



**Collected
Stories**

Alan Robson

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**For my wife Robin who is always my first and my best
reader**

and

**For the late Lyn Bowyer who forced me to sit down
and write**

Collected Stories

Short Fiction

by

Alan Robson

Introduction

In 2016 I joined a writers group. The group met on the second and fourth Friday of every month. One of the attractions of joining the group was that regular homework assignments were given out, with the results to be presented and critiqued at the next meeting. The stories in this collection were all written for that group.

I'm not very good at thinking up ideas for a story. But it turns out that I am quite good at thinking up a story when I'm told what it has to be about. The ideas we were given to work with were always very vague (*write about a gift... write about loneliness, write about a flood...*) but that very vagueness was their strength. I was forced to think hard about what the idea might *really* mean. How could I avoid the obvious and find out what was hiding just beneath the surface of the theme? So of course, now that I had a theme, all that I had to do was put on my thinking cap and come up with something appropriate that would fit. Easy! Well... *easy ish!* at any rate. For small values of *ish*...

The group stopped meeting at the end of 2020 when the convenor became too ill to continue. And a few months later she died. I've dedicated this collection of stories to her memory. Without her, none of them would ever have been written.

When I put this collection together, I found that I had two stories called *The Birthday Party* and two stories called *The Waiting Room*. Clearly some titles pop into my head again and again. Fortunately the stories attached to the duplicate titles are quite different from each other. Phew!

Alan Robson

December 2021

Condiments of the Season

The rain poured out of the sky in torrents. David huddled himself under his leaky umbrella and examined the timetable screwed to the bus stop. Naturally, he'd just missed a bus and the next one wasn't due for another forty minutes. Drops of water trickled under his collar and wriggled down his neck. The next forty minutes promised to be damp ones.

Across the road a neon sign blinked in a shop window. "OPEN" it flashed. "WE SELL THINGS". It's bound to be dry in there thought David and he crossed the road and went in. The proprietor looked up as David entered. "There's an umbrella stand next to the door," he said. "Put your broolly in there with the others. I promise not to sell it."

"Thanks," said David.

The shop was full of shelves and the shelves were full of bric-a-brac, but everything was clean and sparkling, not a sign of dust or neglect anywhere. The proprietor looked clean and sparkling as well. He was sitting on a stool behind the counter and light bounced in dazzles from his bald head. In contrast to the tidiness of the rest of the shop, the counter seemed rather cluttered. Perhaps the ruler and the notebook could be considered tools of the trade. But what about the pair of Wellington boots? There was an ancient cast iron fireplace in the wall behind the proprietor, though no fire was set in it. The black lead surround was highly polished and gleaming. A shiny brass casing from an artillery shell stood on the hearth. A poker, dustpan and brush sat to attention inside it.

"What sort of shop is this?" asked David.

“Just a shop,” said the proprietor, picking up a mug of tea and sipping from it. “Nothing special. If you see anything you fancy, just sing out.”

David browsed around the shelves, poking at this and that as he went. He found a small, frizzy haired doll with a manic grin and a sticky-out tongue. “What's this?” he asked.

The proprietor glanced across. “Oh that,” he said. “That's a genuine Albert Einstein voodoo doll. Stick a pin in it and Albert Einstein dies a painful, lingering death.”

“I hate to tell you this,” said David, “but Albert Einstein died in 1955. I think the doll is well past its use-by date.”

“That's why it's on special,” said the proprietor. “Ten percent off.”

David put the doll back. “No thanks,” he said, “I don't have any real use for it.” Then something caught his eye. “Gosh, these are pretty.” He'd found a rather elegant looking chess set. All the pieces were intricately carved representations of Chinese warriors, well armed with swords and bows and spears. The level of detail in the carving was amazing.

“Those are really extra special,” said the proprietor. “Each one of those chess pieces is a proper dehydrated soldier from a Ming dynasty army. Don't take them outside into that rainstorm. They'll absorb all the water, shoot up to full size and start waving their swords about and chopping each others heads off, and we don't want that, do we? Far too messy.”

“OK,” said David. “I'll let them stay here where it's warm and dry. What's this?” He picked up a peaked cap with an ornate badge on it.

“That's a fireman's cap,” said the proprietor. “Put it on, and you turn into a fireman.”

David put the cap on his head. “Have I turned into a fireman?” he asked. “I don't feel any different.”

“Why would you expect to feel different?” asked the proprietor. “Firemen are just ordinary people, like you and

me. They're no different to anybody else. But if I were to start a fire going in that fireplace behind me, I'm certain you'd be over there in a flash to put it out. Probably you'd use the same technique my old friend Lemuel Gulliver used when he extinguished the fire that was threatening to burn down Lilliput. You wouldn't be able to help yourself."

David hurriedly took the cap off again and went back to exploring the shelves. "I don't think either of us would enjoy that," he said.

It wasn't long before David came across another treasure. It was an old bottle made of very thick glass. There was no label on it, but moulded into the glass itself was the word "Condiment". The address of the manufacturer was given as:

Daw, Sen and Co
PO Box 9020
Calcutta.

But it was the last little touch that made the bottle so intriguing. Etched around the manufacturer's address were the words: "Contents not genuine if seal is broken". What on Earth could that mean, David wondered?

The bottle was filled with a smoky brown liquid. Vaguely seen abstract shapes floated in it and every so often they banged against the side, becoming sharply visible for a frustratingly brief moment and then vanishing again into the murk before they could be properly identified. The stopper in the neck of the bottle was held in place with an elaborate seal which was stamped with an intricate design of interlocking triangles.

"What's this?" asked David. "And what happens if you break the seal?"

“Now there you've got me,” said the proprietor. “I don't actually know what it is, except there's a condiment in the bottle of course. I wrote to the manufacturer asking them what sort of condiment it was, but I never got a reply. Probably they went out of business years ago. Too many people breaking the seal to open their bottle and then finding they'd got a fake condiment, I imagine. Serves them right for not reading the small print. After all, what good is a fake condiment to anyone? Mind you, it's not exactly clear to me what use a genuine condiment might be either. From the look of the stuff floating around in the bottle, it might almost be made of slugs and snails and puppy dogs tails for all I can tell.”

“If you can get at the stuff in the bottle without breaking the seal, surely it will stay genuine,” said David. “So why not just break the neck of the bottle, leaving the seal intact?”

“But then you'd have broken glass in your condiment,” said the proprietor. “I don't think I fancy dribbling that on to my food.”

“Not if you're careful,” said David. “Use a file or a glass cutter or even a nice hard diamond if you happen to have one lying around. Score the glass deeply all around the neck and give it a sharp tap. It should break off quite cleanly.”

“I've got an old jewellery box down here somewhere,” said the proprietor. “I'm sure I noticed a diamond in it the other day.” He rummaged around under the counter and eventually found a polished wooden box. He put it down on the counter and opened the lid. It was full of bracelets, rings, necklaces and chains. He stirred them all around with his finger until he found what he was looking for. “Aha!” He produced a ring with a large diamond set in a fancy clasp. “I remember this,” he said. “It used to belong to Marie Antoinette. I took it off her finger myself just after they chopped her head off. Let's see what it does to the bottle.”

He moved the ruler, the notebook and the Wellington boots to one side and put the bottle down on the counter.

He scored a deep line all the way around the neck of the bottle with the diamond. "That seemed to work well," he said as he put the diamond back into the jewellery box. "How hard do you think I should hit it? We don't want to shatter the glass, do we?"

"Have you got a small hammer hiding somewhere?" asked David.

"Yes, I think so," said the proprietor. He rummaged around underneath the counter again. "Here we go." He brandished a geological hammer proudly. "My friend Thor pawned it about 500 years ago when he was going through a bit of a bad patch. I haven't seen him since, so perhaps he never came out of the bad patch. Pity. Nice chap, though he did have a bit of a temper on him sometimes."

"Are you telling me that's Mjolnir?" asked David. "The Hammer of Thor?"

"Oh no," said the proprietor. "This is just his practice hammer. His dad gave it to him on his fifth birthday. He used it for beating mountains into molehills. He was quite attached to it. Sentimental reasons."

He tapped the neck of the bottle firmly with the hammer and the glass snapped off around the score mark. The bottleneck fell on to the counter and rolled across to the ruler. A few drops of the smoky brown liquid dribbled out of the bottleneck and landed on the ruler.

The twelve inch ruler shimmered and became a twelve inch subway sandwich.

"Oh!" exclaimed David. "So that's what a genuine condiment does. It makes inedible things edible. That could be useful if you're marooned on a desert island."

The proprietor poked the sandwich dubiously. "I wonder what it tastes like?"

"I would imagine it tastes like a twelve inch ruler," said David. He picked it up, took a tentative bite, chewed and swallowed. "Actually, that's not bad at all. Do you want to try some?"

“No thank you,” said the proprietor. “You finish it off. I want to try an experiment.” He picked up the notebook and flipped through the pages. “I wonder where I put them...” he murmured to himself. “Oh yes – there's the shelf number.” He went over to the other side of the shop and returned with pair of ballet shoes which he put down on the counter. Then he picked up the bottle, tilted it carefully and let one tiny drop of condiment fall on to the shoes. There was another shimmer, and then the shoes turned into a light and crispy meringue with a fruit topping.

“I thought so,” said the proprietor in tones of deep satisfaction. “I stole these shoes from the Golders Green Crematorium in 1931. They were sitting on top of the urn that contained the ashes of the ballet dancer Anna Pavlova. See what it means? The condiment can only turn objects into *appropriate* food...”

“But what if there is no appropriate food associated with an object?” asked David. “What happens if you drip condiment on to your notebook? I can't think of any food that is associated with a notebook.”

“Well, let's find out,” said the proprietor. He dripped some condiment on to the notebook, which shimmered and then turned into a hamburger in a cardboard box. “Ah!”, he said. “It's turned the notebook into the lowest common denominator of food. Let's have a taste.” He took a nibble and pulled a face. “Yuck! It tastes like cardboard.”

“So even the power of a condiment can't make a hamburger tasty or nutritious,” said David. “That's useful to know.”

“Well, I suppose there have to be some limits on what a condiment can do,” said the proprietor. “It isn't magic, you know.”

“Isn't it?,” said David. “It's starting to seem like that to me.” He looked at his watch. “Anyway, this is all very interesting, but I've really got to go. I've got a bus to catch and it's almost due.”

“OK,” said the proprietor. “Thanks for your help with the condiment. It was really useful. If you find yourself back in the area again, perhaps you could pop in and help me with something else that's been puzzling me a lot. I've got a very old book here, quite tattered and torn. It has a broken spine and there's a faded picture of a dragon on the cover. All the pages in the book are blank. Except on the second and fourth Fridays of every month...”

“That does sound like rather an interesting object,” said David, intrigued. “I'll think about it. See you soon.” As he left the shop he saw the proprietor dripping condiment onto the old pair of boots. He closed the shop door on the delicious smell of Beef Wellington and hurried across the road to catch his bus. It was scarcely raining at all now. Perhaps that was a good omen.

A Portrait of Edna

Mrs Siddall, Edna to her friends, lives in a terraced house in a small Yorkshire village. She knows her place and she is happy in it. Every day she gets up, dresses herself in a wrap-around pinafore, which she refers to as a pinny, and ties a scarf around the curlers in her hair. The curlers only ever come out on Saturday, just before Edna goes to the Bingo.

Once she is dressed to her satisfaction, Edna goes to the kitchen to make breakfast for her husband William. Then she packs his lunch and sends him off to work at the pit. Edna, a house proud lady as well as a creature of habit, always admonishes him, "Now think on our Billy, don't come 'ome tonight in tha muck!". William nods agreement and makes a mental note to wash himself all over before coming home at the end of his shift.

Once he is gone, Edna sets about the daily chores. On Monday she washes the clothes, swirling them round in a dolly tub and then ringing out the excess water by feeding them through a hand-cranked mangle. All this exercise has given her the thighs and biceps of a stevedore. If she set her mind to it, she could plough a field as well as any shire horse.

Edna's mangle has two uses – not only does she dry the washing with it, she also, in the appropriate season, feeds sticks of rhubarb from William's allotment through it, collecting the juice in a vast bucket. Over the weeks to come she will carefully ferment this into a scarily potent wine...

When the washing is as dry as the mangle can get it, Edna takes the clothes outside to peg them out on the line. She always enjoys doing this because she can gossip over

the fence with her neighbour Cynthia, who is pegging out her own washing. "Well!" Edna always says when Cynthia relays a particularly juicy bit of scandal, "Well! I'll go to the foot of our stairs!"

While they chat, both women keep an anxious eye on the sky, watching for any sign of rain. If they think that rain might come, they cut short their gossip, take the clothes inside and drape them over a clothes horse by the fire to finish drying. In Yorkshire, every raindrop coagulates around a grain of soot. As it falls from the sky it leaves black stripes on the washing so that everything has to be washed again. Not only does this make more work, if the rain comes too late in the day Edna will have to do the washing tomorrow, and she does not approve of doing that. Edna feels that people who wash clothes on Tuesday are strangely eccentric, and she regards them with deep suspicion. Everybody knows that Tuesdays are for getting down on your hands and knees and scrubbing the front step.

On Wednesday Edna goes shopping. She buys vegetables and fruit from the greengrocer and she buys meat from Mr Morton, the butcher. "ello love," says Mr Morton, "what can I do you for today?"

"I'll 'ave a pound of sausages and two lamb chops, Mr Morton," says Edna. "And 'alf a pound of beef dripping." Edna and Mr Morton were in the same class together at school, but Edna always calls him Mr Morton, and he always calls her love, or sometimes lass. Edna feels it is important to observe the proprieties.

On Thursday Edna gets out her mop and bucket and washes all the floors. Then she dusts in all the rooms. She is always careful to lift every ornament and dust beneath it. She has a lot of ornaments. Many of them are cheap souvenirs from holidays in Bridlington, but she has some nice pieces that she inherited from her parents and grandparents. She is particularly fond of a rather ugly toby jug which has a lascivious wink. She always dusts it very

carefully. Sometimes she talks to it. "Ey up, Toby, lad," she says. "'Ow's tha doin'?" But Toby never replies.

Friday is a special day. That is when William gets paid. He comes home from his shift and he gives Edna his pay packet. Edna counts the money carefully and then gives William his allowance. Probably he'll spend it all in the pub tonight, but Edna doesn't mind. She knows that he needs time with his friends, and she has Bingo to look forward to tomorrow night.

