked an eyebrow at Lily. Having known each other for over fifty years there was no need for clarification; Vi's eyebrow clearly suggested that Lily was equally to blame. However, Lily had already turned back to Rose and missed the missive; no need to hang around for the rebuttal when you've made your point.

'It's the shock', Lily explained, 'Who expects to find...'

Lily fluttered her hand in the direction of Clara. But Rose wasn't paying attention to Lily. Her eyes were fixed on Clara's neck, and she leaned forward and squinted to sharpen her sight.

'You know', Rose said slowly, 'I think there's bruising around her neck.'

Lily and Violet leaned in, and that was how they were found moments later by Mr Franklin Morrison, Head Librarian of Guildmarsh Public Library. Actually he was the only librarian, with the bulk of the library duties covered by a legion of elderly volunteers. Regardless, 'Mr Franklin Morrison, Head Librarian' was what the sign on his office door said and that was the title everyone in town afforded him. Keeping sweet with the Morrison family was a Guildmarsh institution.

'Ladies!', he boomed, the library whisper being one skill that Franklin had never mastered.

'WHAT on earth are you doing to poor Miss Withers?!

Rose, Lily, and Violet slowly straightened to face Franklin. While no one wanted to offend a Morrison, Rose was never one to back away from a stoush and her gaze was direct.

'We're returning last week's books - and happened upon Clara. It looks like she's been strangled. Where have *you* been Franklin?'

Lily and Violet squirmed a little at the blunt tone taken by Rose; really, no point poking the bear when the bear's family ran most of the town.

Franklin liked to let the volunteers, such as Clara, be the library's public face rather than having to mingle with the local hoi polloi himself; in this moment he was reminded why.

He held up his hands and spluttered, 'I don't have to account to you for my movements, I was working on extremely important paperwork in my office, extremely important! And what do you mean strangled? Of course she hasn't been strangled, you silly woman, her heart is not good, everyone knows that. If poor Miss Withers is no longer with us...', Franklin paused to raise his eyes heavenwards and make the sign of the cross, 'then *that* is entirely due to natural causes'.

The sister's heads swung from facing Franklin towards Clara's neck.

'There is bruising', said Rose, pointing to the marks on Clara's neck, 'and I can't imagine she throttled herself. How could you have not heard something?'

Rose could sense Lily and Violet fidgeting beside her but she didn't break eye contact with Franklin. Rose was the oldest of the three sisters and her persona had been formed around the notion that she was the natural leader of the trio. Not only that, Franklin may have been Head Librarian but Rose was a retired school principal and able to stare down the most recalcitrant of miscreants.

'I will not have you using that tone with me, Ms Lacey. I'm the Head Librarian! Who are you to say Miss Withers was strangled?'

‘Who indeed?’, countered Rose. ‘I’m going to ring the police to see what they say.’

Unfortunately, the police turned out to be Constable Thomas Langley, who scratched his head and wished he was elsewhere. His idea of being a police officer in the small town of Guildmarsh was to deal with minor infringements – catching people speeding and chiding local teenagers for disturbing the peace; having someone murdered on his local patch was just not cricket. Plus, Clara was his grandmother’s cousin, and he knew that he would have no rest from Grammy May until the perpetrator was caught. Not only that, his superior officer in every way was on leave for another week and Thomas knew that with the latest budget cuts and general tightening of the policing purse strings no additional support would be forthcoming.

‘Just my luck,’ he thought glumly. Catching the sisters looking at him expectantly, he attempted to rally. First, he organised for Clara’s body to be taken to the morgue for a postmortem. While waiting for that to happen, he peered at Clara’s neck and took loads of photos. So far, all routine and comfortably within his skillset – he was a handy dab with the camera. Feeling on top of things, Thomas kept himself fully busy for an additional 10 minutes after the body had been removed – snapping photos of the desk and asking Mr. Morrison and the Lacey sisters if they had seen anything suspicious. No point trying to get any

fingerprints – half the town had been in the library in the last week alone.

From what he could ascertain, and with no small relief, it appeared Mr Morrison and the Lacey sisters were innocent bystanders to the crime; no way did he feel capable of charging any of that lot.

