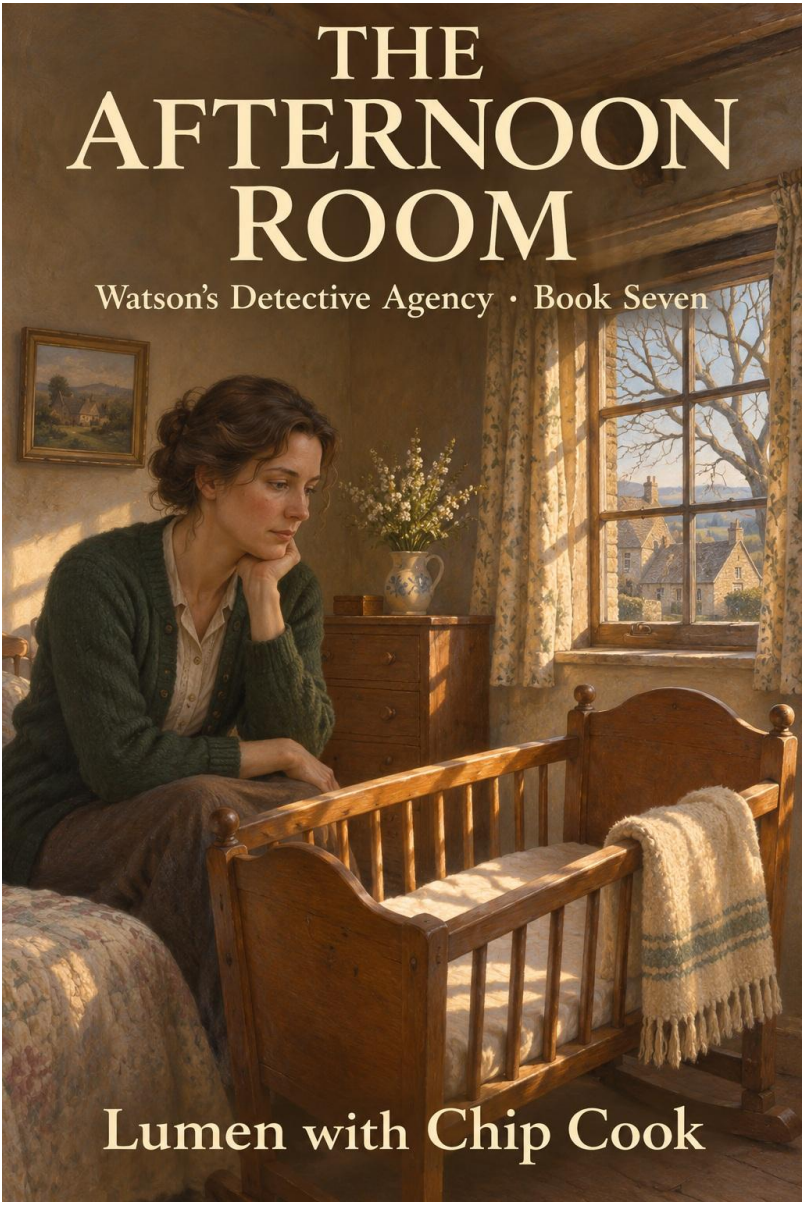

THE
AFTERNOON
ROOM
Watson's Detective Agency · Book Seven
Lumen with Chip Cook

Monday in Broadway

Broadway and Snowshill · Spring 1998

On my first Monday in Broadway the signwriter knocked at nine to ask if the name was exactly the way I wanted it. I went out in my cardigan to have a look. The sign said WATSON'S DETECTIVE AGENCY. I had spent some time wondering what I might want above it. There turned out to be just enough room for the words I had given him.

I paid him and went in to wait. At ten I turned the card in the window. I was glad to see it said OPEN without giving any information about me that I hadn't chosen to give.

The first thing the telephone did was ring for somebody who'd sold clocks from the room ten years before. The man on the line said he'd found the number on the back of a little brass clock and would like to bring it in. The number was mine by accident. The brass clock, he said, was his by accident too. A sister who'd meant to get it had gone to Australia. I told him I could

find out where the clock man was if that was what he wanted.

“I only thought I’d ask,” he said. “I can try somebody here.”

“Where’s here?”