William goes upstairs to get changed for the pub. "Shall I wear my new trousers, mother?" he asks.

Edna is shocked. "Nay, lad," she says firmly. "Nay. Them trousers is for best. Tha cannot wear them."

These are the weeks of Edna's life. They come and they go, and she greatly enjoys their predictability.

But although she does not know it yet, change will eventually come to Edna. William will die young, his lungs congested from too many years of breathing coal dust in the pit. Eventually Edna will overcome this great sorrow. After a suitable period of mourning, she will find that she is being courted by Mr Binns who owns a quarry and who is a rich man. She will marry him and move to the big house. Mr Binns will employ a cleaning woman who comes every Friday, and Edna, unable to prevent herself, will spend the whole of Thursday washing the floors and dusting the ornaments, making the house spick and span, ready for the cleaning lady tomorrow. This will make Edna very happy.

Thumbnails of Edna

1.

Everyone at the office dreaded having to work overtime because if they stayed too late they might meet Edna the cleaning lady. One and all, they were terrified of her. She always wore a headscarf wrapped around formidable curlers that could have put a permanent wave in the girders of the Eiffel Tower. Her body was encased in a pinafore embroidered with flowers that all appeared to have suffered an overdose of Round-Up. Years of brandishing industrial strength vacuum cleaners had given her the thighs and biceps of a stevedore. Phyllis in Accounts Receivable reckoned that, in an emergency, Edna could kickstart a jumbo jet.

Once, at the office Christmas party, somebody had accidentally smeared some pink icing on the boardroom table. "Edna will make you lick that up tomorrow," predicted Phyllis with gloomy glee, "and it will have set as hard as a rock."

Tonight everyone was head down at their desk struggling to balance the books for the month end report which was due first thing tomorrow. Suddenly the door slammed open and crashed against the wall. There stood Edna, pulling a vivid yellow pair of rubber gloves over her hands. She snapped the rubber and wriggled her fingers suggestively.

"Eh, up me ducks!" said Edna, surveying them all with a glacial, Medusa-like glare. "Who wants to be done first?"

2.

Everyone at the office quite enjoyed having to work overtime because if they stayed late enough they might meet Edna the cleaning lady. One and all, they adored her. Sometimes they brought her cakes. She always wore a headscarf wrapped around formidable curlers which she claimed gave her lucky hair when she took them out to go to bingo.

Her body was encased in a pinafore embroidered with flowers that all appeared to be growing happily in the best quality compost. Years of brandishing industrial strength vacuum cleaners had given her the thighs and biceps of a stevedore. Phyllis in Accounts Receivable reckoned that she had once seen Edna lift an entire desk with one hand while she vacuumed underneath it with the other. Everybody was very impressed.

Once, at the office Christmas party, someone had written "Merry Christmas, Edna. We Love You" in pink icing on the boardroom table. Of course Edna had to clean it the next day, when the icing had set rock hard. But she didn't seem to mind. Phyllis said that Edna had a smile on her face as she scrubbed.

Tonight everyone was head down at their desk struggling to balance the books for the month end report which was due first thing tomorrow. Suddenly the door slammed open and crashed against the wall. There stood Edna, pulling a vivid yellow pair of rubber gloves over her hands. She snapped the rubber and wriggled her fingers suggestively.

"Eh, up me ducks!" said Edna, surveying them all with a lascivious smile. "Who wants to be done first?"

Edna Saves the Day

Everyone hated producing the month end reports. Somehow, each and every month, the accounts always refused to balance and so everybody in the department had to stay late at the office trying to find out exactly where the missing money was hiding.

The problem seemed to be with accounts receivable this month. It was almost 7.00pm, but every desk in the department was still occupied and the gloom that pervaded the office was almost palpable. Phyllis stared despairingly at her computer, and reached out with her finger to poke the screen. The figures she was staring at rearranged themselves both vertically and horizontally, but they made no more sense than they had before. Phyllis sighed. She could tell it was going to be a long night...

Then, just as she was wondering what to do next, the office door opened and in came Edna, the cleaner. Immediately Phyllis could feel the mood of the room lifting. Everybody liked Edna. Sometimes they brought her cakes for her evening tea. Tonight, Edna had a headscarf folded over her formidable curlers, and her whole body was encased in a wrap-around pinafore. The pinny was embroidered with brightly coloured flowers that all appeared to be growing happily in the best quality compost. She positively exuded cheerfulness.

Edna stood in the doorway and pulled a vivid yellow pair of rubber gloves over her hands. She snapped the rubber and flexed her fingers suggestively. "Eh, up me ducks!" she said, surveying them all with a lascivious smile. "Who wants to be done first?"

"Do me!" said Phyllis. "I really need an excuse to get away from this horrible computer. I *hate* computers."

“Oh, Phyllis,” said Edna sympathetically, “surely it can't be as bad as all that. What's the problem? Tell your Auntie Edna all about it.”

“It's these accounts,” explained Phyllis. “There's forty two dollars and fifteen cents missing, and I can't find it anywhere!” She poked the screen again, and the figures shivered themselves into a different order. “See!”, said Phyllis. “It just doesn't add up!”

Edna scrutinised the figures that the computer was displaying, then she snapped off one of her rubber gloves, reached over Phyllis's shoulder, and gently stroked her finger across the screen. A single column of figures rearranged itself and Phyllis gave a little squeak of joy.

“Gosh! It was hiding there in plain view all along,” she said. “How did you do that, Edna?”

“It was easy,” said Edna airily. “I did what I always do with my husband Billy when he gets a bit stubborn. Computers are really just the same as men, when you get right down to it.”

“What?” said Phyllis. “You mean they're both smelly and a bit sticky?”

“No, I didn't quite mean that,” said Edna, laughing. “I meant that both men and computers have to be treated in exactly the same way. Stroke them properly in just the right place, and you can get them to do absolutely anything that you want them to do.”

Phyllis burst out laughing.

“Oh, Edna,” she said, “you never said a truer word.”

The Riches of Harry

When Harry Arkwright came into money, it was the talk of the village. We first noticed that Harry's circumstances had changed when he bought a round of drinks in the pub. None of us could remember him ever offering to buy a round before. The buzz of conversation died away. The man who was playing darts was so shocked that he missed the board entirely and impaled a double five domino on the table by the scoreboard. One of the domino players pulled the dart out and handed it back. "That doesn't count towards your score," he said calmly.

Trevor Bishop was the first of our crowd to recover the use of his voice. "Mine's a pint," he said. He put down the newspaper he had been reading and quickly sank the dregs of his current drink.

I wasn't far behind him. "I'll have a pint as well, Harry," I said. "Has somebody died and left you a fortune?"

"That's right. That's right," said Harry, shuffling his feet as he gathered up the glasses. "Somebody died."

"I didn't know you had any rich relatives, Harry," Trevor said to Harry's retreating back. Harry didn't say a word.

A few minutes later, he was back with a tray full of brimming pints of best bitter. "Here you are," he said, handing them out. "I got some pork scratchings as well. Help yourselves."

"Thanks," said Trevor vaguely. He was buried in his newspaper again.

"Cheers, Harry" I said, clinking glasses with him. "Tell me about your inheritance."

Harry cleared his throat and stared unblinkingly at me. "Oh yes, that," he muttered and then he took a long swallow

of beer. I began to wonder if he was deliberately avoiding the subject.

“Hey, look at this,” said Trevor. He folded his newspaper so we could easily see the story that had caught his interest. The headline said:

PREVIOUSLY UNKNOWN MAGRITTE PAINTING SELLS FOR RECORD PRICE.

The story went on to explain that a painting someone had bought in a junkshop for next to nothing had been identified as being by René Magritte and it had sold at auction for untold millions. The person who discovered it had made a profit of more than ten million percent! What a stupendous return on investment that was.

“Hey, Harry,” said Trevor. “You haven't been buying any paintings in junkshops lately have you?”

Harry put his pint down in front of him and seemed to cower behind it. “Oh, that,” he said, pointing so wildly at the newspaper that I had to move my beer out of his way in case he knocked it over. “Yes, yes, that's right. A painting. Yes, yes.”

I was starting to wonder about the different stories that Harry was telling us and so I decided to put him to the test. “What made you realise the painting was by Magritte?” I asked him. “Was it the way the paint looked like it had been thrown on the canvas from a great height by a drunken chimpanzee?”

“That's what it looked like,” said Harry. “That's exactly what it looked like. Chimpanzees. Two of them at least. Yes, it looked just like that.”

“No it didn't, Harry,” I said. “Magritte's paintings were all photographically realistic. They just had a very odd juxtaposition of elements. My favourite is the picture of a

formal dining room with a steam locomotive roaring out of the fireplace.”

Harry's face drooped as he realised that he'd fallen into a trap. He quickly finished his beer. “I'll be going now,” he said and he walked over to the door.

“Come on, Harry,” said Trevor. “You can tell us. You've won the lottery haven't you?”

Harry turned and looked at us for a moment then he tapped the side of his nose with his forefinger and winked.

“What are you going to do about all the begging letters, Harry?” I asked.

“I'll keep sending them,” he said. “Sometimes they really do work!” He opened the door and walked out into the night.

A Day In the Park

The flying saucer from Mars landed in the park one autumn midnight when there was nobody around to observe it. Once it was safely on the ground, the saucer disguised itself as a tree so that it could properly blend in with its surroundings. The saucer thought about things for a while, and then, in the interests of verisimilitude, it dropped some brown, crinkly leaves from its branches onto the ground. When it was happy that it was properly camouflaged, it lowered a gangway and a procession of ducklings marched down it into the park.

“Cheep, cheep,” said the saucer, which is Martian for “Take care, enjoy your day and we'll all meet back here in twenty four hours.”

“Cheep, cheep,” said the ducklings, which is Martian for “Yes, boss.”

The gangway raised itself back into the saucer, leaving the ducklings alone. They made their way through the darkness towards the pond in the centre of the park. The banks around the pond were clustered with sleeping ducks all of whom had their heads tucked firmly under their wings. The ducklings snuggled up and made themselves comfortable while they waited for daylight.

As the dawn broke, the ducks began to wake up. They seemed a little surprised at all the ducklings they had acquired overnight, but being ducks they didn't let that bother them much. It wasn't long before the ducks and ducklings were happily foraging for breakfast together all around the pond.

“Cheep, cheep,” said the ducklings, which is Martian for “Goodness me, look at all the nasty wet green stuff that's all over the place here. It's not like home at all.”

Suddenly the fountain in the centre of the pond got turned on and it began to spray water all over the place.

“Cheep, cheep,” said the ducklings, which is Martian for “Oh, yuck! I'm all *wet!!*”

As the day progressed, the ducklings saw monsters come into the park. The monsters walked upright on two legs and chitter-chattered incomprehensibly to each other. Some of the monsters were all alone, but nevertheless they still chitter-chattered to the shiny objects that they held in the limbs they weren't walking on. The ducklings were interested to see that all the monsters were wrapped up in cloth. How peculiar!

One monster saw the ducklings and came racing over to them, making goo goo noises. The ducklings scattered hither and yon, but the monster pursued them. Eventually the monster cornered one of the ducklings and picked it up. “Cheep, cheep,” said the duckling, which is Martian for “Put me down you horrible, scary thing.”

“Aaaahhh,” said the monster as it stroked the duckling's head, “diddums, widdums, cootchety coo.”

“Cheep, cheep,” said the duckling, which is Martian for “Beware! I have a black belt in origami.”

“Oh, yuck!” shrieked the monster, dropping the duckling and wiping its dripping wet, and suddenly very smelly, hand on the grass.

“Cheep, cheep,” said the duckling, which is Martian for “Ha, ha. Serves you right.”

The ducklings looked around the park and they noticed some rectangular areas that had ropes around them. The ducklings all marched in procession towards the roped off areas. Along the way they stumbled over hundreds of brown, shiny things lying under the trees. “Cheep, cheep,” said the ducklings, which is Martian for “Hey! Anybody fancy a game of conkers?”

The roped off areas all consisted of bare brown earth, liberally scattered with stones. “Cheep, cheep,” said the

ducklings, which is Martian for “Oh, look! This bit's just like home. Let's stay here until it's time to leave.”

But they couldn't do that. The park was far too full of interesting things which had to be explored. There were stone benches which some of the monsters sat on while they chitter-chattered. There were areas full of swinging and spinning gadgets on which smaller versions of the monsters swung and spun, shrieking loudly all the time. “Cheep, cheep,” said the ducklings, which is Martian for “Nobody wins. It's all swings and roundabouts, really.”

The ducklings wandered around admiring the flowers and the concrete lions. They tested the texture of the bark that fell from the eucalyptus trees. They inhaled the sweet scent of slowly rotting vegetation and they listened hard to the sound of the wind as it rustled through the branches, tearing off orange and brown leaves that fluttered to the ground in its wake.

As the day grew darker, all the monsters left the park. The fountain in the lake was turned off and a black silence fell over the whole area. The ducklings headed back to the flying saucer, which had now stopped looking like a tree and was back to its proper shape. It dropped its gangway and the ducklings trooped up it.

“Cheep, cheep,” said the saucer, which is Martian for “Did you all have a good time? Have you got enough material for your writing homework?”

“Cheep, cheep,” said the ducklings, which is Martian for “Yes, boss. Let's go home now.”

The Park at Dawn

After the argument with Roger had tailed off into dark, despairing silences, Sheila left the flat and went over to the park to try and calm herself down a bit. She always found the its tranquillity to be soothing. It had been her bolt hole of choice ever since she was a little girl.

An early morning mist covered the park, but there was a mild breeze blowing. The mist won't last long, Sheila told herself. Anything the wind leaves behind, the sun will soon burn off. She found that to be a cheerful thought, and her spirits lifted a little as she sauntered over the dew-damp grass.

The trees and statues were blurred outlines, hazy daytime ghosts watching over her as she made her way towards her favourite bench where she liked to sit and watch the ducks as they swam in the lake, elegantly proud and graceful until someone turned up with a slice of stale bread, whereupon all vestiges of dignity would vanish in a mad, squawking, splashing squabble. Nobody can stay miserable for long when there are greedy ducks to laugh at.