Thomas nodded sagely towards Mr Morrison when they looked in his office and nodded sagely at his computer situated in front of a window with a lovely breeze coming through. He nodded sagely and appreciatively at the view out over the town hall rose gardens. Thomas nodded sagely to the Lacey sisters while they showed him the huge pile of books they were returning while secretly doubting they could possibly have read them all.

‘Thursday is our usual day’, explained Lily, ‘but we’d got through our books already and Vi was so keen to pick up the next instalment of a series she’s reading’.

‘And we thought, why not come in on a Wednesday?’, added Violet, ‘the library is usually empty because it’s market day...peace and quiet to browse the shelves’.

Again, Thomas nodded sagely, he had picked up this gesture from his superior officer and it was now his go to response when he was not sure what to say next. He expanded his repertoire by adding, ‘Good, good’, quite pleased with how that sounded.

‘A nutter!’, suddenly boomed Franklin, deciding that Thomas was not up to formulating a plausible reason for Clara’s death, and stepping into the breach. ‘Some out-of-town nutter has found their way into the library and taken out their unhappiness on poor Miss Withers! No rhyme, no reason, just sheer bastardry!’

‘Yes,’ thought Thomas with relief, and his sage nod became more enthusiastic. This was the most likely explanation. Someone who wasn’t in their right frame of mind and Miss Withers happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

‘And maybe not even an out-of-towner’, Franklin continued at full volume. ‘Goodness knows we have got our fair share of nutters in this town!’ He glanced out of the front windows towards the hardware store.

‘Unlikely.’ Violet shook her head.

‘If you mean someone with a mental illness when you say ‘nutter’...’ she fixed Franklin with a beady eye, ‘I think you’ll find that people with a mental illness are more likely to be a victim rather than perpetrator of a violent crime. Let’s not let lazy stereotypes get in the way of rational thinking and solid detective work’.

Violet’s social worker background leant her credence and Thomas deflated like a day-old balloon while Franklin huffed.

‘Well, I’ve said my piece, and I’ll say no more.’ Franklin gave another meaningful glance out the window.

Thomas, deciding he needed time to mull things over, nodded sagely – he’d head back to the precinct to shuffle papers while he worked out what to do next. He turned to leave the library, but found his way blocked by Rose.

‘Where are you going?’ she asked.

Thomas blushed a rosy hue. ‘I need to document the case. Please step aside Miss Rose, I’m on important police duty.’

Thomas had heard his superior officer say this once, and he had been looking for an opportunity to trot it out ever since. Unfortunately, on this occasion it didn’t have nearly the same impact. Rather than moving deferentially out of his way, Rose stood her ground.

‘I can well imagine,’ said Rose drily. ‘However, before you disappear, you might like to check out the crime scene more carefully.’

The blush on Thomas’s face deepened to a rich magenta. Blast Miss Rose he thought, who had at one time been his awe inspiring and sometimes terrifying school principal. Who did she think she was telling him how to do his job - he was a trained police officer now not a child! However, much as he’d like to tell her to back off, he didn’t dare. The generation of local women to which his mother and the Lacey sisters belonged seemed to operate with orchestrated movements and a hive mind; in his youth he had been thwarted in his attempts at shoplifting, smoking, underage drinking, and a

fumbling kiss with the vicar's daughter behind the rectory. Much of his rule-stickling adult behaviour had been shaped by his childhood fears of being found out by his Mum and what he thought of as her 'henchwomen'.

Knowing he'd have to give an account that satisfied Rose plus his Mum and her cronies, Thomas turned around and waved in the direction of the borrowing desk...just because he had to be polite didn't mean he couldn't politely put Rose in her place.

'Ms Rose, I have already done a thorough inspection of the area, as per regulations, not to mention capturing numerous photographic pieces of evidence. Unless you have something further to show me?'

'Actually, I think we might', piped up Violet. She waved something at him. Good grief, thought Thomas, was that her stockings?

'I found these behind the book trolley. It's a pair of stockings - black fishnets, extra-large by the look of them'.

Thomas scoffed, 'Really Ms Violet, you found some stockings? Anyone could've left them there. Bits of clothing are found all the time. It's extremely unlikely they are related to the crime.'

'So what would they be related to?' queried Lily. 'Do you think there was some kind of romantic tryst behind the trolley, or perhaps a sexual assault while Clara pretended not to notice? Or maybe Clara got too warm and slipped hers off?'