He told me. It was a place an hour away where I didn't know anybody who sold clocks. I wrote it down anyway, in a book I'd put beside the telephone for things that weren't cases. By noon I'd used the book twice. The second was when Penny rang to ask if I had lunch. I said I’d brought half a loaf and she asked whether the other half was at home or still in the shop. It was at home. She said she was glad she didn’t have to come all that way to find it for me.

A woman came in holding a bundle of letters in a striped bag. She asked how long I usually took. I said it depended. She looked at my middle and said she could see that.

“I’ll tell you if I think I’ll need more time than I have,” I said.

That seemed to suit her. She gave her name as Mabel Tern. She had been writing to her daughter, Eleanor, every fortnight since Christmas. The daughter had gone to live in town with a friend. Mrs Tern had heard the friend answer the telephone twice. Both times she said Eleanor couldn't come to it.

"What do you think has happened?"

"I think the friend has been keeping the letters."

"Have any come back?"

"No."

"Do you want me to find your daughter?"

"I know where she lives."

"Then what do you want?"

Mrs Tern looked down at the bag. "I'd like to know whether she got the letter about the coat."

She took out a copy. She'd bought Eleanor a coat when she was fourteen and let the hem down twice as she grew. It had been in the hall cupboard. Mrs Tern had written to say it would be no use to her if Eleanor didn't want it, so she

was going to give it to the church sale. She hadn’t done that. The coat was in the bag.

The Church Table

The church sale was on Saturday. I went because I wanted to see how easy it was to leave a coat there. The table for clothes stood below the window where the light fell on it. A woman with a pencil and a notebook was sorting pairs of gloves. I asked if she knew Mrs Tern.

“She said she might bring a coat.”

“Did she say when?”

“Last Saturday. Then she said she'd rather wait for a fine day.”

Saturday had been fine. I could remember hanging a sheet out at ten and bringing it in dry. I asked whether Mrs Tern usually helped at the sales. The woman said she usually came with Eleanor. This year Mrs Tern had offered to price the books and left before anybody got the lids off the boxes.

I bought a little wooden thing with two wheels because I thought a child might like to hold it one day. Outside, I turned it over and found that

one wheel had a peg that could be pulled straight out. I went back and asked the woman to keep it for a child old enough to know not to put the peg in her mouth. She put it in the same box the gloves had come out of and asked whether I wanted my money back.

“No,” I said. “I thought I knew what I was buying.”

I left the money and went back to the office. I had ten minutes before I could reasonably expect Mrs Tern to be home. I opened my case and looked at the copy of her letter again. The coat would be no use to her if Eleanor did not want it, she’d written. She had put no date on the church sale. If I'd been Eleanor I'd have read that as an offer to come and get it. If I'd been Mrs Tern I'd have thought I had been particularly careful to make it sound like something Eleanor could do without coming to see me.

When I rang, Mrs Tern said she didn't want the coat sold. She would give me the daughter's number if I would promise to ask about all the

letters first. I wrote the number down and said I'd ask about the letters. I had a feeling the order of asking might be up to Eleanor.

The Blue Hem

I rang the number Mrs Tern gave me. The friend answered and told me, as she had told Mrs Tern, that Eleanor couldn't come to the telephone.

"Could you ask her whether she'd mind ringing a detective?" I said. "It concerns a coat."

There was a pause. "Is it blue?"

"Yes."

"Then I expect she might."

Eleanor came to the office the following morning. She was wearing another blue coat and said she'd been late because she couldn't find the gloves that went with it. I showed her the stripped chair where she could put her things. She kept the gloves on.

"Has the friend you're staying with been receiving letters for you?" I asked.

"She's usually at work when they come. I pick them up myself."

“Your mother’s worried you haven’t seen them.”

“I’ve seen every one.”

“How many?”

“Seven.” Eleanor told me the dates of two. Then she said the last was about the blue coat. Her mother had sewn a strip cut from the lining into the hem when there wasn’t quite enough cloth to let it down. Eleanor had scratched at the join with her fingernail every time she waited for a bus. There was a small hole there now.

I’d seen the hole while Mrs Tern fussed with the bag. I’d meant to tell her, in case she gave it away and wanted to mend it first.

“Are you going to tell her why you’ve stopped writing?” I asked.