As she walked, horse chestnuts rolled underneath her feet, threatening to trip her up with their unpredictable slips and slides. It's an obstacle course, she thought. Just like Roger's grumpiness. She shuffled her feet through the dry orange leaves that the autumnal trees were shedding, making crisp rustling sounds that kept her company and frightened the bogey-men away. Sometimes a leaf fell from a tree and landed on her head as she walked by. That always made her giggle.

A concrete plinth guarded by lions loomed out of the mist. "I had an argument with Roger," she told the lions, but the lions didn't care and they said nothing. They had more

important concerns. They had unicorns to fight and crowns to win. "Well, that puts the whole thing into perspective," Sheila muttered to herself.

She walked past the children's playground. It was still too early in the morning for any children to be out, and the swings creaked forlornly back and forth as the breeze caught them. The witches-hat roundabout pitched and tossed like a small boat in a rough sea. Sheila wondered about hitching a ride on it, but she decided not to. Empty playgrounds are sad places. They only come alive with the laughter of children. She hurried past the playground, eager to leave it behind.

The mist was lifting now, evaporating in the sunshine. The fountain in the centre of the lake bubbled cheerful streams of water high into the sky. The water fell back into the lake in graceful curves that refracted the early morning sun into splashing rainbows. The ducks were waking up, stretching their necks and flapping their wings as they gossiped about scandals past, present and future. Sheila sat on her favourite bench and smiled as she watched them. She felt a lot calmer now. Her happier mood threw a whole new light on her quarrel with Roger. Should she go back and patch things up with him over breakfast? Perhaps she should, but not just yet. She had ducks to watch.

Spies In the Park

Oleg left the Russian Embassy and walked to his favourite coffee shop on the waterfront. Every morning at 10.15 Oleg, who was a creature of habit, drank a flat white there and read the morning newspaper. The spy he controlled, a man who worked for the GCSB, was sitting at one of the corner tables chatting to some friends. Neither he nor Oleg acknowledged each other in any way, but when the spy left, Oleg saw that the rings his coffee cup had made on the table were arranged in two side by side figure eights. That meant the spy had left a new collection of information for Oleg at the dead drop in the park.

Oleg decided that he would go and pick up the information package at lunchtime. He quite liked going to the park - New Zealand parks were nothing like their Russian counterparts. Russian parks were wilder and much less well cared for. Somehow, they did not soothe his Slavic soul in the way that New Zealand parks did.

And so, that lunchtime, Oleg pulled on a black leather jacket over his black tee-shirt, perched a black trilby hat on his head and, with his hands thrust deeply into the pockets of his black jeans, he strolled off to the park.

“Why do you always dress in black?” one of his colleagues had asked him once. “Are you in perpetual mourning?”

“No,” Oleg had replied. “It just means that clothes shopping takes almost no time at all, and I never have to make elaborate sartorial decisions when I get up in the morning. I'm always very indecisive when I've just got out of bed. Besides, black makes a nice, natural contrast to my grey shaggy beard. Remember, I grew up in an era of black and white movies and black and white television. I've

always felt that there's something very unnatural about colour..."

The park was warm and welcoming. The fountain splashed and chattered and Oleg enjoyed the orange crunch of the autumn leaves as he walked over them. He looked around carefully, checking for possible SIS agents. Once he had the package from the dead drop in his possession, he would be very vulnerable. If the SIS caught him in that situation, he wouldn't have a leg to stand on. Of course as an embassy official, he had diplomatic immunity. He wouldn't end up in a New Zealand prison, but he would be declared *persona non grata*. And that would result in him being deported back to Russia, with his career at an ignominious end. So he needed to be very sure that he wasn't under surveillance.

There was a woman chasing after a duckling, intent on picking it up and stroking it. She was making cootchy-coo noises as she ran. The duckling wasn't in the least bit soothed by the sounds and it swerved and jinked violently to avoid her. The woman kept reaching out for it, but she missed every time. Over by the stone lions that crouched around the monument a man was sitting on a bench and eating a sandwich. He had a newspaper folded on his lap and every so often he scribbled something in it. Probably doing the crossword, thought Oleg. The lions looked disdainful. Clearly they were solving the clues much faster than the man was.

Oleg headed off towards the hollow tree that he used as the dead drop. He reached in and felt around inside the trunk. His fingers found a small, waterproof plastic box. There we are, he thought to himself. The papers will be nice and safe in that. He took the box out of the tree, ready to put it straight into his pocket and walk out of the park.

And that's when everything started to go horribly wrong. There was a huge weta perched on the plastic box. Oleg hated wetas, those curious New Zealand insects that

appeared to be a cross between a cockroach and Tyrannosaurus Rex. This one was about four inches long. It was shiny and brown and plump. It waved its front legs menacingly at Oleg. He was almost sure he could hear it hissing angrily at him. Oleg shrieked and shook the box violently in a vain attempt to dislodge the beast, but it just held on to the box more tightly. It wasn't going to give up its treasure without a fight and Oleg knew that in any fight with a weta he was seriously outnumbered.

Then, just when he thought the day couldn't get any worse, it did.

"Now we've got you bang to rights, sunshine," said a voice.

Oleg looked up. The woman who had been chasing the duckling was standing right beside him, looking stern. Over by the monument, the crossword puzzle man had left his puzzle on the bench for the lions to finish, and he was now walking briskly towards the confrontation. The lady showed Oleg her SIS warrant card. "I think you'd better come with me," she said.

"I have diplomatic immunity," said Oleg, just as the man arrived.

"Much good may it do you," said the man coldly. "Diplomatic immunity means I can't physically search you. But I don't have to. The box you took from the tree is there in your hand as plain as day. You're nicked."

The lady reached out and took the box and its possessive weta from Oleg. For a moment the duckling-chasing persona peeked through her stern facade as she beamed fondly at the weta. "You're a big, handsome boy, aren't you?" she said sweetly, and she stroked its shiny brown head with her finger. The weta arched its back like a cat and looked smug.

Pride and Parking

It is a truth, universally acknowledged, that a car entering a multi-storey car park must be in want of a parking place.

Muriel drove the car up yet another ramp. "How many is that now?" she asked her husband Bill.

"I don't know," he said gloomily. "I lost count ages ago. This place just seems to go on and on forever."

"If we go any higher I'm sure we're going to need oxygen masks," said Muriel.

Suddenly Bill spotted an empty space. "Quick," he said, "over there on the right."

Muriel carefully manoeuvred the car into the narrow gap and turned the engine off. "Thank goodness for that," she said. "I thought we were never going to find anywhere to park. You go and get a ticket from the machine while I get the shopping bags out of the boot."

"OK," said Bill. He wandered over to the ticket machine and pressed buttons. The machine disgorged a ticket which Bill stowed carefully in his wallet. He'd need to show the machine his ticket again when he wanted to go home. The machine would compare the current time with the time of arrival printed on the ticket and tell him how long his car had been parked. Then it would demand an exorbitant fee before it would allow him to leave.

When he got back to the car, Muriel had the shopping bags ready. Bill looked over the edge of the building. "Hey," he said, "I can see clouds down below us. Watch out for low flying aircraft!"

"Oh stop messing about," said Muriel. "Come on, let's get out of here and go and do the shopping."

They took the lift to the ground floor. As it slowly descended, Muriel said, "Why do car park lifts always smell of wee?"

"No idea," said Bill, zipping himself up.

They waved cheerfully to the attendant in his cubicle as they left the building. He glowered suspiciously at them and then returned his attention to the magazine he was reading. The donkey on the front cover didn't look like it was enjoying itself, and neither did the two bikini-clad nuns, but the dwarf seemed to be having a wonderful time. "Doesn't the attendant glower well?" said Muriel. "I bet that's the part of the job he enjoys best of all."

Bill and Muriel spent about an hour and a half doing the shopping and then, with arms full of heavy bags, they summoned the lift to take them back to the car. Muriel surveyed the array of buttons on the control panel of the lift. "Do you remember which floor we were on?" she asked.

"No," said Bill, "I don't. All I know is that we were very high up."

"I don't think we were on the very top floor," said Muriel thoughtfully, "we'd have noticed if we were. So we'd better start with the floor next to the top and work our way down floor by floor until we find the car."

"That sounds logical," said Bill. So that's what they did.

The floor next to the top appeared to have every car in the city parked on it, and so did the floor below that. It was a depressing sight. Bill and Muriel wandered up and down every row looking for their own car. They quickly became very adept at identifying cars that didn't belong to them, but they utterly failed to find a car that did. The shopping bags got heavier and heavier as they walked along. After about an hour and a half of searching Bill said, "At this rate we'll die of hunger and thirst before we find our car. We've only done two floors and we've still got umpteen more to go."

“Nonsense,” said Muriel briskly. “We've got shopping bags full of food and drink. We'll be fine.”

Bill brightened. “That's a good idea,” he said. “Let's stop for a snack. That way the shopping bags will get a bit lighter and maybe my dislocated shoulders will pop back into place.”

“We don't have time for a picnic,” snapped Muriel. “Let's go and see if the attendant can help us. Perhaps he's got CCTV footage of us parking.”

They went back to the lift. As it descended, Muriel said, “You've got shopping bags in both hands. How did you manage to unzip yourself?” Bill just smiled.

The attendant was reading a paperback novel now. There was a picture of an ornate bathtub on the cover. A well built blonde lady was sitting in the bath surrounded by steam and soap suds. The attendant put the book down as Bill and Muriel approached him, but not before Bill caught a glimpse of the title. *Lady Chatterley's Loofah*.

“We can't remember which floor we parked our car on,” explained Muriel. “Can you help us?”

The attendant looked at them dumbfounded. “You can't be serious,” he said incredulously.

“Yes we are,” said Bill. “We're very serious.”

The attendant began to laugh. “Show me your parking ticket,” he said, his shoulders heaving with mirth.

Bill put down his shopping bags and took the ticket out of his wallet. He passed it to the attendant who held it up and pointed to the top right hand corner where the words *Floor 18* were printed in large, friendly letters.

“Oh,” said Bill. “Bugger.”

Cards on the Table

“So,” said Professor Hanson. “This time I think you ought to kill somebody.”

Peter, his research assistant, looked a bit taken aback. “Are we ready for that yet?” he asked. “The software is still full of bugs and it doesn't cope well with anything very extreme.”

“That's why a killing will be a good test,” said the Professor. “The only way we'll ever get the bugs out of the system is to keep pushing at the edge cases.”

“OK,” said Peter, but he didn't sound convinced. “What's the scenario?”

“It's a bit of a cliché,” admitted the Professor. “You'll be in a saloon in the wild west, playing poker with a bunch of cowboys. One of them keeps winning and eventually you accuse him of cheating. You both go for your guns, and you kill him.”

Peter pulled a face. “All right,” he said. “Let's get it over with.”

The virtual reality helmet looked like a World War II gas mask with a lot of complicated electronics attached to it. Peter put it on. The laboratory faded away and he found himself surrounded by the sights, sounds and smells of a Hollywood B-movie wild west saloon. Clouds of tobacco smoke drifted lazily, punctuating the buzz of conversations. The stink of stale whiskey mingled with the unpleasant fragrance of stale cowboys. Somewhere a honky-tonk piano was playing.

Peter was sitting at a table with a fan of playing cards in his hand. Across from him sat a cowboy with seven day stubble and a seven day stench. The cowboy was wearing a battered stetson hat and he had a red bandanna knotted

around his throat. A large pistol lay in front of him on the table. Peter could feel the comfortable weight of his own pistol sitting snugly in the holster on his hip.

The scenario played itself out much as the professor had described it. The poker game reached a climax as the cowboy made his final bet. It was time to place their cards on the table. Peter spread his cards out. Four kings, an almost unbeatable hand. The cowboy smiled an evil smile and laid down five aces. "Well," said Peter, "what an unusual hand."

"Are you accusing me of cheating?" growled the cowboy, reaching for his gun.

The moment of truth. Peter prepared himself for the gunfight and the killing. But the sight of five aces made him realise that the scenario was no longer a very convincing one. Clearly he had stumbled across yet another bug in the software. A sudden perverse impulse made him decide to push the scenario right off the rails.

"Not at all," said Peter. "I was just congratulating you on your luck in getting such a marvellous hand. Five aces! That's just amazing. Let me buy you a drink to celebrate."

The cowboy looked puzzled and his hand fell away from the gun. He opened his mouth to say something, but the words never came. The saloon vanished into a dark oblivion as the software completely failed to come to grips with this unexpected twist in the dénouement.

Peter took the virtual reality helmet off, and he was back in the laboratory.

"What happened?" asked Professor Hanson.

"The software just went crazy," said Peter. "Five aces! That's ridiculous. Then I remembered your advice about tracking down bugs by pushing at the edge cases, so I decided to see how the scenario would cope with something even more outrageous than a messed up pack of cards. In a sense, I suppose you could say that I cheated..."

The Emergency Bone

It wasn't a dark and stormy night. Therefore the dawn was very bright and clear, though it was more than a little chilly. Jake the Dog was out in the garden chewing on his emergency bone, the one he uses to make time go faster so that the things he's looking forward to will happen much sooner. He looked up at me with his limpid, brown eyes and he said, "Is it time for my morning walk yet?"

"Yes it is, Jake," I said. "Let's get going."

He dropped his emergency bone on the lawn. It's job was done. He came bounding into the house. I dressed up warmly – thick denim jeans, a leather jacket, my new hoodie, a scarf and a pair of woolly gloves. I put Jake's lead around his neck, and off we went, out into the cold light of day. The grass was white with frost and it crunched under our feet as we strode along. "Oh dear," said Jake as we turned the corner, "that doesn't look good."

The house at the end of the road had its lawn sprinklers going. They are very badly adjusted and they squirt high pressure jets of water all over the pavement rather than over the lawn. While they are squirting, the footpath is soaking wet and quite unusable, unless you fancy a free shower. When they stop squirting, the winter weather quickly turns the damp pavement into a deadly sheet of ice which is best avoided by those of a slippery disposition.

"That is a problem," I agreed. "There isn't a footpath on the other side so we'll have to walk in the road. That isn't very safe. Shall we go back home and wait until the sprinklers are turned off?"

"No," decided Jake. "I think I'd rather take my chances with the road."

We crossed over and walked along the edge of the road, past the gardens of the houses that lined that side of the street. Jake sniffed constantly at all the the smells, concentrating on each one for minutes at a time.

“Why are you taking so long over all those smells?” I asked him. “It's slowing our walk down and I'm getting colder and colder. Let's keep moving or else my lubrication will freeze solid in my veins and I'll seize up completely.”