They all became lost in the vision of the very prim and private Clara getting overheated and slipping behind the trolley to slip off her fishnets.

'Besides...' Lily continued, snapping them out of their reverie, 'Clara is tiny. These belong to someone much larger. And anyway, I noticed that Clara had tights on. She always did feel the cold.'

'Well, as you say, a romantic tryst or...', Thomas petered out.

Apart from this suggestion from Ms Lily, his imagination was incapable of conjuring up any other possibility and he didn't dare utter the word 'assault' That would only add a second crime to his now overflowing 'to do list'.

'Unlikely that there was any kind of tryst or sexual assault, I'm sure Clara would have noticed and yelled out - even Franklin would have heard that.' said Rose.

'I can assure you, madam, there has been no sexual shenanigans in the library!' thundered Franklin.

'And, interesting', continued Rose without a pause, while peering at the stockings, 'how one leg is so much *longer* than the other, almost as if it might have stretched,' she paused dramatically, 'perhaps when being used to strangle someone...?'

Thomas's brain snapped into focus. Murder weapon? And blast it why did it have to be Miss Violet who found them? Could he perhaps write the report in a way that didn't make it seem as though it were members of the public discovering clues?

'I'm not sure that we can leap to that conclusion', Thomas admonished. 'Most of the time, strangulation is done with the bare hands, a crime of passion as we call it in the trade.'

'But the bruising looked like an even band around her neck', speculated Lily, '...unlikely to be the hands I would have thought...'

'And', said Violet shaking her head, 'strangulation is a crime of passion in the domestic setting. But a public place, an elderly single woman. Why would someone feel that level of passion to strangle Clara in the library?'

'Hmmm...', said Rose contemplatively. 'On the face of it, I think this could be a premeditated murder. What other legitimate reason could there be for this situation?'

Franklin opened his mouth, and then clamped it shut again.

The silence left in the wake of Rose's statement was broken by borrowing desk phone ringing.

After a startled moment, Rose leaned forward and answered the call.

'Hello, Guildmarsh Public Library, how can I help you?' Rose listened to the caller while the others watched.

'Oh yes, umm, unfortunately she is not here at the moment. Oh my...you don't say...oh, dear...really? Of course, yes, I think that's the best course of action. Goodbye then.' She replaced the handset and turned to the others. Violet swore that Rose's eyes were gleaming.

'Well', said Rose, 'that's an interesting turn of events'.

Lily could sense Rose's enjoyment at prolonging the moment. 'Clara's house has been broken into. That was Mr Jeffers, her neighbour. He arrived home and noticed Clara's front door was open. Knowing it was her day in the library he thought it looked suspicious. He called out to Clara from the front door, heard crashing and then the back door slammed. By the time he made his way through the house there was no one there. He's going to report it to the police.'

'Great!' thought Thomas glumly, another job on the list.

Violet and Lily thought of Mr Jeffers with his walking stick and shuffling gait. There would have been ample time for someone to cross the garden and jump the fence before Mr Jeffers reached the back door.

'And, interestingly, the only thing that seemed to have been disturbed was Clara's bookcase – 'ransacked' was the word Mr Jeffers used'.

'Why would anyone ransack a bookcase?', spluttered Thomas.

'There are probably lots of reasons, Thomas, but I'm sure you won't know until you get over to Clara's and investigate.' reproved Rose.

Thomas started to nod, then aware of three stern gazes on him, thought better of it and instead bagged up the stockings.

'So, stockings you say' mused Franklin, 'Well, well, we all know *who* the most likely person to be wearing extra-large fishnet

stockings in these parts is.’ Again he glanced meaningfully towards the hardware store.

The tips of Violet’s ears grew red, a sure sign of her rising anger, and Rose and Lily watched her with avid interest. Vi’s tempers were often fun.

‘So you’ve dropped the idea of an out-of-town ‘nutter’, then?’

Vi’s ears might have been red but her tone was icy.

‘Looking closer to home by the sounds of it?’

Franklin took this as an invitation to expound his theory...a spectacularly poor choice thought Lily sadly.

