

Double digging (alternative name bastard trenching)

Jean Cowgill

As with my other plays, this started life as a short story, the bulk of which occurred in scenes 3 and 4.

Characters

John Firth – aged thirty, a CID Inspector based in Leeds.

Anna Whitely – aged fifty, a specialist in Obstetrics and Gynaecology in Lancaster.

Liz Firth – police constable about to resume part-time working after the birth of her daughter.

Philip Whitely – father of Anna, ex librarian in very poor health.

Narrator

Sally Firth – a nonspeaking part but integral to the story.

Scene One In the sitting room of John and Liz's house in Adel, Leeds

Scene Two Pavilion Café in Williamson Park, Lancaster

Scene Three Lane and allotment outside Staveley, Cumbria

Scene Four In the sitting room of the cottage near Staveley

Scene One In the sitting room of John and Liz's house in Adel, Leeds

(A semidetached house built in the 1930's and showing signs of wear and tear. The room is superficially tidy but there is evidence of childhood toys and paraphernalia. A large settee fills one wall. A young woman is sprawled out staring vacantly at a television. Her husband enters the room in a triumphant manner.)

JOHN: She's gone down at last, good as gold! Things are getting easier *(sits beside his wife)*.

LIZ: Not sure about that – she can be a right little madam during the day when you are at work.

JOHN: Come on love, she's sleeping through, that has to be an improvement.

LIZ: When Sally was breast feeding it didn't make much difference to you...sorry love. I'm not being fair. You took your turn in the evenings, when your work allowed.

JOHN: I know. Make me feel guilty why don't you? You know the crack. When there's a flap on our lives aren't our own.

LIZ: Flap on. That sounds like World War 2. I remember it felt like it at times. *(sighs, reaches over to her husband)* Wouldn't change things for the world. Now come on. I've been very patient. What is your news?

(John does not reply immediately. He stands, crosses to the wine shelf ..takes a bottle of red and two glasses, rejoins Liz on the sofa).

LIZ: Come on love. What are we celebrating?

JOHN: Two fold. No, I have not got a promotion. The rank of Inspector suits me very well at present. By the time Sally is at university I intend to be an Assistant Chief Constable...

LIZ: John I'm going to hit you in a minute.

JOHN: Would that be classed as ABH or GBH I wonder, it could be grounds for divorce.

LIZ: John

JOHN: Sorry. We are having a glass of wine my love because you can resume your drinking habits. Well over a year of alcoholic abstinence, excluding Trevor Miller's leaving do.

LIZ: To which I was not invited. Seriously, thanks for supporting me in the embargo. But, you said there were two things.

(John pours the wine)

JOHN: I had an email from *my mother* today.

LIZ: Email! How trendy.

JOHN: She's not an ancient sitting knitting in an inglenook corner.

LIZ: Sorry.

JOHN: She said she was shocked to get a letter from the adoption agency. I think it knocked her for six...well it would.

LIZ: They sent it nearly two months ago. Was she on holiday?

JOHN: I don't think so. She was chewing things over. She didn't say much...but she did say she always thought of me as Robert. When I was adopted mum and dad chose John, after mum's father.

LIZ: I like John, it is a good strong name. *(smiles)* So, if she isn't some crazed ancient what does she do for a living? Is she married? Has she got a family, another one I mean?

JOHN: I feel a bit strange about things...thought I'd be happier.

LIZ: So?

JOHN: She never married and has no other children.

LIZ: How sad.

JOHN: Apparently, she wants to meet me. I'll find out more details then. What should I do?

LIZ: Just a question John. Why did you contact her?

JOHN: You know why. When I first saw Sally I wanted to know about her grandma, her proper grandma. And with mum and dad gone, you know...

LIZ: *(lays her hand on his arm and kisses his cheek)* I know love. So you have no choice. Do you mind if I write her a note?

JOHN: One of your famous cards. I think it's a great idea. Heavens, I feel as though I'm at the top of the big dipper at Blackpool.

LIZ: Seize the moment.

(They embrace, immediately Sally makes strenuous demands on their time.)

Scene Two The Pavilion Café at Williamson Park, Lancaster

(The action takes place outside The Pavilion Café. It is early spring and the day is cool, customers are thin on the ground.)

JOHN: *(talking to himself)* If I'm in the correct car park the café should be just along there behind the monument...not many people sitting outside. There she is, but she looks too young. The only other people are two girls larking about and the old man smoking near the litterbin. It *must* be her. Do I feel up to it? Should I turn back? Too late, she's seen me *(smiles nervously)*.