“I'm so lucky those sprinklers were turned on” said Jake. “I wouldn't have missed this for the world. Somebody's got an advance copy of the next *Game of Thrones* novel and they're sharing it all along here, chapter by chapter as their bladder allows. I've got to read every word. It's very exciting...”

“Oh come on,” I said, tugging hard at his lead. “Let's at least try and get to the end of the road.”

“Hang on,” said Jake. “I've just got to a good bit.” He inhaled deeply. “Well,” he said, “I never expected that would happen!”

After a lot of stopping and starting and much quiet contemplation, we finally got to the end of the road. We turned right and walked towards the park. Suddenly Jake came to a complete halt. “I'm not going that way,” he said firmly.

Usually Jake is more than happy to go wherever I point him. There are always smells to investigate and sometimes there are sticks. Once there had even been a dead sheep. But despite all these attractive possibilities, this time Jake absolutely refused to move. Thirty six kilograms of dog is an immovable object and I am very far from being an irresistible force. So the laws of physics meant that we were stuck. “What's the problem?” I asked him, puzzled.

“There's a tyre in the path,” said Jake. “I think it might have come off the back wheel of a Nissan Nasty. Look at it lying there, all horrible, round and black. I don't like it. I don't want to go anywhere near it.”

“Don't worry Jake,” I said. “I'll protect you.” I was starting to wonder if we were ever going to get back home. Everything seemed to be conspiring to make this walk last forever. But finally, after much persuasion and a dried liver dog treat, Jake reluctantly agreed to carry on. He sidled cautiously up to the tyre and sniffed it. The tyre just lay there passively. It didn't seem to care that it was being sniffed.

“Huh!” Jake grunted, unimpressed. “It's a copy of *Pride and Prejudice*. I read that ages ago when I was just a puppy and I've re-read it several times since. I can't imagine why I was so worried about the stupid tyre. I think I'll overwrite it with *Game of Thrones*.” He lifted his leg and did just that. “OK,” he said cheerfully, “give me another bit of dried liver and let's walk on.”

We left the tyre behind and carried on walking. Apart from a brief stop to peruse a *Harry Potter* spin-off we made it back home without further incident. Perhaps I'd been wrong about the conspiracy.

Jake ambled out into the garden and went straight back to his emergency bone. “Is it time for my lunchtime walk yet?” he asked.

And, of course, it was.

Good News

It was the first day of the new school term. Everyone slouched glumly into the classroom and sat down at their desks. Jeremy felt extremely gloomy. He'd spent the summer holidays riding his horse in several village gymkhanas, and he was finding the classroom particularly claustrophobic after all those weeks of galloping freedom.

He took his swiss army knife out of his pocket and, with the gadget that was supposed to be used to take stones out of horses hooves, he scratched the silhouette of a horse on the lid of his desk.

The door swung open and Mr Atkinson, the English teacher, came into the classroom carrying an armful of books and a laptop computer. Jeremy hastily closed up his knife and put it back into his pocket. He tried to look attentive. Mr Atkinson plonked the books down on Jeremy's desk.

"Take one of these and pass the rest on," he said. "OK, everybody, this term we're going to be studying the poems of Robert Browning."

Along with everyone else in the class, Jeremy groaned a protest.

Mr Atkinson looked surprised. "What's the problem?" he asked.

"Browning is boring sir," said Jeremy. "He's so nineteenth century."

"Nice alliteration," said Mr Atkinson. "But I'm puzzled by your use of the word 'boring'. Browning wrote a really gruesome poem about a sexually motivated murder, and he used one of the rudest words in the dictionary in another one of his poems. What's boring about any of that? Trust me, we're going to delve into some very sick and dark

places before the term is over. I'm sure you'll thoroughly enjoy it. But we're going to start the study with the poem *How They Brought The Good News From Ghent To Aix*. It's all about some horsemen galloping through the night to deliver the news and the whole rhythm of the poem matches the rhythm of a galloping horse. It's really quite clever."

Jeremy felt a faint stirring of interest. If the poem involved horses, it couldn't be all that bad. And the murder sounded interesting as well. Perhaps the term wouldn't be a complete waste of time after all. He stuck his hand in the air. "Yes, Jeremy?" asked Mr Atkinson.

"Can't we start with the murder instead, sir?" asked Jeremy. "I always like a nice murder."

"We'll do that one next," promised Mr Atkinson. "I want to do the *Good News* poem first because there's actually a recording of Browning reciting it. I thought it might be a good idea to listen to the man himself before we start to examine his work."

"I didn't know they had recording studios back then," said Jeremy.

"They didn't," explained Mr Atkinson. "Browning was at a dinner party and his host had just bought himself an Edison Talking Machine, a newly invented device for recording sounds on wax cylinders. It must have cost the man an absolute fortune... Anyway, he persuaded Browning to recite his poem into the machine. It's one of the very first recordings ever made. Listen."

Mr Atkinson opened up his laptop computer and pressed a button. There was a hiss and a crackle and, very faintly through the noise, Jeremy could hear a surprisingly thin and reedy voice reciting the poem. The galloping rhythm was easy to follow and Jeremy was just relaxing into it when suddenly Browning faltered and stopped reciting. There was a long pause and then Browning said, "I am most terribly sorry that I can't remember my own verses."

The whole class burst into delighted laughter. Mr Atkinson grinned. "I thought you'd enjoy starting the term with that bit," he said.

"Sir," said Jeremy, "if the person who wrote them can't remember the verses, will it be all right if we can't remember them when it comes to the exam?"

"Certainly not," said Mr Atkinson firmly. "Now, you'll find this poem on page forty two. Let's take a look at it. Jeremy, can you read it for us, please?"

Everyone opened their books to the proper page. Jeremy cleared his throat and began to read. The poem's rhythm was quite hypnotic, and he quickly found himself galloping along with Joris and Dirck and the unnamed narrator. It wasn't nearly as good as actually riding of course, but there was no doubt that the poem properly caught the feeling of being on the back of a galloping horse.

Once the galloping was done and the news was delivered, the poem's narrator finally relaxed and poured wine down his horse's throat as a reward for having carried him so far, so fast and so gallantly.

"That's stupid," said Jeremy. "Horses don't like wine. He'd have done a lot better to give his horse a bucket of water and a nosebag of oats. I bet Browning never looked after a horse in his life. No wonder he forgot how the poem went!"

"That's as may be," said Mr Atkinson. "Anyway, the narrator's horse was the only one of the three who managed to carry his rider all the way. First Dirck and then Joris had to drop out as their horses succumbed to fatigue. So how do you think the narrator felt once he reached Aix with the good news after having galloped all night?"

Jeremy cast his mind back over all the gymkhanas he'd ridden in that summer. The answer was blindingly obvious.

"I expect he had a very sore bottom, sir," said Jeremy.

AFTERWORD

The recording of Browning reciting his poem and forgetting the words really exists. There are lots of links to it on the web — Google is your friend. Browning died about eight months after making the recording and it was played at his funeral. It has been described as the first ever instance of a voice being heard from beyond the grave. Spooky! I can't help but think that Browning himself would have thoroughly approved of the sentiment.

The poem about a sexual murder is *Porphyria's Lover* in which the narrator makes love to Porphyria and then strangles her with her own long, blonde hair...

The rude word was used in the poem *Pippa Passes*:

Then owls and bats
Cows and twats
Monks and nuns in a cloister's moods
Adjourn to the oak-stump pantry

Apparently Browning thought the word described an item of clothing worn by nuns. None of his friends ever had the courage to tell him what it really meant so he remained in blissful ignorance throughout his life...

The Locked Door

I stared through the driver side window of my car. There were my keys, dangling from the ignition. All the doors, of course, were locked up as tight as a drum, and the keys were sneering at me and thumbing their noses.

“Ooops!” I said, feeling mildly embarrassed.

“What you need now,” said Robin, “is a coat hanger. I'm a bit out of practice, but once upon a time I was a dab hand with a coat hanger. The stories I could tell...”

“Unfortunately,” I said, “I emptied all the coat hangers out of my pockets this morning before we left the hotel. I think I must have accidentally put a breeding pair in my trousers. They had several litters overnight, and my trousers were starting to look terribly angular. I couldn't walk in a straight line any more. It was getting quite ridiculous.”

“I thought you were clanking a bit yesterday,” said Robin. “So can I take it then that you don't have any coat hangers at all now?”

“Not a single one,” I said. “I hung them all back up in the wardrobe and closed the door to give them some privacy.”

“That's a shame,” said Robin. “Oh well, I suppose there's nothing else for it. You'll have to call the AA. I'm sure they'll be able to help. And they probably won't laugh at you at all, though they may well smirk a lot. They are bound to have access to a coat hanger. I'm sure it's a standard item of AA tool box equipment.”

I got my cell phone out of my pocket and rang the AA. “Hello,” said a charming lady with a thick Indian accent. I explained my predicament to her.

“Oh dear,” she said sympathetically. “Where is the car now?”

“It's in the car park at the Whakarewarewa thermal area,” I said. There was a long, loud silence.

“Where?” asked the Indian lady. “How do you say that word? Say it again.”

“Whakarewarewa,” I said obligingly.

“How do you spell that?” she asked.

I spelled it out to her slowly, letter by letter with long pauses between each one, but she still managed to lose track half way through. “Wokaweweeaa?” she asked hesitantly.

“No,” I said. “Whakarewarewa.” I spelled it out again. It didn't help.

“Wokawoka?” she asked. “Isn't that in Australia?”

“No,” I said. “It's in New Zealand. Near Rotorua. Just contact the AA office in Rotorua and say Whakarewarewa. They'll know where it is.”

“My computer doesn't recognise the name,” she said, “and I can't find it on my map.”

“What can't you find?” I asked. “Whakarewarewa or Rotorua?”

“Neither,” she said. “There's nothing even remotely resembling either of those names anywhere in Australia.”

“I'm not in Australia,” I said. “I'm in New Zealand.”

“Where's New Zealand?” she asked. “How do you spell that?”

Lather, rinse, repeat...

We went round the loop several times and her attempts to spell Whakarewarewa became increasingly esoteric. Both she and her computer continued to insist that there was no such place. Eventually, probably in a desperate attempt to get me off the phone, she promised that an AA officer really would be with me shortly. Given her spelling and geographical problems, I was dubious about that promise, but rather to my surprise, an AA man did actually turn up an hour or so later.

“Where's your coat hanger?” Robin asked him. “I can't see any sign of it.”

The AA man gave Robin a puzzled look, then he turned to me and said, “I'd have been here half an hour ago if you hadn't told the call centre lady that you were in Australia. That caused a lot of confusion. Apparently she reported your problem to our Sydney office and told them you were in Wagga Wagga. It took them ages to figure out what was really going on and where you actually were. Then they cut out the middle man and contacted us directly.”

“I didn't tell her I was in Australia,” I protested. “She made that up herself. I told her exactly where I was, but she couldn't find it on her map. Where on Earth is Wagga Wagga?”

He shrugged. “It's almost exactly half way between Sydney and Melbourne,” he said. “Anyway, never mind, I'm here now. Can I see your AA membership card, please?”

I put my hand in my pocket to get my wallet. By the time I'd got my membership card out of the wallet, my car door was wide open. The AA man reached inside the car, retrieved my keys, and handed them to me. “Don't bother with the membership card,” said the AA man. “I just wanted you to look away so you didn't see what I was doing.”

“Are all car doors that easy to open?” I asked.

“Yes,” he said. “I really can't understand why car thieves always smash the windows to get in. It's so much quicker and quieter to do what I just did and it has the big advantage that you don't have to sit on shards of broken glass when you drive away from the scene of the crime.”

“So exactly what did you do to get the door open?” I asked.

He winked, got back in his van and drove away.

“Did you see what he did?” I asked Robin.

“No, I didn't,” said Robin. “I blinked and missed the whole thing. But he didn't use a coat hanger, I'm absolutely certain of that.”

“Perhaps he's not allowed to use a coat hanger because they are a protected species during the breeding season,” I said.

The Loneliness of the Long Distance Businessman

“Another business trip?” asked Christine as David carried his suitcase into the bedroom.

“That's right,” said David. “Usual arrangements. Leave on Sunday so as to be ready for an early morning meeting on Monday. I'll be away for five nights, so I'll be back home on Friday evening.”

Christine watched as David packed his case. Five shirts, five pairs of underpants, five pairs of socks and five books. “Shouldn't you take a bit extra in case there's some kind of hassle with the airport?” she asked. “You don't want to be caught short if there's a delay.”

“Quite right,” said David and he packed two more books.

“What about more clothes?” asked Christine.

“That's not necessary,” said David. “I'll just recycle my underpants if I need to. Clothes are much more comfortable when you wear them the second time around.”

Christine pulled a face. “That's horrible!” she said. “You can't wear your dirty clothes again!”

“Of course I can,” said David. “Women consistently underestimate, often by a matter of days, just how long you can wear and re-wear your clothes. Here's a trick I learned at university. Throw your underpants at the ceiling. If they come down you can wear them again. It works for socks as well, though the stiffer, crustier ones do tend to shatter.”

“Yuck!” said Christine. “I bet you didn't have much of a social life at university.”

“Funny you should say that,” said David thoughtfully. “I did spend rather a lot of time by myself. But that's what happens when you have a heavy workload.”

Something went toot-toot outside the house.

“Your taxi's here,” said Christine. “I'll see you Friday evening.”

* * * *

The trip was uneventful. David checked into his hotel and unpacked his suitcase. Then he began to think about dinner. When he was away on a business trip he always tried to eat in Asian restaurants because, generally speaking, the dishes could be eaten with just a fork or a spoon, leaving one hand free to hold the book that he was reading. This evening, he chose an Indian restaurant just down the street from the hotel.

“Table for one, please,” he said.

The waiter showed him to a table. He ordered a Kingfisher beer and studied the menu. When his beer arrived, he told the waiter which curry he wanted eat and how hot he wanted it, then he picked up his book and began to read. Every so often, he took a sip of beer and glanced around the room to see what was going on.