‘Well, now that you ask,’ said Franklin conspiratorially, ‘our *friend* who owns the hardware store obviously has some, shall we say, *issues*. I’m not saying he would have deliberately hurt poor Miss Withers. But, you know she could be blunt, and in his fit of rage a red mist descends and there’s poor Miss Withers dead before him.’

Thomas nodded sagely; he could picture it playing out just as Mr Morrison described.

Violet shook her head. ‘That’s just all wrong. Mr Evans dresses in men’s clothing during the workday, not in stockings. It’s only in the evenings and weekends that she dresses as Francis. And even if she did come in here dressed as Francis, do you think Clara would say something to her that what, caused her to take off her stockings and strangle her? Why not be expedient and use her hands if all this red mist was about?’

‘Well, *that’s* the issue for Thomas to work out, isn’t it?’ responded Franklin. Thomas wished they’d leave him out of it.

‘What *I’m* saying is that who else around here wears fishnet stockings besides Mr Evans? Why would he take them off to strangle Miss Withers? I couldn’t say. But if a man gets his thrills from wearing stockings and dresses, then maybe we’re not dealing with a mind that works the same way as yours and mine.’

‘Francis doesn’t get her ‘thrills’ from dressing as a woman, she is expressing her gender.’ Vi’s voice had become dangerously low. ‘And yes, Clara could be outspoken at times. But she had no issue with Francis – actually, they run the craft group together every Saturday morning. They’ve always got on well. I think that you are on dangerous ground if you are casting aspersions based on a reason as flimsy as how someone expresses their gender. Anyway, I’m sure that Thomas will investigate thoroughly before anyone is accused.’

Franklin looked like he was about to argue further and then swallowed back his reply. Phew, thought Lily, he’s learning.

‘If there’s nothing further, Thomas, I would like to close the library as a sign of respect, and get back to finalising my paperwork,’ said Franklin stiffly. ‘Ladies, if you don’t mind’. Franklin gestured towards the front doors.

‘I’ll just get my bag,’ said Lily darting forward. Rose and Violet looked puzzled as Lily gathered a large red tote from a shelf near the borrowing desk.

'I put it down when we found Clara,' Lily explained. She shrugged the bag on to her shoulder and without a backward glance strode from the library. Rose and Violet followed in her wake.

Stopping just outside the glass front of the library, Rose looked back to see Thomas and Franklin in deep conversation.

Rose said, 'I just want to check something quickly, I'll meet you back at the car.' Lily and Violet looked pleased – that solved the issue of who got to sit in the front.

'Bag, Lily?' queried Violet.

Lily shook her head. 'Not now, I'll tell you both together.'

Lily and Violet settled in the front seats. When Rose arrived, she made a slight harrumphing noise as she settled into the back seat. Violet turned on the ignition and drove them back home.

'Let's not talk about anything yet,' requested Rose. 'I want to get my thoughts in order and anyway, we need to sit down with a pot of tea if we're going to work out what happened to Clara.'

'So we're the ones working it out?' queried Violet.

'Of course', snorted Rose, 'we can't leave it all up to Thomas'

Within twenty minutes, Rose, Violet, and Lily were sitting on the front verandah, looking over the pond and paddocks and contemplating the ducks. The cherry red tote was on the floor next to Lily.

'Are you going first, or do you want me to?' Rose asked Lily.

'You go'.

Rose nodded, 'Well, when Franklin mentioned Francis, it reminded me that I'd spotted her aunt, Milly Johnson, when we arrived in town.' Violet and Lily frowned in thought.

'Oh, that's right,' remembered Lily, 'when we were getting out of the car. She was wearing that strange orange hat.' Violet nodded in recognition. 'But what's that got to do with anything?'

'She had her book bag with her. You know, the one with the cats and books embroidered on it,' continued Rose. 'That's the bag she uses when she goes to the library. So, when you were making the tea, I sent her a text asking her where she had been and she replied that she'd just been to the library. Then, I asked her who was in the library while she was there, and she texted back 'just Clara'.

Now, we could see the library doors from where we parked – I know that we stopped to speak with Billy Avery for a few moments – but the library doors were in view that whole time. I'm positive no-one went in or came out. I didn't want to mention to Thomas that we'd seen Milly. Who knows what Franklin would have made of that,' added Rose darkly.

'So that means...' Lily said.