ANNA: *(pale and even more nervous)*. Rob...John? It is John isn't it? *(she stands and they shake hands in a stilted, formal manner.)* No problem finding the place?

JOHN: *(still feeling nervous, attempts humour)* No problem, a combination of my trusty SATNAV and my police acumen. I'll get myself a drink, do you want anything else?

ANNA: Thank you, I've already got tea to calm my nerves, I don't need anything to eat.

(John returns with a hot chocolate).

ANNA: Where do we start?

JOHN: How about at the very beginning Anna, you don't mind me calling you Anna do you? Miss Whitely is ridiculously formal and I'm not sure about the term mother, or are you a doctor?

ANNA: Technically, I am a surgeon so don't use 'doctor'. I'm fine with 'Anna'. I have to force myself to stop thinking of you as Robert, thirty years worth...

JOHN: So you did think of me, I wasn't pushed to one side.

ANNA: *(reaching tentatively for his hand)* Never. Not a day went by, it was especially hard on your birthday

ANNA & JOHN SIMULTANEOUSLY: December the 17th.

ANNA: Would you mind telling me about your childhood, your adoptive parents and so on.

JOHN: I was very lucky. Mum and dad gave me love and security. In my job I've seen the scrag end of life, but no, I was an only one, cherished you might say but not spoiled.

ANNA: Where did you live?

JOHN: Actually, I still live in my parents' house, in Leeds, north end, Adel, handy for the Yorkshire Dales. Dad was in the police and mum worked part-time in an office. She was always home when I got in from school.

ANNA: So you followed in your father's footsteps?

JOHN: *(smiles wryly)* Yes, once I realised my career as a footballer was a pipe dream.

ANNA: When did they tell you, about the adoption I mean.

JOHN: *(finishes his drink, pauses.)* They didn't. I found the details when I was going through their effects.

ANNA: Oh John, their effects.

JOHN: Holiday of a lifetime. It certainly was. The most expensive jaunt celebrating dad's retirement *(gulps)* bloody nature, I'd never even heard the word tsunami before.

ANNA: I wish I'd been there for you.

JOHN: Yes, well, I must admit the adoption papers were a bolt from the blue. I had no idea. They had kept it well hidden.

ANNA: Weren't they supposed to tell you?

JOHN: I think all that legislation came in after my time. I'll be honest, I was angry, very angry. All sorts of ideas were tumbling about my head. My fiancée, Liz, was a great support.

ANNA: I'm looking forward to meeting her.

JOHN: (*mocking*) Liz said anyone as fantastic as me must have had good parents both adopted and biological. Think she might be a bit prejudiced.

ANNA: How can I comment?

JOHN: So I'm afraid at first I put you on the back burner. 'If she didn't want me, I don't want her' type of thing. Not nice I know.

ANNA: What changed?

JOHN: Liz moved with me back to my parents' house. She has just finished maternity leave from the police. Our little girl, Sally, is fourteen months. Oh by the way, we got married three years ago, I missed not having any close family there. Sorry I'm telling this all the wrong way round.

ANNA: What can I say?

JOHN: I don't mean to sound bitter (*he switches on his phone*) would you like to see some pictures of Sally?... baby ones, could be anyone, she looks a bit like a prune,...I like her here in dungarees playing with her digger...

ANNA: (*overcome*) Sorry (*tears roll down her cheeks*) Oh I'm sorry John.

JOHN: Look Anna I didn't mean to upset you. This is supposed to be a bonding moment...for both of us (*he gives her a light hug*). I'm desperate to know your story. But, at the risk of sounding like a schoolboy can I give you a note from Liz – no it is not about the dog eating my homework (*they both laugh*.)

ANNA: (*reads the letter aloud*)

Dear Anna,

We knew nothing about John's adoption until his parents' death. I do hope that we can meet soon and you can get to know Sally, your granddaughter. She is a little monkey at times but much loved.

I only knew John's mum and dad, sorry that is how I think of them, for three years. John was devastated when they died.

I hope you can find a corner of your heart for your new family. I enclose some photos of Sally – I prefer paper ones to put in albums even in these days John calls me old fashioned.

I look forward to meeting you when you feel ready. Liz (your daughter-in-law)

JOHN: Do you want a moment? When you feel up to it could you tell me about yourself?

ANNA: (*makes an effort to appear calm*) Like you I'm an only child. My parents were middle aged when I arrived. Dad was chief librarian in Kendal, mum a district nurse. Home was the back of beyond near Staveley, not good for a teenage social life but I loved, still love, the place. We walked most of the fells in Cumbria, I used to stick a pin on a huge map the first time I conquered them. We lost mum four years ago which knocked the stuffing out of dad. He is in a poor way, he has only a few weeks left.