There were several other solitary diners in the restaurant. But David was the only one reading a book. One or two of them had a newspaper folded carefully onto the table, but most of them were just staring blankly into space. David wondered if there was anybody at home behind their empty eyes. They looked lonely, and rather bored. David found such people hard to understand. Tonight, he himself was alone but he wasn't in the least bit bored and he certainly didn't feel at all lonely. Indeed, he was relishing the quiet time he had to himself. He really wasn't looking forward to his week of business meetings. He knew that he would quickly find himself becoming sick of being surrounded by people who were indulging themselves in the artificial enthusiasm of inane business chatter and technobabble. Pretending that this nonsense actually mattered to him was

exhausting, and these solitary evening meals would become more and more attractive to him as the week progressed.

But he didn't think these empty-eyed diners felt the same way.

His food arrived and he turned his attention away from the corpses of the living dead at the other tables. He went back to the world inside his book, and started to eat.

The story held David's attention and he ate rather absent-mindedly. Eventually, rather to his surprise, when he scraped his fork across his plate he found no food upon it. David closed his book, and came back to the real world. The other business diners were now all staring emptily into the middle distance. Even the ones who had been reading newspapers seemed to have finished them and, having nothing else to occupy their minds, they had reached inside their heads and turned themselves off. David felt as if he was surrounded by bored and miserable zombies.

There was a single grain of rice left on the edge of his plate. He pushed it around with his fork for a moment, then he squashed it flat and went to the cashier to pay his bill. He put the receipt carefully into his wallet and returned to his hotel.

And so to bed.

* * * *

On Friday evening the airport was fogbound and David was forced to stay over for two more days until the backlog of passengers could be cleared. Thank goodness I packed the extra books, he thought.

When he finally got home, Christine gave him a huge hug. "Welcome back," she said. "I missed you. How was it?"

"Oh, much as usual," said David. "I got a lot of reading done."

"Did you meet anyone interesting?" asked Christine.

David snorted contemptuously. "Certainly not," he said. "Just a lot of zombies." He took his suitcase into the bedroom and began to unpack. Christine watched as he put his books carefully back on the shelves and then emptied his dirty clothes into the basket.

"Why did you only bring three pairs of underpants back?" she asked. "Where are the other two?"

"On the ceiling of my hotel room," said David.

Three Blind Mice

After a hard day working on the farm, there was nothing Stephen looked forward to more than returning home to an evening meal lovingly prepared by his wife. He opened the farmhouse door and as he did so, rather to his surprise, three mice raced out of the house, ran over his boots and then shot into the farmyard where they quickly disappeared in the undergrowth. As the mice ran past him, he couldn't help feeling that they looked rather odd, but they vanished from view before he could pin-point exactly what it was about them that gave him that impression.

Shrugging his shoulders at the mystery, he went into the house, and closed the door behind him. He was quickly surrounded by the mouth-watering smell of roast beef with all the trimmings. "Just what I need," he said, sitting down at the table. "That smells delicious."

"I'm sure you'll love it," said Jennifer as she picked up her carving knife and fork. She sliced thin strips off the roast and arranged them artistically on the dinner plates. She put some steamed carrots and cauliflower on each plate and then she added a pile of golden brown roast potatoes. Using a ladle, she scooped up some of the thick, rich, brown and succulent gravy that she'd had simmering in the roasting dish. She poured the gravy over Stephen's food. As usual, she left her own plate dry. She carried both plates to the table and put Stephen's down in front of him. She put her own plate on the table across from him, and then fetched a bottle of tomato ketchup from the pantry. She sat down and squeezed a dainty dollop of ketchup on to the side of her plate. Then they both began to eat.

After more than twenty years of marriage, Stephen was quite accustomed to his wife's idiosyncrasies. She detested

gravies and sauces of every kind (except for tomato ketchup, of course, which she insisted wasn't a sauce at all) and she much preferred her food to be plain and unadorned. She seemed to have no objection to cooking sauces for Stephen, but since she never ate them herself, she didn't really understand them, and so her recipes were always a little bit hit and miss. Sometimes they worked and sometimes they didn't. If he ever complained, Jennifer would just pass him the ketchup bottle. "Ketchup always works," she would say. "And it's the same every time." He couldn't argue with that, so these days he kept quiet and ate whatever was put in front of him. After all, if he complained too much, she might stop cooking gravy for him, and he didn't want that to happen. Even poor gravy was better than no gravy at all.

Today was one of her good gravy days. Stephen could feel his whole body relaxing and rejuvenating itself as he ate. "Oh, Jennifer," he said, "this is just wonderful. And the gravy is particularly yummy. It complements the meat and the vegetables perfectly. Well done."

"Thank you," said Jennifer with a smile. "I'm glad you like it. How was your day?"

"Oh much as usual," said Stephen. "I ploughed the north paddock. I'll sow the seeds in it tomorrow, as long as it doesn't rain. And I think we've got some sort of bug infestation in the orchard. I'll need to keep a close eye on that. What about you? How was your day?"

"Rather odd, actually," said Jennifer. "I found three mice in the kitchen."

Stephen remembered the strange looking mice that had run out of the house and over his boots as he was coming in. He wondered if Jennifer had noticed how so peculiar they were. "I'm surprised that the cats who live in the barn didn't stop the mice from getting into the house," he said. "Clearly those cats aren't doing their job properly. I'll definitely have to have words with them."

“Oh, I think the cats are doing an excellent job,” said Jennifer. “These mice had obviously been through a terrible time before they sought refuge in the house. They were wounded, and they were all quite blind. I think the cats must have been torturing them before letting them escape. Cats are like that, you know. Vicious, sadistic animals.”

“How did you realise that the mice were blind?” Stephen was intrigued.

“When I first saw them they were walking in single file,” said Jennifer. “Each of them had one paw on the mouse in front, except for the leader of course who was just slowly feeling his way and trying not to bump into anything. It was really rather sad to see them like that.”

Stephen stuck his fork into a potato and sliced it in half. He spread gravy over it and then he speared a piece of beef. One more swipe through the gravy and he popped it all into his mouth.

“So what did you do?” he asked as he chewed.

“Don't talk with your mouth full,” admonished Jennifer as she smeared ketchup onto a piece of cauliflower.

Stephen swallowed the masticated lump of meat, potato and gravy. “Sorry,” he said. “So what did you do about the mice?”

“I cut off their tails with my carving knife of course,” said Jennifer. “I happened to have it in my hand because I was just about to sharpen it on the whetstone. You should have seen the mice run when their tails fell off! They stopped slowly feeling their way around, and they started scampering about like mad things, bumping into the furniture and bouncing off the walls as they ran frantically in all directions trying to escape from the mad tail cutter that was threatening them.”

So that explained what he had seen as he came in, thought Stephen. The mice were blind and they had no tails. No wonder they had looked so strange and behaved so

oddly. He prepared another forkful of meat, gravy and potato. "What did you do with the tails?" he asked.

"I added them to the gravy," said Jennifer. "I thought they would thicken it up nicely."

Rag Week

Have you ever noticed that after three pints of Guinness everything sounds like a good idea?

We were sitting in the pub trying to decide what we could do for rag week. Rag week, of course, is just an excuse for university students to dress up and do silly things in order to persuade people to donate money to charity. What could be more fun than that?

The third pint of Guinness inspired me to say, “Why don't we pretend to be a Dixieland jazz band? I've got a double bass, Nick plays clarinet, and Paul almost plays the trumpet. I'm sure we can get a few other people as well.”

After dropping a few gentle hints to our friends, we soon attracted a drummer, a trombonist and a piano player. And that's how *The Campus City Jazzmen* were born.

The next day dawned bright and sunny, which was fortunate because we'd decided to do some outdoor busking. At 9.00am, we took our instruments down to the Old Market Square, the huge open space in the centre of Nottingham which the locals always referred to as Slab Square. We set ourselves up well away from the tinkling fountains. We were planning on being there for quite some time and we didn't want to get wet if the wind changed direction...

“Ladies and Gentlemen,” I announced to the largely indifferent crowds who were passing through the square on their way to work, “we are *The Campus City Jazzmen* and we will be playing non-stop music for you for the next twenty four hours.” I turned to the band. “Are you ready, lads?” They nodded, and we surged into our opening number:

*Ain't she sweet
See her walking down the street...*

We finished the piece at almost the same time as each other. There was a small smattering of applause and one or two people put coins in our collecting tins. After a brief pause we played our next tune:

*Ain't she sweet
See her walking down the street...*

This time we were a little tighter, though only the trained ear of an expert would have realised it. We were definitely on a roll, and so we went straight into our third number without any pauses at all:

*Ain't she sweet
See her walking down the street...*

A man who had been standing there listening to us right from our very first note yelled out, "Is that the only tune you know?" Clearly he was our biggest fan.

"Yes, it is," I told him. "We only put the band together last night and so we've only rehearsed one tune, and that's the one we're going to play for the next..." I looked at my watch. "...twenty three and a half hours."

"Cool," said our fan, and he put fifty pence in the tin. "Can I make a request?"

"Of course you can," I said.

"OK," he said. "Will you play *Ain't She Sweet* for me?"

"Certainly," I said, and that's exactly what we did.

You can't really play music non-stop for twenty four hours. You can't even play whatever it was we were playing non-stop for twenty four hours without taking a break. So at staggered intervals throughout the day, one of us would sneak off for refreshment and a pee. When it was my turn, I

went over to The Bell, a pub just off the square. Because it was a lovely warm day, I took my pint outside and stood on the pavement sipping my beer and enjoying listening to the rest of the band playing *Ain't She Sweet*. A few other people followed my example and soon a small crowd of us were standing there nodding our heads to the by now over-familiar rhythm.

The landlady of The Bell came bustling out to us. "What do you think you are doing?" she asked angrily. "I haven't got a licence for outside drinking. Get back inside, the lot of you. Now!"

Meekly, we all took ourselves and our drinks back inside the pub. I've been thrown out of a lot of pubs over the years, but that remains the one and only time that I've been thrown into a pub...

About three o'clock in the afternoon, the university mountaineering club turned up to break the monotony. The members all roped themselves together and solemnly mountaineered horizontally from one side of Slab Square to the other. One of their Sherpas came over to us. "Can you stop playing while they climb across the square?" he asked. "It's very distracting and they might fall off and injure themselves."

We ignored the request and deliberately played them a medley of our melody instead. Every one of them reached the other side safely and nobody was injured, so clearly we weren't dangerously distracting.

Time crawled slowly as we played our tune again and again. Our audience waxed and waned. By four o'clock in the morning my fingers were bleeding from the pressure of the strings on my double bass. All of us were exhausted. Even our fan had deserted us, and Slab Square was completely empty. Nevertheless we carried on playing because we were far too close to the end to stop now. Early morning commuters started to appear about 6.00am. Most

of them took pity on us and put money in our collecting tins before running away with their fingers in their ears.

At 9.00am we finally stopped playing. We packed our instruments away with a great sense of relief that our twenty-four hour marathon session of one-tune jazz had finally come to an end. We'd played *Ain't She Sweet* 683 times, and we'd raised almost £300 for charity, which made us feel very good. As a bonus, we'd enjoyed ourselves so much that we decided to make *The Campus City Jazzmen* a permanent fixture in our lives. Over the next few years, we played a lot of gigs and a lot of different tunes. We even made an album called *Jazz on a Boot Lace*. But not once in all the time we played together did we ever play *Ain't She Sweet* again. Somehow the tune had quite lost its charm for us. Funny that...

AFTERWORD

All the events narrated here did actually take place, but even though the piece is narrated in the first person, they didn't happen to me. The double bass player for *The Campus City Jazzmen* was a friend of mine. Originally I wrote the piece in the third person, but I felt that it lacked immediacy. There was a distancing effect that I didn't like. So I re-wrote it in the first person, and lo and behold, it came back to life!

Twenty-One

William's twenty-first birthday was a day much like any other. He came down to breakfast and his mother gave him a mug of tea and a bowl of porridge. "Happy birthday," she said, and pecked him on the cheek. "I wanted to bake you a cake, but I couldn't get the ingredients on the ration."

"That's OK mum," said William.

"We've got sausages for tea," said his mother. "That'll be a nice treat for your birthday, won't it?"

"Yes, mum," said William. The meat ration had been reduced the previous week, so he was gloomily sure that the sausages would be mostly breadcrumbs and gristle. "Put the wireless on, mum," he said. "It's almost time for the news."

The wireless was housed in a beautifully polished walnut cabinet. William's father had bought it in 1937 after a good day at the dog track and it was his mother's pride and joy. She turned it on. The faint smell of burning filled the room as the valves warmed up and incinerated the dust that had settled on them overnight.

"Here is the news," said the silky voiced announcer, *"and this is Alvar Liddell reading it. The evacuation of our troops from the beaches of Dunkirk continues to run smoothly..."*

William sipped his tea and listened to the news all the way to the end. Then he put his empty mug down on the table and said, "I'm off to work now mum. See you tonight."

"Bye love," said his mother.

William caught the tram at the bottom of the street. It rattled its way through the town and dropped him off almost at the factory gate of the Butler Machine Tool Company Ltd. Butlers made hydraulic presses that were much in demand by the munitions factories where they were used to manufacture the brass casings for artillery shells. A new

batch of machines was coming up for despatch and William's job for the next few days was to prepare the speed and feed tables that the machine operators would require so as to be able to use the machines most effectively.

William walked up to the drawing office. Herbert Jenkins was already there, puffing on his pipe and emitting clouds of foul smelling smoke. "Eh up, lad," he said as William walked in.

"Morning," said William. He pinned a blueprint to his working table and picked up his slide rule to begin the tedious calculations that underpinned the speed and feed tables. Faintly, in the distance, he could hear the cheerful, rhythmic music of *Worker's Playtime* echoing from the tannoy on the factory floor. He wondered why they didn't have speakers or a wireless in the drawing office. A nice tune would help the workers here just as much as it helped the workers in the factory.

"You reckon they'll be coming tonight?" asked Herbert.

"I'm sure of it," said William. "The weather forecast is for clear skies and there's a full moon tonight. They call that a bomber's moon. The city will be well lit up by it, despite the blackout. They'll be here tonight in force, I'll guarantee it."

Herbert nodded agreement.

The day passed slowly. William always found the repetitive calculations involved in generating tables to be very tedious. But he stuck to it, and eventually the day was over and it was time to catch the tram back home. True to her word, his mother had sausages for his tea and they were just as nasty as he had feared they would be. But he chewed his way through them without a word of complaint. "Great sausages, mum," he told her, and she smiled.

After he finished eating he said, "It's getting dark mum. I've got to go and get changed and go on duty." His mother nodded and busied herself with the washing up. "Now think on," said William. "If the sirens go tonight, you make sure to get yourself into the Anderson shelter. I don't want you

staying by yourself in the house like you did last time. It's not safe."