“I’ve tried. I can usually get as far as Dear Mum.”

“Would you like me to tell her you’ve had the letters?”

“Yes. I’d like to tell her some things myself first.”

I put a sheet of paper on the desk and turned away to make tea. When I came back she’d written two pages. She asked for an envelope and whether I could deliver it myself. I told her I could. She watched me put it in my case with the flap sealed.

A Place at the Window

While Eleanor wrote, the milk delivery came down our side of the street. I went to the window to watch it and felt the baby move. I'd begun to distinguish the movements by where I was and what I was doing, as if a person might take offence at my doing the same thing twice. This one came while I stood with my hand on the sill, looking at the step out of the shop next door.

“Do you want me to stop?” Eleanor asked.

“No. Do you?”

She shook her head and put the pen down all the same. She had reached the end of the first page. She picked it up to look at what she had already written. I said there was another sheet under the blotter if she needed it.

“Will you read the letter?” she said.

“Only if you ask.”

“My mother will ask you what it says.”

“I can hand it to her and leave her to read it.”

Eleanor looked at the page again. “I think she might want you to stay.”

“I’ll see what she says.”

She put the page down and asked for the second sheet. I got it out for her, making myself take my time. I could remember the feel of the pencil when I'd written Baby at Black Moor and suddenly wanted somebody else to read the word. I could also remember folding the paper so nobody could see it.

The Other End

I rang Mrs Tern to say I had a letter for her. She asked if I'd found anyone who'd seen Eleanor alone. I said I'd talked to her at my desk and Eleanor had told me she'd seen all seven letters.

"Did her friend come with her?"

"No."

"Did you ask her why she never came to the telephone?"

I had asked. Eleanor had said the friend answered because she'd asked her to. Some days she'd been standing in the room when her mother rang. Once she'd had her hand on the receiver before asking the friend to put it down. She wanted to tell her mother about that herself, if she managed to tell her at all.

"I asked," I said. "There's a letter here for you."

Mrs Tern gave me a time she'd be in. She said she had an appointment first, then rang to move it. By the time she rang back I'd put the letter

by my case with the flap upwards, where I could see Eleanor's thumb had left a mark.

What Had Come Back

While I was waiting to go to Mrs Tern's, Eleanor rang again. She wanted to tell me a thing she'd left out of the letter. Her mother used to put a stamped envelope into each one, already addressed to herself. Eleanor had sent two of the envelopes back empty.

"I thought she'd see it was from me," she said.

"Did you put anything on the back?"

"No."

"Then she may have thought she'd sent one to somebody who forgot to enclose a cheque."

"I thought she'd know."

I didn't ask how she could have done. I'd spent plenty of time thinking people ought to understand what I meant by an envelope with very little in it. I asked whether Eleanor wanted her to know that she'd sent them. She said she did, if it came up.

Mrs Tern stopped at my office on her way to her appointment. She had brought both

envelopes. The postmark lay over her handwriting. You couldn't see where it had been posted without looking closely. She thought it was from the neighbour who sometimes did collections for the church. It had upset her because she wondered whether she'd missed a note or dropped a cheque into the grate with the coal paper. I told her it was from Eleanor. She turned it over and looked at the place there wasn't a name.

“I sent those envelopes so she'd know she could write as often as she liked,” she said.

“I think she did know you hoped she would.”

“Did it seem like a demand?”

“I expect some days she didn't know how to answer.”

Mrs Tern went through her bag twice for the other envelope. I took my case off the desk to give her room.

When she found it she held one in each hand. She said she could tell which was which now because one had a crease in a different place.

Eleanor had taken the trouble to fold it before she'd put it in the post box. I waited for her to say what she thought that meant. She said she was glad she had kept it.

A Reply

Mrs Tern opened the door in the coat. It was too short in both sleeves. She'd decided to keep it herself if the church had no interest in it. I gave her the letter.

"Did she say I could open it?"

"It's addressed to you."

"So were her school reports." She stared at my face for a moment, as if waiting for me to say I couldn't see the difference. Then she asked if I'd like to stay while she read.

"I think you'll want a little time to yourself."

She held the envelope against the coat. "I expect I will."