JOHN: Sorry to hear that.

ANNA: I had such a sheltered childhood. When I went to study medicine in Manchester, it was a new world. I've always studied hard but in the first year I partied hard as well.

JOHN: Go on, I think...

ANNA: At Easter, in the first year, I discovered I was pregnant. I felt the truth would have killed my parents.

JOHN: My father...you did know who he is.

ANNA: John, of course I did. There was only ever one man for me.

JOHN: So what happened?

ANNA: He was not in a position to offer marriage, how old fashioned that sounds. He was a good bit older than I was and, yes, he was married.

JOHN: What a dog.

ANNA: I still loved him but the affair was over. His parents provided for me during the pregnancy, the rest you know.

JOHN: How did your parents take it?

ANNA: They never knew. As far as they were concerned, I went to America for twelve months on a student exchange. I made sure I was the one to telephone. I got a friend to send pre-written post cards. It was a lonely time, but my choice.

JOHN: So everything sorted, I was tidied away.

ANNA: Giving you up was the hardest thing I've ever done. It was heart wrenching. As I said before I've thought about you every single day.

JOHN: Sorry Anna I'm not being very fair. I don't feel very fair. My head is all over the place. I was kicked into touch and you became a professor of obstetrics and gynaecology. Do you see the irony?

ANNA: I do, I do. I pray that you will let me into your life and learn to forgive me.

JOHN: I've been fighting against my feelings Anna. I stirred up this hornets' nest because I wanted resolution, no I wanted more. I would like to let you into my life, maybe a bit at a time.

ANNA: I'd be honoured John. A bit at a time would be wonderful. I was thinking Sally would like to come here and see the butterflies when she is a bit older. I wonder though if I could have first turn, I'd so like you to meet my father whilst there is still time.

JOHN: I'd like that.

ANNA: Is it OK if I email you with the details and some dates? When you come over wear your oldest clothes and make sure you bring some wellies.

(Anna rushes away to meet her clinic appointments. John sits for a moment and muses over the meeting.)

Scene Three: Outside a cottage and allotment near Staveley, Cumbria

(It is five weeks since the meeting in Lancaster. Many emails and texts had eventually produced a date suitable for a busy police inspector and an even busier gynaecologist.)

ANNA: *(musing to herself)* I feel as though I've waited here all my life. I remember when I was a toddler how the lane seemed so rough and uneven. If anything, it is worse. Dad never minded the isolation or the tortuous journey into Kendal. *(She stamps her feet to aid her circulation. She peers down the road, her patience is rewarded. John. Her heart turns over.)* Come through the gate, but please keep quiet as dad is sleeping. These days he only manages to get up for a couple of hours in the afternoon.

ANNA: Good to see you! Let's sit down for a few minutes I want to catch up with your news.

(They enter the allotment and sit on a dilapidated bench in front of a garden shed.)

ANNA: Were my directions clear?

JOHN: As crystal. I left the car at the bottom of the track as you suggested. Anna, I feel terribly nervous even worse than when I met you.

ANNA: It'll be OK don't worry, dad is not an ogre. I feel nervous as well. I have to explain about deceiving him all those years ago. I do so want him to meet you while there is still time.

JOHN: *(John reached for her hand)* How is he?

ANNA: Not so good, I estimate he will be gone within a month. Let's change the subject – how are Liz and Sally?

JOHN: Sally rules the roost. Never thought a child could make so much difference to our lives. My world turned upside down, planning goes out of the window. To be honest shift work seems like a holiday camp by comparison. I wouldn't change things. Liz sends her love, she's looking forward to meeting you. I've got more photos for you. Digital cameras are OK you know, why don't you let me download onto your computer.

ANNA: You can do that but I still prefer albums. Call me old fashioned if you will. Anyway, later today I want to show them to dad. His eyes are not too clear, paper photographs are a lot easier. I can't wait until then...let me...these are wonderful. Sally seems to change by the week. Oh, look at that one, what a silly face. John, I'm going to have to put them away or no work will get done.

(They get reluctantly to their feet.)

ANNA: Glad to see you've come prepared. Your dark blue 'wellies' are very fetching.

JOHN: Comes with the job, standard issue. I don't get to wear them often, promotion has kept me away from the sharp end of police work. *(He looks around)*. I love the way the limestone walls reflect the light. I presume we are tackling the wilderness half of the allotment. It looks daunting. We'll never manage this today.

ANNA: Yes, that half belongs to dad. The other belongs to his neighbour, a young man who works from home on his computer.