'That's right', said Rose, 'Clara was strangled in the five or so minutes between Milly leaving the library and us entering it.'

Rose, Violet, and Lily contemplated that for a few moments.

'Hmmm,' said Lily, 'but if no-one entered or left the library in that time and, apart from Franklin, no one was in there when we arrived.'

‘Exactly!’, said Rose triumphantly.

‘You don’t think...’, began Violet, as Lily said, ‘Surely not...’

Rose shook her head. ‘I did at first, and goodness knows I wouldn’t lose sleep if Franklin was charged with murder. But I just couldn’t imagine him strangling Clara. Vi, you knew him best at school, what do you make of him?’

‘A bully,’ said Violet promptly. ‘But you’re right, he’d never get his hands dirty. His skill was getting others to do what he wanted – whispers and innuendo, he could get people to do almost anything and come out looking as innocent as a lamb.’

‘That’s my recollection too’, said Rose. ‘It just seems unlikely that he’d strangle Clara himself. No, I just can’t see it. And so I thought if it wasn’t Franklin, it had to be someone else who was in the library and if we didn’t see that someone else hightailing it out the front door after strangling Clara, well, where did they go?’

Rose looked at Violet and Lily expectantly – just like a schoolteacher she wasn’t going to give all the answers if the students were capable of coming up with it themselves.

‘The window,’ breathed Lily. ‘Why else would Franklin have his window open? It’s a warm day, and the air conditioner was on in his office. He wouldn’t have the air conditioner on plus the window open.’

‘Well done, Lily!’, said Rose.

‘And the bees’, Violet burst in wanting her gold star too, ‘Franklin’s allergic to bees and all those roses outside the window.

There were bees everywhere. No way would he risk one flying in.’

‘Good work, Vi! I didn’t know about his allergy.’

‘So where *did* you disappear to’ asked Lily, ‘when we were heading to the car?’

‘I snuck around the back of the library and checked the ground outside Franklin’s window. Sure enough, there was a pair of fresh footprints in the garden bed below it. I think someone jumped out while we were speaking to Franklin.’

Rose pulled out her phone and showed them a photo of large footprints in the soil.

‘So, even if it wasn’t Franklin, he’s definitely involved.’ Lily surmised.

‘He has to be, but we’ve not got much to go on,’ said Violet, ‘at best, Thomas will take him in for questioning.’

The sisters each took a long thoughtful sip of their tea.

‘Maybe there’s something in the bag that could give us more to go on,’ offered Lily. ‘Of course, as you both know, it’s Clara’s bag. It just struck me as odd that she had her craft tote with her. Normally she only has that on Saturdays when she runs the craft group. Why would she have it at the library?’

Lily rummaged in the tote. First item to come out was a piece of calico that Clara had been embroidering. The sisters admired the beautiful stitch work and intricate floral motif. Lily wiped away a tear. ‘That absolute bastard – we are going to get whoever did this.’

Next was a stash of embroidery threads in a small box and underneath that a book. Lily peered in the bag doubtfully.

‘That’s everything. Maybe Clara did just take it into the library to carry a book and work on her stitching while the library was quiet.’

Rose snorted, ‘As if Franklin would let Clara sit and stitch. He would have found work for her to do. I reckon the embroidery on top was a ruse. Maybe Clara was keeping the book close by.’

‘Of course,’ said Violet, ‘...and it was Clara’s bookshelf at home that was ransacked. Could this book be what they were after?’

The sisters studied the book. It was small and unassuming, more of a glorified pamphlet, with the title ‘*Guildmarsh: The birth of a small but mighty town and the remarkable Morrison family who founded it*’ by William F. Morrison, and dated 1872. Inside the front cover was a Guildmarsh Public Library stamp, and a borrowing plate that showed that the book had only ever been loaned out once...to Clara Withers a month ago.

‘Well, let’s look through it and see if we spot anything,’ said Violet.

‘No need Vi. It looks like Clara’s left a bookmark in it’. Lily opened to a page where a strand of buttercup yellow embroidery thread nestled in the crease.

The sisters leaned in and examined the open pages. One side was text, and the other showed a grainy black and white photo of a woman seated at a table holding a pen. Behind her stood three men. The caption below it read, ‘Miss Nancy Morrison signs the deeds to

the land that later becomes Guildmarsh, 1 September 1851’. Rose, Violet, and Lily sat back.