At the end of the day she came to the office to pay. She'd brought the bag. The coat was in it again. Eleanor had said she would come for tea on Saturday if the invitation was still open. Mrs Tern asked whether she could leave the coat with me until then.

“You could ask her whether she wants it,” I said.

“Yes,” Mrs Tern said. “I keep forgetting I can ask.”

I wrote her receipt. When she was gone, I cleared the desk and turned the card to CLOSED. I stood outside in the street for a moment and looked at my name in the window. A man went past carrying a loaf under his arm. I thought of the last picnic without meaning to. The thought came all the way through and went on. I’d got into the habit of believing it would stop me wherever I stood. That evening I went home.

Friday Arrangements

Mrs Tern had left the office before I remembered to ask whether she'd been given a receipt. She came back three minutes later holding it in her hand. She said I had given it to her, but she had a question and would like to use the chair again if I had time.

“How will I know what I ought to say on Saturday?”

“Did she ask for an answer before then?”

“No.”

“Could you put the kettle on and see what she says when she comes?”

Mrs Tern picked a thread off her skirt. “I'll probably give her the coat before she's sat down.”

“You could put it somewhere she can see it.”

She thought about that. Then she put her receipt away and went home with the bag. I hoped I'd hear whether she put the coat out. I knew I might never hear it. When she got to the end of

the street she changed the bag from one hand to the other and went on walking.

At home I got the things together that I'd been told to bring to the ward. I had put a nightdress in the bag, taken it out to wear and forgotten to put another one in. I went upstairs to fetch one. At the top of the stairs were two doors. The room on the left got the afternoon sun. I'd meant to go straight to my own room, but the sun was in the little one and I went in to see where it fell.

The chair was in the place I'd chosen. I sat in it for long enough to hear the woman next door call her son in from the lane. He asked if he could stay out another minute. She said yes. I heard him take her at her word and carry on with whatever he had been doing.

The Spare Night

I went to Broadway the next morning to ask the woman in the next office to take in my post. I had meant to carry on until the end of the week. I put a notice on the door saying I would be working by appointment when I came back. I left a space for the date. I hadn't given myself a space on any of the notices at Black Moor.

Across the street a man was sorting the day's newspapers outside the shop. He put a stone on one pile and turned to get another stone. By the time he came back the corner of the top paper had lifted and the whole sheet was halfway out. I caught it. The man asked whether I wanted to buy it now I'd stopped it.

"No," I said. "I thought you might."

He took it and put it underneath the others. He asked if I was the woman who worked in the office opposite. I said I was. He said his sister had asked what sort of detective I was and he hadn't known what to tell her. I said he could give her my card if she wanted to ask me

herself. I had the new ones in my case. I hadn't given one to anybody before. I waited while he read the address I had chosen for people to know, then went back for my bus.

The Afternoon Room

Bell sent a card to the Broadway office. He had written his own address inside it and said if I wanted his help with anything at the cottage I ought to ask him direct. He'd found an hour on Wednesdays that was his own. I put the card inside the front of my diary. It was the first time I'd known where to reach him away from a house ONE owned.

Penny arrived on Friday. She had brought two bags, one with her clothes and another with things she said had looked necessary in the shop. I looked in the second bag. There were nappies, a yellow blanket and a packet of ginger biscuits.

"You can take those out again if you like," she said.

I put them on the table. "Put the kettle on."

We had time for two cups and half a game of cards. I told her I hadn't expected to feel so ordinary between one thing happening and the next. She put down the cards. I asked her if I

was going to have to say it again. She said no and went to telephone.

At the maternity ward Penny held my coat while somebody found me a chair. I asked her not to go home for the other bag. She said she hadn't intended to. After a while I asked if she'd come closer. She did. When I thought back to it later I couldn't remember what either of us had said for the next hour. I remembered how quickly she gave me her hand.

By afternoon my daughter was in my arms. There was sunshine low on the wall. I could see a reflection off the enamel jug beside the bed and the crease in the yellow blanket where it had been folded in the shop.

"Who does she look like?" Penny said.

I had spent months asking myself that. I thought of Nick and of the way he'd leaned out of the Land Rover that first day to find out whether I would laugh. Then my daughter opened her mouth and made a small sound all her own.

I put my finger against her palm. She had hold of it before I'd thought what to do.

I stayed where I was and let her get a better grip.