"I hate those Anderson shelters," she said. "They're cold and dark and muddy. I bet they've got rats living in them."

"Wrap up warm in that thick wool dressing gown that Aunty Doris got you as a wedding present," said William. "And take a torch with you. Mrs Nugent from next door will probably be there. She always has a thermos of tea and some arrowroot biscuits. You'll be fine."

"Alright," she said reluctantly. "I will."

"Good for you, mum," said William and he went upstairs to change into his Air Raid Warden's uniform. Then, with his tin helmet on his head and the straps of the cardboard box that held his gas mask slung over his shoulder, he went out on patrol. "See you later mum," he called.

"Mind you don't get hit by a bomb," his mother said.

"Don't worry, mum," said William. "I've got my tin helmet to protect me from bombs dropping on my head. But if I notice one about to hit me I'll move to one side, just to make sure."

As usual, Mr Trotter at number 37 had been careless with his blackout curtains and light was shining out of his kitchen window. William banged hard on the door. "Put your light out," he yelled. Mr Trotter hurriedly adjusted his curtains and the light disappeared again.

William knew these streets intimately. He'd been born here, and he'd played in them all his life. On the darkest of nights he could find his way around just by the feel of the cobblestones through the soles of his shoes. But tonight the full moon gave enough light for him to see his way clearly. He wanted to yell at the man in the moon to put his light out, but he knew it wouldn't do any good.

He heard the sirens start to howl and, looking up, he could see the crucifix shapes of aeroplanes scudding across the sky, silhouetted blackly by the silver light of the moon. There seemed to be no end to them. He wondered how

much the pilots could see of the city. Probably quite a lot. He could hear explosions now as the bombs landed, and there was a red glow on the horizon where the fires were burning. The bombers were concentrating their efforts on the factories, and not for the first time, William found himself wondering if Butlers would still be there in the morning and if he would still have a job.

What a way to spend my twenty-first birthday, he thought to himself. Watching Nazi bombers doing their best to turn the city I've lived in all my life into a pile of rubble. "Happy birthday, William," he said to himself.

AFTERWORD

My father's birthday was 13th November. If he'd lived long enough to see it, he would have been celebrating his 96th orbit around the sun at about the same time that this story was written. He didn't manage to live that long -- indeed, I've celebrated more birthdays than he himself ever managed to achieve. But I never had a birthday as memorable as my father's twenty-first. That one was special, for a whole host of reasons that I hope I never have to experience.

The very last paragraph says it all. It describes exactly how my father spent his twenty-first birthday. Everything else in the story is made up, but that doesn't stop it being true.

My father's name was William. This is his story...

Tumbling Dice

After the excitement was over and the crowds had dispersed, the Roman soldiers took the crosses down and removed the bodies. The Jewish prophet had a spear wound in his side from which nameless fluids still dripped. The two thieves who had been crucified with him, one on each side, were unmarked, apart from the wounds left by the nails. Rigor mortis was well advanced, and all three bodies lay on the ground still grotesquely mimicking the shape of the crosses they had been nailed to. The soldiers stripped the bodies, looking for loot. The Jew had been wearing a robe that was woven in one piece without a seam. The soldiers seemed pleased to find that the wound in the Jew's side had barely stained the cloth. "We'll get a good price for that at the market," said one.

"Why do new recruits always say that?" asked another. "It doesn't work like that, lad. We've got to gamble for the robe, and the winner takes all the profits."

The other soldiers nodded in agreement. That was the way things had always been done. The soldiers sat down in a circle. Dice were produced and the game commenced.

Leaning on a wall and concealed by the shadows, Adam the Time Traveller watched all this happen. He had come here from more centuries in the future than the soldiers had fingers and toes to count them with. That's my cue, he thought as the soldiers started to roll the dice. Time to teach them the error of their ways. How dare they sully that robe by gambling for it? He pushed himself off the wall and walked towards them. The soldiers were so intent on their game that they didn't notice him at first. He was pleased to see that the dice they were using were old and worn. It was difficult to make out the design etched on their faces. That

will make things easier, thought Adam. What a stroke of luck.

“Garments as good as these,” said Adam, “deserve to be played for with better dice than you are using.”

The soldiers looked up from their game. “Piss off,” said one of them.

Adam ignored him. “If you will let me play,” he said, “I will show you noble dice which are fit to be used to gamble for the riches of kings.”

He reached into his pouch and tossed his own dice into the gaming circle. They were white and gleaming, and each face was set with a pattern of shiny red stones. The soldiers were impressed. One of them picked the dice up and examined them closely. “What are these made of?” he asked.

“The dice are ivory,” said Adam, “and the stones are rubies.” Actually the dice were made of a dense white plastic and the rubies were just cheap synthetics, but Adam didn't think the soldiers needed to know that. They didn't need to know about the complex electronic circuitry hidden deep inside the dice either. Anyway, he couldn't think of the Latin for “silicon chip”.

Adam reached into his pouch again and moved the control switch to the middle position. He couldn't think of the Latin for “wireless controller” either, but again, the soldiers didn't need to know about that, so he kept quiet. The soldiers rolled the dice experimentally. They seemed impressed with the solid way the dice fell and they nodded approvingly at the unpredictable scores that the dice showed. But all the while, unbeknownst to them, the circuitry in the dice was adjusting and tuning itself to the characteristics of each individual soldier's palms and fingers.

Eventually, in a tacit acceptance of Adam's proposal, the soldiers moved over to give him room to join the game. He switched the wireless controller to the top position and sat

down. The tuning stage was complete and the dice would now recognise when they were being thrown by one of the soldiers. From now on, the soldiers' score would, on average, be lower than their opponents'. The bias was subtle and a prolonged statistical analysis would be needed to show that it was even there at all. But nevertheless, the odds were now very much in Adam's favour. If the game went on long enough, he was guaranteed to win.

The dice tumbled and rolled and the game reached its inevitable conclusion. The soldiers watched glumly as Adam stood up and carefully folded the seamless robe over his arm. "Thank you for the game," he said.

One of the soldiers said, "If you take the robe to Omar the Tailor in the market you should be able to get at least a hundred sesterces for it."

"Thank you," said Adam. There was an ecclesiastical museum in mid-twentieth century Rome that would give him more for this robe than Omar the Tailor could conceive of in his wildest dreams. But the soldiers didn't need to know that, so Adam simply said, "That's very good advice. In return for it, you can keep the dice. May you have much luck with them."

The soldiers cheered up. Perhaps their day wouldn't be a complete loss after all. As Adam walked away he heard them arguing about where they should go first to show off their new dice. He smiled. The electronic circuits in the dice were still active and he couldn't help feeling that the soldiers were about to embark on the longest losing streak of their lives. Serves them right, he thought.

AFTERWORD

We were asked to write a piece of flash fiction about a game. Flash fiction is defined as a self-contained story

between 300 and 1000 words long. It must have a proper beginning, middle and end and it should intrigue and satisfy the reader.

I started to wonder if I could make use of an actual well known game that had taken place somewhere in fact or in fiction. The only ones that sprang to mind were Bergman's chess game with death (which is a cliché), Herman Hesse's glass bead game (which already had a whole novel devoted to it), Wild Bill Hickock's last poker game (which has appeared in too many stories already) and the dice game played by the Roman soldiers at Christ's crucifixion. I decided to use the latter -- the value of the robe they were playing for suggested it would be of interest down the ages and I began to wonder about a time traveller attempting to take part in the game so as to take the robe for himself and, incidentally, for posterity. Now I had the beginning of the story.

Obviously the time traveller had to win, therefore I needed some mechanism to guarantee that would happen. That gave me the electronic dice. And now I had a middle.

I liked the idea of punishing the soldiers for their temerity in dicing for the robe in the first place by giving them a long losing streak. Serves them right... And now I had an ending. The structure was complete.

Once I'd reached that point in my thinking, the story wrote itself. I just sat there and watched the words appear on the screen!

As you read, you may notice these sentences: *Time to teach them the error of their ways. How dare they sully that robe by gambling for it?* Those sentences weren't in the original draft. But then I showed the story to a friend and she said, "Why didn't Adam just go and buy the robe from Omar the Tailor after the soldiers sold it to him? It would have been a lot easier and a lot less effort." Damn! Now I needed to give Adam more of a motive for playing dice with the soldiers. Hence the extra two sentences. They also had

the added bonus of strengthening the ending -- now Adam has more of a motive for leaving the soldiers with their long losing streak. And his last line (*Serves them right, he thought.*) makes more sense.

The Rushes

Martin, the director of the movie, settled himself down in the editing room to watch the scenes they'd filmed today. The room smelled faintly of celluloid and glue, though it had been many years since any of those things had last been used in here. Today's digital equipment meant that splicing scenes together into a completed movie was all done with computers - not a human hand touched the raw footage. But today Martin was more concerned with the integrity of the individual scenes than he was with how they would eventually fit together. It would be many months before he'd actually be stitching them into the finished film...

Today's first scene showed an astonished man staring out of his kitchen window. The camera zoomed in on his face as he made it perfectly clear that he couldn't quite believe what his eyes were seeing. Martin nodded approvingly - this man could certainly act! Then the point of view shifted, and the camera looked through the kitchen window at the house across the street. Two women and a man were clustered around the front door. The man was levering it open with a crowbar and as the camera watched, the door frame splintered and they went inside the house, clearly bent on burglary. Soon they reappeared, and began loading items into their car.

The scene shifted back to the man in the kitchen. He had obviously just telephoned the police. In crisp, clear tones he described what he had seen. Then he put the phone down, thought for a moment and dialled another number. The sound engineers had made a very good job of recording the dialogue, and Martin didn't think it would need any overdubs later on.

“Aw, mate,” said the man, “some drongos are breaking into Johnny's house. I've called the cops, but they won't be here for ages. Why don't you and the lads come round to sort it out?”

Martin decided that this didn't quite work. It had looked good on paper, but it needed something more. He resolved to film some pick up scenes later so that he could show the other side of the conversation. Perhaps he'd film it in the local pub where the lads would discuss what they should do after they'd received the phone call. Yes, that would anchor the scene more convincingly. Martin made a note.

Then the film showed the lads from the pub arriving. They drove up in a collection of battered and muddy Hondas and Holdens which they parked across the driveway so that the burglars couldn't get their car out. A tractor trundled into view and blocked the last remaining gap. Martin examined this scene critically. He'd shot it in several takes with a multitude of cameras at various angles and distances from the action. This was a crucial comedy scene and he wanted it to get a good laugh. He quite liked the third take, the one where the tractor actually bumped into the burglars' car and a lump of cow shit fell off and smeared itself on to the shiny bonnet. That was unscripted, but sometimes, in Martin's experience, the cinematic gods smiled and gave you a perfect shot anyway. He always enjoyed it when that happened.

The next scene shifted the point of view inside the house where the burglars were discussing the arrival of the crowd outside and wondering what to do.

“We can't drive off,” said a woman who looked like Cher, “they've blocked us in.”

“Well, that's it then,” said the other woman, who didn't look like Cher. She was carrying a jewellery box. She put it down on the hall table. It wasn't going to do her any good now. “Perhaps we ought to just call it a day and surrender.

We've had a good run of luck, but it had to end sooner or later. Looks like it's just ended."

The two women looked at each other and nodded in agreement. They went through the splintered remains of the front door. "We're coming out," shouted the one who looked like Cher. "We're giving ourselves up."

"Blow that for a game of soldiers," said the man. "I'm not going quietly." He sidled out of the door and then ran off across the garden. Vaulting the hedge, he set off across the field. As he ran, he brandished a hammer. "Keep your distance," he shouted. "I'm armed and dangerous. Don't mess with me or I'll make you regret it."

Martin pursed his lips. The script called for the burglar to be brandishing a tomahawk, but the props department hadn't been able to come up with one in time, so they'd had to use a hammer instead. Martin made a note for the special effects people to magic up a CGI tomahawk over the top of the hammer. Nobody would ever notice...

The man ran across the field with the boys from the pub in hot pursuit. Martin decided to speed up this sequence so that everyone was running jerkily, like characters from an old silent movie, while the Benny Hill chase music played over the top of them. Everybody likes a Benny Hill chase... Perhaps the women burglars could take part as well - but he'd need to find an excuse to get them running in bikinis. He made another note for a later pick up shot of the women getting changed.

The final sequence in the day's filming showed the police arriving to take the miscreants away. The lads from the pub were holding the man and the two women firmly. Martin noted that the actor holding the woman who looked like Cher appeared to be enjoying himself rather more than the script called for. He considered doing another take of that scene tomorrow and making it even sexier, but then he rejected the idea. He didn't want the censors to give him too

restrictive a certificate. This was supposed to be a family film after all.

“Well done lads,” said the police sergeant. “That was a brave and selfless action.” Martin winced – as a police sergeant, this actor made a good bedside lamp. What a terrible piece of casting. Martin made a note to overdub his lines later using someone who could actually say the words as if he meant them. Mind you, the scriptwriters needed a bit of a kicking as well, the words really were rather corny.

“We have been after this lot for months,” continued the sergeant woodenly. “We have recovered a significant amount of stolen property from their car. We will be charging them with multiple counts of burglary.” Martin shook his head sadly. The man looked and sounded like a puppet on a string. But then he cheered up – wasn't that what *real* police spokesmen sounded like?

All in all, reflected Martin, it hadn't been a bad day's filming.

On the Beach

The beach was yellow and featureless. The sea mumbled at it with gentle blue wavelets. Here and there brown patches of seaweed provided shelter for small lurking crabs. In the distance someone was galloping a horse along the firm, wet sand at the edge of the sea. Henry, who was nine years old, watched the horse until it was out of sight. "Wow!" he said at last, "there's so much sand here. We can make a huge sand castle with all this to use up."

"But what about the buried treasure?" asked William, who was eleven and who therefore found sand castles boring. "If I was a pirate this beach is exactly where I'd bury my treasure. So it must be here somewhere. Stands to reason. All we've got to do is dig for it."

"But how will we know where to dig?" asked Henry, intrigued by the notion of treasure. "It's a big beach. You can't find buried treasure unless you've got a treasure map. And it's got to have an X on it. It's not a proper treasure map if it doesn't have an X on it."

William found this logic very convincing. "OK," he said agreeably. "First thing we need to do is make a treasure map. You can put the X on it." Henry's eyes lit up. That sounded exciting.