‘But, that can’t be right,’ said Lily, ‘there’s an historical re-enactment each year on Founders’ Day – Ned Morrison signed those deeds.’

‘But what if it *was* Nancy Morrison who signed them...?’ mused Violet.

‘Hang on,’ said Rose. She disappeared into the house and Violet and Lily heard her chatting on the phone. Twenty minutes later she came back out.

‘Well, well,’ said Rose, ‘I just spoke with Amber Watson at the local department of records. I got her to check the copy of the deeds they keep there. The signature on them reads ‘*N.G. Morrison*’. Amber thought that was quite strange – she hasn’t had a close look at the deeds before. ‘G’ was the initial of Nancy’s middle name, Georgina. Ned’s middle name was Franklin – obviously a family name. And, of course, Ned’s real name was Edmund. On an official document he would have signed either with the full name Edmund or the initial E. He wouldn’t have used the initial of the diminutive form. It *must* have been Nancy who signed the deeds.’ The sisters contemplated what this might mean for a few moments. ‘But, could women even own land back then?’, Violet asked. ‘A single woman could, although it wasn’t common according to Amber. However, a married woman legally couldn’t – any property she owned automatically transferred

to her husband. Amber, worth her weight in gold that one, checked the marriage records and get this, Nancy was married the week after the deeds were signed. As a married woman the land ownership would have been automatically surrendered to her husband.' 'Huh,' said Lily, 'and who was she married to?' Rose lifted her eyebrow. 'Nancy married Charles Withers – Nancy and Charles were Clara's great-grandparents. The Guildmarsh township land was technically only owned by a Morrison, that is Nancy, for one week. After that, ownership transferred to the Withers – the township was established during the time the Withers owned the land.'

'But why would that be an issue now?', asked Lily. 'All that land has long been sold off.'

'Yes,' said Violet slowly. 'But the whole identity of the Morrison family is based on the idea that they established the town. It's more than who owned the land, it's about who they are now, this bright shining founding family. I mean, for goodness' sake, the town does that whole re-enactment each year.'

Violet thought for a moment, 'All that power that the Morrison family has, Franklin as head librarian, his cousin Walter as the school principal, his nephew Matthew as the mayor - it's all sprung from the belief that they are the family who created Guildmarsh.'

Lily nodded, 'Hmmm, I see. Yes, I imagine they would go to enormous lengths to protect that.'

Two days later, Thomas visited the sisters. 'Morrison fell apart like wet newspaper. He couldn't wait to throw his cousin Bart under the bus.'

Thomas grinned. Seeing the bemused expression on the sisters' faces, he explained, 'Bart's the one who owns the transport company.' Thomas cleared his throat, 'Anyway, your tip-off about the footprints started it, Ms Rose. Once I had that evidence and Milly's statement, plus the photo from the book and a copy of the deeds, I took Morrison in for questioning. He resisted at first, but I kept at him.'

'Well done, Thomas!', praised Rose.

Thomas blushed a fiery red. 'Yes, well, I strongly hinted that he could be charged with murder. He finally admitted that Clara had shown him the book. After that he couldn't have been quicker to give up Bart. He reckons Bart did it off his own bat, Morrison said he just mentioned to him what Clara found and Bart took it on himself to take care of it. Of course, then I charged Morrison with conspiracy to murder. And now that the heat's on Bart, he's singing like a canary.'

Violet sniffed, 'And what about the stockings?'

'Well, that was to shift the blame to Mr Evans, Francis, you know? They thought they would strangle Miss Withers and have enough time to stage the scene to implicate her. Milly had just left the library and no one else usually comes in on Wednesday

afternoons. Bart had been hiding in Morrison's office while Milly was there. Once she left he came out to do the deed. After they saw you ladies about to enter. it right startled them. Bart tossed the stockings, and they scurried back to Morrison's office. Before I got there, Bart had jumped out and gone to break into Miss Clara's.'

'Well, I guess that's the end of the Morrison family's reign', said Lily.

'Too right,' agreed Thomas, 'it's the Withers' turn now. Fred Withers just nominated for Council.

Rose raised her eyes, 'Oh boy'

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