JOHN: It must be wonderful not to have a daily commute – Leeds can be hell.

ANNA: Lancaster is no fun either. Dad has been gardening here for half a century or more. A few years ago, he went organic. Read everything that came into the library...I suspect he ordered books for his own benefit. We recycled kitchen waste long before it was fashionable *(she looks around and sighs)* we really will have to start work. The BT will take forever.

JOHN: BT?

ANNA: Sorry, nothing to do with telephones. It is an abbreviation for 'bastard trenching'. A term I don't normally say in full. Double digging sounds more innocuous.

JOHN: I agree. Although it never meant much to me until...

(Anna smiles and touches his arm. After a moment, she turns and views the allotment.)

ANNA: Dad grew all our vegetables. We were virtually self sufficient even without a deep freeze. Perhaps you'll start a vegetable plot.

JOHN: Good idea. We spend a fortune at the supermarket. I'm not sure we could find the time nor the space. I'd like Sally to learn about growing things. I remember an experiment with beans, blotting paper and jam jars when I was in junior school.

ANNA: I think it will take us the rest of the day. It will be the last time. Dad will not be here for the planting let alone the harvest but he has been pestering the life out of me, unfortunate phrase, to get the ground turned over. Last night I barrowed through a load of compost. You know I think compost is magical *(John looks doubtful)* the conversion of waste into a friable, near perfect condition.

JOHN: There is no smell. I always thought it would be smelly.

ANNA: Not if done properly. We need compost, a wheelbarrow, a spade and a fork. All present and correct, it is a bit like checking all my operating equipment.

JOHN: I wouldn't know I hate hospitals. Attending a post mortem is even worse.

ANNA: You can get used to anything in time. I'd rather cut and slice than have patients fade away under a cocktail of drugs...I can't believe I just said that. Poor dad, after mother died he seemed to lose the will to live. Well this won't get the baby a new bonnet.

JOHN: What baby? What bonnet?

ANNA: It's just an old saying, meaning we had better get on. You dig the trench and put the soil in the barrow. We transfer it to the far end, I'll do that. Should be OK provided I don't overfill the wretched thing. The second line of digging goes into the trench when we've put in a layer of compost. These are dad's instructions.

JOHN: Why are you starting up here away from the house?

ANNA: Dad's idea. He used to say coming home is easier than going away.

(They work steadily for half an hour. Anna puts down the wheelbarrow straightens up and begins to massage the small of her back.)

ANNA: Aches and pains already...third lumbar vertebrae at a guess.

JOHN: *(looks up and smiles)* anything I can do?

ANNA: No thank you. Kind offer, but once I stop I'll never get going again. You are doing very well, we'll make a gardener of you.

JOHN: Ye gods, this is going to take forever.

(Two hours later, half the area has been dug in the approved manner. Weeds form a pile on spare ground waiting to go to the nearly empty compost bin. The contrast between old and new ground is marked. The latter gave the illusion of being stone free and slightly raised resembling a cake mix.)

JOHN: Perhaps you should have been a landscape gardener.

ANNA: I don't think my back would agree with you. Shall we have a drink?

(Anna became aware of a figure standing in an archway near the shed.)

ANNA: Dad. *(to John)* Yesterday he could hardly dress himself. How has he managed to leave the house. *(She hurries towards her father and guides him gently to the bench. His aspen body trembles as he tries to catch his breath.)*

ANNA: What are you doing out here? You are still in your slippers, where's your coat? Why didn't you wait for me to come back in.? Were you checking up? You were weren't you?

(Philip looks embarrassed)

ANNA: You thought I could not manage didn't you? Well I hope the digging is to your satisfaction. I can't quite hear you. The boy...he's not a boy. He's thirty years old. No dad he is not my toy boy.

Where on earth do you pick up these expression? I can't talk now. I'll explain later. John, can you put the tools back in the shed please? We'll have to finish for today I need to get dad into the house.

Scene Four: In the cottage sitting room

(The sitting room is small and over warm. Two high backed chairs face one another; a small settee is at right angles. A coffee table has crockery set out for a light meal. In one corner is an old-fashioned television, in another corner, a grandfather clock looks mutinously on. Throughout Anna's childhood, it had kept perfect time, but now it is frozen at 11.03 whether PM or AM is a matter of conjecture. The window looks out onto the garden with the allotment gate showing in the distance.)

ANNA: Sit down dad, here we are. *(She eases him gently into the more worn of the two chairs. He takes a few moments to catch his breath.)*

PHILIP: Are you going to introduce us lass, where are your manners?