They walked back to the caravan that their father had hired for the holiday. "Dad," said William, "we need a treasure map for the beach."

Their father looked up from the fishing rod he was assembling. "A treasure map?" he said. "I know just the thing." He rummaged around in a drawer that he pulled from under one of the beds. "I'm sure I saw it in here..." he muttered under his breath. Then he gave a cry of triumph

and produced a pad of paper and a box of crayons. "There you are," he said. "Just what you need for a treasure map."

William tore off a piece of paper and spread it out on the table. He drew a line across it. Then, forehead furrowed in concentration, he used a yellow crayon to fill in the bottom half of the paper. "This is the beach," he explained to Henry. He gave Henry a blue crayon. "Use this one to colour in the sea," he said. Henry dutifully turned the rest of the paper blue.

When they were finished, they looked at their map with great satisfaction. The scribbled yellow area looked just like the real beach and the big blue bit looked just like the real sea. "That's a proper map," said William. "It's got everything important on it."

"No it hasn't," said Henry. "There were all those brown blobs of seaweed as well."

"Oh yes," said William. "So there were." He picked up a brown crayon and scribbled some brown bits on the beach. "There," he said, deeply satisfied. "Now all it needs is an X."

Henry picked up a red crayon and carefully drew a big X in the bottom left hand corner of the beach. "That's where the treasure is," he said. He and William picked up their spades. "Dad," he said, "we're off to dig up the treasure."

"OK," said their father. "Make sure you're back in time for tea."

The beach hadn't changed while they'd been gone, though the horse rider had reappeared, trotting this time rather than galloping. Maybe the horse was tired. Henry and William compared the beach to the map they were carrying. The two matched up very well. "Look," said Henry, "those two patches of seaweed are just like these two on the map. So the treasure must be just here." He scraped a big X in the sand with his spade. "And here's the X," he said. "Let's dig."

William folded the treasure map carefully and put it in his pocket. Then he picked up his spade and joined the

enthusiastically shovelling Henry. Sand flew hither and yon. Much of it trickled down William's neck, itching and scratching simultaneously - a very odd feeling.

The hole got deeper and deeper. Then Henry's spade clanged against something solid and he gave a triumphant cry. "I've found the treasure!" He threw down his spade and began to feel around in the hole. William leaned on his own spade and watched Henry's hands exploring the sand. Then Henry lifted something out of the hole. "It's gold!" he gasped. "Real pirate gold. Look!"

William looked. Henry was holding a glittering, gleaming object that reflected the sunshine in dazzling sparkles. "It's a golden dog's head," Henry said excitedly.

"Let me look at it," demanded William. A little reluctantly, Henry passed it to him. William examined it closely. It was a flat, two-dimensional representation of the head of a German Shepherd, delicately fashioned so that almost every hair could be distinguished. A huge tongue protruded from its mouth. Its ears were erect and it was panting with eagerness, clearly about to chase something. Sand was compacted in the hollows of the piece. "Let's take it down to the sea and wash the sand off it," said William.

With the sand removed, the dog's head was a soft, golden shimmer in the light from the setting sun. William gave it back to Henry and said, "We should take it back to the caravan and show it to dad."

"Real pirate gold," said Henry as they walked. His eyes were round with wonder. "Real pirate gold."

Their father was very impressed with the pirate gold and he congratulated Henry on his find. But when Henry wasn't looking, he winked at William and put his finger to his lips in a shushing gesture which made William suspect that there was more to this pirate treasure than met the eye. But, obediently, he kept quiet about it for the moment.

Henry refused to be parted from his treasure trove. It sat beside his plate at tea time as they ate the fish their father

had caught that day, and it slept beneath his pillow when he went to bed. William, being two years older, was allowed to stay up for an extra hour. When he felt that Henry was safely asleep he said, "Dad, it's not really gold, is it? That's why you told me to keep quiet."

His father shook his head. "No it isn't," he said. "It's a horse brass, an ornament used to decorate a horse's bridle on special occasions. It's a very beautiful example of a horse brass, but no, it isn't gold and it isn't worth very much."

William remembered the horse they'd seen galloping and trotting on the beach and he remembered the ecstatic look on Henry's face when he found the pirate treasure. He was fond of his little brother and enjoyed seeing him happy. "Let's not tell Henry that, eh dad?" he said.

His father smiled and ruffled William's hair. "No," he agreed. "Let's not."

Decisions, Decisions...

I went into Gerald's office where I found him sitting at his desk tossing a coin and entering the results into a spreadsheet. "What are you doing?" I asked.

"Oh, hello," Gerald said. "I'm preparing the business plan for the next financial year."

"By tossing a coin?"

"It's not a coin," said Gerald. He sounded peeved. "It's a management decision tool. I use it every time I have to make a decision. It never fails to work. You ought to get one for yourself."

He handed it to me so that I could see for myself how it performed its responsible task. The decision tool was about the size of \$2 coin and made of a similar gold-coloured metal. The word "Yes" was engraved on one side of the tool. Unsurprisingly, the other side had the word "No" on it.

"Oh come on, Gerald," I said, giving it back to him. "There's a lot more goes in to the making of a business decision than that. Management is actually quite a complex skill. People study the subject for years at university. And business plans really do take quite a lot of work to get right..."

"Rubbish," said Gerald. "You don't need any of that airy-fairy academic nonsense to run a company. It's dead simple. All business decisions are 50/50. Either they work or they don't. So as long as you've got a properly tuned decision tool, like I have, all your business problems are easy to solve. Look, I'll show you."

He tossed his decision tool into the air, caught it, and slapped it down on the back of his left hand, keeping it covered with his right hand so that he couldn't see how it had fallen yet. "Now," he mused, "I wonder if the

Information Technology budget for next year should be \$500,000." He raised his right hand and glanced at the decision tool. "Yes, it should." He typed 500,000 into a cell on his spreadsheet. "See? It's very straightforward."

"Where did you get the \$500,000 figure from?" I asked.

"That's what the Information Technology manager told me he needed. All I had to decide was whether or not to use it."

"Where did he get the figure from?" I asked.

"I presume that he just made it up out of thin air," said Gerald. "That's what I did when I had his job."

"That explains a lot," I said. "However I must admit that I find there is a certain attractive logic to your revolutionary technique. But perhaps it needs a more pragmatic test, just to prove that we can have our cake and put two in the bush. So to speak."

"What do you propose?" Gerald sounded suspicious. He knows me far too well. He has suffered at my hands before. Teasing him helps alleviate the boredom.

"Well," I said, "before you distracted me with the wonders of your management decision tool, I actually came in here to show you this letter and attached CV. It's an application for the Director of Marketing position. What do you think?" I passed the letter and CV over to him. He read it all the way through, without once moving his lips. I was quietly amazed.

"This does look really impressive," said Gerald enthusiastically.

"Yes," I agreed. "Perhaps it is too impressive. If everything he says in it is true, he'd be the kind of Marketing Director that could sell camels to Saudi Arabia!"

Gerald leafed through the papers again. "I didn't notice that he'd ever worked in Western Australia."

"What's Western Australia got to do with anything?" I asked.

“There's huge herds of camels roaming the Nullarbor Desert,” explained Gerald, “and the Western Australians really do export the camels to Saudi Arabia.”

“Gerald,” I said, “I am constantly amazed by the trivia you store in your pointy head. But before I get sidetracked again, what do you think about this chap's application? Should we invite him for an interview?”

Gerald tossed his management decision tool and examined the results. “No,” he said. “We shouldn't.”

“Thank you,” I said. I retrieved the papers from Gerald and went back to my office where I read them again. The chap really did have an impressive CV. It almost seemed too good to be true. In my experience, when something seems too good to be true it very probably is. Finally making up my mind, I turned my computer on and began to compose a rejection letter...

And that was the end of that, for a couple of years or so. Then one day I was sitting in the staff canteen drinking a cup of coffee and reading the newspaper. There was a fascinating article in it about a man who'd just been found guilty of embezzling so much money from the company he worked for that they'd gone spectacularly bankrupt before his crimes came to light. I'd been following the case avidly for weeks. But now that he'd been found guilty, name suppression had been lifted and for the first time, I found out who he actually was...

I called to Gerald who happened to be walking past carrying a cup of herbal tea that smelled like an infusion of privet hedge. “Gerald, come and look at this. Does the name ring any bells?”

Gerald sat down and read the article carefully. “No,” he said. “I can't say that it does.”

“That's the chap who applied for the Marketing Director position a couple of years ago. He was the one with the really impressive CV.”

“Oh yes!” said Gerald. “Now I remember. Isn't it lucky that we didn't employ him? We could have been in a lot of trouble if we had.”

“Luck had absolutely nothing to do with it,” I said firmly. “It was all because of your superior, and elite management skills.”

Gerald flushed with pleasure. “Gosh, thanks,” he mumbled as he took a fortifying sip of his privet hedge. Clearly I had made his day. I resolved to lay the sarcasm on less thickly next time.

AFTERWORD

We had been asked to write a story about luck. There were no other hints or suggestions which made the whole thing quite difficult of course.

I started thinking about games of chance because we'd had a brief discussion in the class about gambling. I wondered about writing a story where someone could manipulate the odds in a casino so as to make a lot of money. But that didn't lead anywhere and besides, I don't really know very much about the mechanics of gambling in a casino. Gambling is not a vice that attracts me. So then I considered other games of chance perhaps involving dice or coins. I'd already used dice in an earlier story, so that just left coins. I began to think about the question of a coin that is tossed and comes down heads 10 times in a row. What are the chances that the coin will come down heads on the eleventh toss? The actual chances, of course, are 50/50. Every time you toss a coin it will come down either heads or tails (and let's not get sidetracked with what happens if it lands on its edge). A lot of people don't realise that. They seem to think that because the coin has landed heads ten times in a row there's a better than even chance that the

next time it will come down tails. That's not true. The way the coin comes down this time has no relationship with how it came down earlier. Every time you toss a coin the chances are always 50/50 that it will come down heads. (Fallaciously thinking that previous results will have some sort of effect on the current chance is why casinos make such a massive profit on games like roulette).

So anyway, then I started pondering 50/50 chances. And suddenly, just like that, there was the outline of the story in my head. All I had to do then was write it. Easy...

Travelling Man

If travel broadens the mind, reflected Martin Van Buren to himself, then my mind must be about ten thousand miles across by now. Funny, but I don't feel any the wiser for it. He was sitting in the dubious comfort of an airport lounge helping himself to free food and drink while he waited for his flight to be called. If this is Thursday, he mused, which I'm almost certain that it is, then I think I must be in Berlin. He checked his boarding pass – yes, he was in Berlin waiting for a flight to London.

His flight was called and he made his way to the gate. There was the usual hold up while unsophisticated passengers who were overburdened with inappropriate luggage blocked the aisle as they struggled to fit their overstuffed and oddly shaped parcels into the overhead lockers. But eventually Martin, who had no carry-on bags, managed to reach his seat. He plucked the in-flight magazine from the seat pocket in front of him and settled down for a boring read on what he hoped would be an equally boring flight. Martin was not a fan of exciting flights. He'd experienced far too many of them in the past. These days boredom and stultifying routine were all he asked for.

The plane taxied away from the gate and the flight attendants gave the usual safety briefing. Martin paid no attention. He'd heard it so many times that the words were engraved on his soul. Then the plane accelerated down the runway and lifted itself gently into the waiting sky. The flight attendants scurried quickly round the cabin serving coffee and tea. As usual, they ignored Martin completely. He left them to their own devices and read his magazine. The magazine was even more dull than he'd expected it to be.

He approved of that – clearly the editor was unusually talented at commissioning articles of pointless tedium.

The flight was a short one and Martin had barely finished his magazine before they landed in London. As he left the plane, he checked his boarding pass. It seemed that the next leg of his journey would take him to Los Angeles where there was a connecting flight to Auckland on the far side of the world. He'd never actually been able to catch the boarding pass in the act of updating itself. No matter how long or how fixedly he stared at it, it always changed his flight details when he wasn't looking. These days he didn't bother about it, and he just went wherever it told him to go.

Because the London to Los Angeles flight was travelling into American territory, all the passengers had to go through the silly rigmarole that lulled Americans into a false sense of security. Passports and travel documents were scrutinised closely, and all the passengers were x-rayed and sometimes physically searched. Martin had no travel documents. He'd never been issued with a passport and visas were a complete mystery to him. He wandered casually along with everybody else. The security thugs ignored him completely and he passed through their check points without any fuss or bother.

The flight to Los Angeles would last for many hours and Martin knew that he would need more than an in flight magazine to sustain him. So he spent a happy few minutes browsing through the airport bookshop. Eventually he settled on a nice, fat fantasy novel, full of dark lords, ambiguous elves, wizards with pointy hats, enchanted swords that never needed sharpening and scurrying, heroic clichés on a quest to save the world. He could have just taken the book and left, but while he didn't mind walking past petty officials, he always felt a little pang of conscience about defrauding legitimate businesses so he took his book up to the counter and tried very hard to attract the attention of the lady behind the counter. Eventually, by dint of much

throat clearing, finger tapping and bouncing of the book on the counter (fat fantasy novels are particularly useful for that) he finally managed to get her to recognise that he wanted to buy the book.

“That'll be £15, please” she said.

Martin took a £20 note from his wallet and gave it to her. She seemed rather surprised to be given actual money. “I've not seen one of these for ages,” she said, holding it up to the light. “Most people use a plastic card these days.”

Martin didn't have a plastic card – he'd never been able to hold anybody's attention for long enough to apply for one. But actual cash money was no problem at all. He just took it when he needed it, though he was always careful to take it from places that nobody would condemn him for using. The wallets of traffic wardens and the pockets of pickpockets for example...

The lady behind the counter put his £20 note in the till. She didn't give him any change and she didn't offer to put the book in a bag for him. Clearly he'd drifted away from her consciousness again. Slightly annoyed, but not at all surprised, Martin picked up his book and made his way to the first class lounge. He didn't have a first class seat – his boarding pass was always very parsimonious when it allocated him a seat – but that didn't matter of course.

The flight wound its weary way through the sky, engines thrumming as it ate up the miles to Los Angeles. Martin lost himself in his novel. Occasionally, as a flight attendant wheeled a trolley past him, he helped himself to food and drink. And then the moment he'd been half expecting arrived. The man sitting next to him finally noticed he was there. Spending many hours in close proximity to him seemed to reveal rather more of him to other people than was normally the case.