ANNA: Dad this is John, John Firth.

JOHN: Pleased to meet you sir.

ANNA: The food is ready I just need to mash the tea. Would you prefer coffee John?

JOHN: Tea is fine. *(Anna exits)*

PHILIP: I've lived here nearly fifty years. We came here when Anna was a bairn. What did you say your name was young man?

JOHN: John, sir.

PHILIP: Forget about the 'sir' business. Nobody knighted me. I never did anything special with my life, just worked in the library. Please call me Philip.

JOHN: Thank you sir, I mean Philip.

PHILIP: *(after a few seconds)* So, Jim, how did you two meet? I must say I've never known Anna bring home a lad.

JOHN: *(gives up trying to untangle the name confusion)* It's not like that, I am twenty years younger than Anna.

PHILIP: It takes all sorts these days I see some strange goings on there *(points to a small television)*.

JOHN: I'm happily married.

PHILIP: *(ignoring the comment)* I wish Anna had met someone, Nancy and I would have loved grandchildren. Now it's all too late. *(changing the subject as the very old are entitled to do)* Do you know anything about clocks Jim?

JOHN: Not really, I'm in the police force. Some people might say we clock watch from twenty years of age to retirement.

PHILIP: *(looks confused and clearly fails to understand)*. You see my clock in the corner. *(Both look at the grandfather clock)*. I can't get the devil to go. Anna winds it up but it only lasts a couple of hours *(looks at his hands)* these fingers are worth nowt, nowt.

JOHN: Shall I have a look? I can't promise anything mind you.

(John crosses the room, he finds the key at the bottom of the casement, it is very stiff to turn but he manages several revolutions. He remembers that his adopted father had a similar clock, he had spent time adjusting the weights. John tries the remedy without much hope. A few seconds later, it is ticking majestically. John adjusts the time, pausing at each quarter hour. Anna enters the room carrying sandwiches and drinks.)

ANNA: The clock's going.

PHILIP: You always liked to state the obvious. This young man...Jim...he's got it going.

ANNA: John, his name is John, dad.

JOHN: *(modestly)* I reset the balance. Don't know how long it will keep going.

PHILIP: None of us know how long we'll keep going. *(stunned silence.)*

ANNA: Come on folks, tuck in. I'm starving, had an early breakfast.

(John devours more than half the sandwiches, Anna has a couple and forces her father to eat one. Afterwards he takes a series of pills.)

PHILIP: I reckon you think I'm a bit old to be a junkie don't you J...John. You in the police...are you going to arrest me?

(John and Anna laugh awkwardly. Philip seems to have gathered a little strength.)

PHILIP: I remember we called in the police when someone had been in the reference room for two hours.

JOHN: What was he doing wrong?

PHILIP: Nothing much, he was quiet, very quiet.

ANNA: Oh dad, not that old chestnut.

PHILIP: He was dead *(chuckles)*.

ANNA: You are the limit.

PHILIP: *(ignoring her)* I got into trouble with the police once. *(Anna groans.)* I was in Lancaster library doing some research. When I went out all the bells from hell went off. It seems my false hip activated the alarm.

ANNA: If you are going to tell a tale at least keep it truthful dad. Two librarians pursued you across Market Square. There was no involvement with the police.

PHILIP: I haven't had such a good time in ages, great to have company. Chap next door pops in but I can't really understand him. He's from London, says he hasn't got an accent *(laughs)*. Oh but I wish Nancy were here to join in. Thank you for coming to see me John, and doing a bit of digging. Police! Do you dig up dead bodies?

ANNA: Dad please stop all this nonsense.

PHILIP: Sorry Anna. Now come on you two, tell me how you met.

ANNA: John has a little girl called Sally.

PHILIP: A married man. I'm disappointed in you Anna.

ANNA: He has a lovely wife, Liz, whom I intend to meet next weekend all being well.

PHILIP: I'm confused, flabbergasted.

ANNA: I've got some photographs that John gave me today *(she places them on the table)*.

PHILIP: *(puts on his glasses)* She looks a bonny wee thing.

ANNA: Does she remind you of anyone?

PHILIP: Not really, no, how could she?

ANNA: *(opens her handbag and places a photograph of herself at the same age.)* Well?

PHILIP: *(looks intently from one photograph to the other. He casts a puzzled look towards Anna.)* I don't understand. How could she?

ANNA: This is your great granddaughter...

PHILIP: *(Pause)* So the man who can mend clocks... *(he glances towards John)*

ANNA: *(laying a hand on her father's arm)* ...I'm proud to say is my son and your grandson.

THE END