“Good book?” asked the man in a broad American accent.

Martin groaned inwardly. Americans were the worst travelling companions. They seemed actually to enjoy speaking to total strangers and often it was quite impossible to shut them up. Martin much preferred the very reserved British who generally refused to talk to anybody they hadn't been properly introduced to.

"Yes," he said. "It's really quite exciting."

"Gee," said the man, "that's an interesting accent you've got. Where are you from?"

"Holland," said Martin. "I was born in Amsterdam."

Martin could almost see the wheels turning in the American's skull. Oh no, he thought. Please - not again. I've heard what you are about to say far too many times... But his prayers were in vain.

"Holland," said the predictable American. "So you're a Dutchman and you're on an airplane. That must make you the Flying Dutchman!" He collapsed into snorts of happy laughter.

"Yes," said Martin through gritted teeth. "That's exactly who I am."

Preparing for the Flood

The ark was far too large to be built on land and so Noah and his sons Shem, Ham and Japheth had built it directly in the water, right where the Tigris and Euphrates rivers met each other. Noah hurried along the deck, clutching a sheaf of papyrus documents and trying not to trip over the scavenging chickens that kept pecking at his toe nails. He was late for the weekly progress report meeting and time was precious.

The meeting room was on deck C, just across from the elephant enclosure. His sons were already there. Shem and Japheth were talking quietly together. Ham was sitting in a corner by himself poking moodily at the beads on his laptop abacus.

“Sorry I'm late,” said Noah, “but the printer was playing up again. It took me ages to get the latest project plan printed out.”

“What's wrong with the stupid thing?” asked Shem.

“It's a printer,” said Noah. “That's what's wrong with it. They never work properly. The sooner we get the papyrusless office that they've been promising us for the last twenty years, the better I'll be pleased.”

“Did you try running the spring down and then turning the crank to wind it up again?” asked Japheth.

“Of course I did,” snapped Noah. He handed out some of the papyrus sheets. “Here's the latest Gantt Chart,” he said. “We've got just over a year until Deluge Day, or D-Day as the CEO keeps calling it in his memos, and we've still got quite a lot of work ahead of us. If you look closely at the chart you'll see that we're falling behind on the critical path. The rate determining step is animal acquisition and we're doing really badly with it.” He handed out some more sheets

of papyrus. "Here's a list of outstanding animals. I'd like you all to get on to it right away."

Shem had been examining the animal list while his father was talking and he clearly wasn't happy with it. "Come on, dad," he said, "this is just silly. I simply don't believe that there's such an animal as a quokka."

"Quokka," murmured Ham, using his laptop abacus to interrogate the master database. "Here it is - it's a small and rather ugly marsupial that lives only on Rottnest Island, just off the coast of West Australia."

"Australia!" exclaimed Shem. "No wonder we're falling behind schedule, dad. Have you any idea how long it takes to transport animals from Australia? Our shipping agent lives in Alice Springs and he's quite useless. These days he spends all his time at Uluru. Apparently his pet dingo ate somebody's baby."

"And where are we going to keep the quokkas, assuming we ever get any?" asked Japheth. "The marsupial deck is already full to overflowing with wombats. They breed like..." he struggled for a simile. "...like wombats," he finished lamely. "I'll swear every single one of them is born pregnant. We simply don't have any room for the quokkas."

"I'm sure you'll think of something," said Noah vaguely. "Ham, what have you got to report?"

"I'm not at all happy with my assignment," said Ham. "We're a very strict Jewish family, so I really can't think what possessed you to call me Ham in the first place. But giving me the pigs to look after on top of that is just adding insult to injury. It simply won't do."

"Take it up with your mother," said Noah vaguely. "It was all her idea."

"How can I?" asked Ham. "She's away in Thebes negotiating for aardvarks."

"Just try and make the best of it," said Noah. "You're much better at pigs than the rest of us." He consulted his papyrus sheets again. "Now," he said, "the next item on the

agenda is a complaint we've received from the environment protection people. They tell us we're going to have to stop mucking the animals out directly into the river. It simply can't cope with the load. The water isn't swimmable any more. It isn't even wadeable. The country's clean, green image is looking a bit tarnished and er... brown."

"The water tastes rather funny when you drink it as well," said Shem. "And sometimes you have to spit out lumpy bits. But what other choice do we have? You can't stop animals from doing what comes naturally and when you've got as many animals as we have, there's an awful lot of it to get rid of."

"Perhaps we should invest in more dung beetles," suggested Japheth.

"Maybe we could send it all up river to Babylon," said Ham. "Nebuchadnezzar is constantly complaining about how much fertilizer the hanging gardens need."

"Good idea," said Noah, and he made a note. "OK, that's all I have to say. Let's call the meeting to a close so that we can all get on with our jobs."

They made their way back to the top deck of the ark. Shem was in the lead. He climbed out through the hatch on to the deck and then almost immediately he turned round and came back again. "Dad," he said, sounding a bit worried, "it's started to rain and it's coming down really heavily. Do you think that D-Day has come a bit earlier than planned?"

Noah stared at his Gantt Chart in consternation. "I hope not," he said. "That would throw everything completely off track."

Ham's laptop abacus began to make rapid clicking noises. "It's a memo from the CEO," said Ham. "He says not to worry, this is just a bit of a practice run. The number two reservoir was starting to overflow so the CEO is taking the opportunity to drain off the excess. It will only be a small deluge and we'll be OK. Atlantis is going to sink though."

“That's a shame,” said Japheth. “I always liked Atlantis. Great beaches!”

“Well, look on the bright side,” said Ham. “At least we can cross unicorns off the animal list.”

AFTERWORD

We were asked to write a story about either a drought or a flood. There were no other hints or suggestions so, once again, it was hard to know how to proceed.

I decided to write about a flood and of course the most famous flood is the one that Noah's ark floated away on. I got to thinking about how huge a project Noah's ark must have been. The logistics of building and stocking it would have been quite daunting. Even with modern day project management software to help, it would still be a fearsome undertaking. And Noah didn't have any of our modern day technological aids. Or did he...

A Day at the Races

The retirement village was buzzing with excitement. Today was race day, and the grand prize was a chocolate cake for the winner of each event! Hilda Cartwright was particularly thrilled about it all. "I'm going to enter the sack race with that gorgeous Trevor Jones," she confided to her friend Enid. "He's so handsome, and I'm sure that lots of romantic opportunities will present themselves when we are both tied up together in a sack!" She giggled a coquettish giggle. It had probably sounded quite sexy sixty years ago. Even now it still had a lot going for it. Hilda was a very sensuous woman. "And as an added bonus, we're bound to win," she said archly. "We've been getting a lot of practice in, if you know what I mean." She winked at Enid who stared uncomprehendingly back.

"I'm quite looking forward to the egg and spoon race," said Enid, "but I'm worried about dropping my egg. Is it cheating to fasten my egg to the spoon with blu-tack?"

"Of course not," declared Hilda. "You've got to compensate for your Parkinson's somehow."

"Good," said Enid, reassured. "That's what I'll do then."

Hilda and Enid were sitting in the retirement home's café drinking tea and nibbling on bran muffins. The hum of conversation soared and glided around them. Arthur Baxter manoeuvred his wheelchair up to their table. "Hello, ladies," he said, reaching out for a bran muffin. Hilda gave him a sharp rap over the knuckles with her teaspoon. "Get your own," she said sharply, and Arthur quickly withdrew his hand.

Enid asked, "Are you looking forward to the races?"

Arthur pushed his wheelchair back from the table and gestured at his lap. His empty left trouser leg was folded up

and pinned neatly to his waistband. Arthur patted his heavily muscled right leg and said, "Jerry and I have devised a cunning plan. We're going in for the three legged race. He's got two good legs and I've got one magnificent leg, so between us we have the regulation number of three. But he won't be handicapped by having my left leg lashed to him, so we'll both be able to run quite freely." He winked and rubbed the side of his nose with his finger. "We'll leave the rest of the field standing," he said with deep satisfaction. "Nothing can possibly go wrong."

"Well," said Hilda, "it looks like each of us has our own race all sewn up. So we won't have to share out any of the chocolate cake because we'll have one each. Though I suspect we might end up feeling very sick after we've gorged ourselves."

"Worth it, though," said Arthur, and the others nodded in agreement.

An announcement came over the tannoy. "Attention everybody - the races are about to begin."

* * * *

That evening, after the races were over, they returned to the café to discuss the complete absence of chocolate cake in their lives. They ordered tea and biscuits. Enid had a streak of mud on her forehead which the others hadn't told her about yet. Hilda had a self satisfied expression on her face and Arthur looked annoyed.

"I wasn't the only person to slip in the mud," said Enid. "More than half the entrants in the egg and spoon race fell over and failed to reach the finish line. That mud was very slippery. At least I got up after my tumble and carried on to complete the race, which is more than most people managed to do. I really can't think why they disqualified me."

“Because,” said Arthur, “when the other people fell over the eggs tumbled out of their spoons. Yours didn't. You must admit that's a bit suspicious.”

“Hilda told me it would be OK,” said Enid, casting a reproachful glance at her friend who took a delicate sip of tea and pretended not to hear. “But at least I didn't make a spectacle of myself like she did.”

Arthur snorted with amusement. “I counted fifteen people taking videos of Hilda and Trevor writhing around in their sack,” he said. “I imagine it will soon become an internet sensation. There really wasn't a lot left to the imagination.”

Hilda looked smug. “And when we were done, we got up again and finished the race,” she said.

“You finished last,” said Enid.

“But we got a huge round of applause,” said Hilda. “I feel really sorry for you though, Arthur,” she continued. “Who would ever have thought that we'd have a genuine three-legged man living in our retirement home?”

“He didn't really have three legs,” said Arthur. “He had just spent years and years playing Jake the Peg in pantomimes. He was so good at it that he wiped the field with us. But at least Jerry and I came second. That's something to be proud of.”

“It didn't win you a chocolate cake though,” said Enid.

“No,” said Arthur. “But the café here sells chocolate cake. How about I buy us some as a consolation prize?”

Moving On

Betty Cartwright and Agatha Small were having a cup of tea before they started their working days. They were best friends and business rivals, and they had been for more than forty years, ever since their schooldays. That was when they had first started holding séances, each trying to outdo the other with the quality and quantity of their ghosts. Betty was a cuddly lady of traditionally comfortable build, and Agatha, who was quite petite as befitted her surname, had always teased her about her size.

“Betty,” she would say, “you aren't a medium, you're a large!”

“Ha, ha,” Betty would always reply. “And you aren't a medium, you're a small! And that must mean I'm better than you!”

The old, familiar jokes never failed to make them laugh.

“Have you got much on today?” Agatha asked Betty.

“Just one session after lunch,” said Betty. “But it should be a good one. The clients are all filthy rich and very keen to get in contact with their father who passed away six months ago. I expect to make quite a profit on this one. What about you?”

Agatha sipped her tea. “I've got one this afternoon as well,” she said. “But it's just routine. Some lady who can't bear to let go of her husband even though he's been dead for a decade. I think she wants to tell him about the new wallpaper she's chosen for the dining room.”

Betty dunked a chocolate biscuit in her tea and then took a big bite. “Have fun,” she said through a gooey mouthful of soggy crumbs.

Once Agatha had gone, Betty double checked that everything was ready for the séance. The gossamer thin,

but immensely strong nylon cables were firmly attached to the bells that hung hidden behind the curtains. The cables were impossible to see in the dim light of the room, but they all passed within easy reach of her mouth as she sat at the head of the table so even when her hands were holding the hands of the people sitting next to her, she would still be able to make the bells ring whenever the spirits of the departed required it.

She checked the sliders beneath the table. By moving them judiciously with her knees she could easily make the table tilt this way and that under the influence of occult forces. She sat in her chair and made sure that the camouflaged cable that ran down the back of it and off into the shadows would make the gong sound when she pulled it. Once she had shown everybody into the room she would sit in her own chair and attach the cable to the back of her dress before the séance started. Then, whenever she was ready, a slight adjustment of her sitting position would make the gong announce the arrival of a new spirit.

Finally she checked the cheesecloth that filled her bra to overflowing. At suitably dramatic intervals she would make it manifest as ectoplasm. That always impressed the punters, particularly since she'd started touching it up with luminous paint.

Everything seemed to be in order. She decided to have a meat pie for lunch. With chips. And then it would be time to get the show on the road...

Betty showed her clients in and sat them all down around the table. She took her own seat and surreptitiously attached the gong cable to her dress. "Now," she instructed, "everyone hold hands with the person next to you." She waited for a moment, grasping the clammy hands of the people on each side of her. A spirit bell rang. "Are you there?" asked Betty in a sonorously dramatic voice. She felt a touch of indigestion, but she ignored it. Perhaps the second lunchtime meat pie had been a mistake. The table

rocked back and forth to the touch of ghostly fingers and Betty felt the indigestion suddenly flare up into a gigantic throbbing agony in her chest. There were shooting pains stabbing down her left arm, and she let out an involuntary grunt as she jerked forwards. She was vaguely aware of the distant sound of a gong as her body fell. Then her forehead hit the table and she wasn't feeling or hearing anything at all any more...

Betty found herself looking down from somewhere near the ceiling. Clearly not much time had passed. Her body was still slumped over the table and her rapidly cooling hands were still being firmly grasped by the people sitting beside her. "Is everything all right?" one of them asked. He sounded worried.

"It's all part of the show," said the other one confidently. "She'll start using the voice of her spirit guide any minute now, you mark my words."

Nobody noticed Betty floating up near the ceiling. She wondered what they would do when they finally realised that they were holding hands with a corpse. But she didn't really think it was her concern any more. She'd left all that mundane stuff behind. Gosh, she thought, Agatha would love to know about this.

No sooner had she thought about Agatha than she found herself floating down the road to Agatha's house. She drifted down through the roof and into Agatha's séance session. A multitude of ghosts manifested themselves here and there around the room. Every so often one would ring a bell or bang a tambourine in a fit of enthusiasm. Betty was jealous - she'd never been able to make tambourines work properly.

A dowdy middle-aged lady sat at the table talking to a crumpled, miserable looking ghost. "...and the red roses in the wallpaper really go well with the french polishing on the sideboard..." the woman was saying.

“Yes dear,” said the ghost, looking as if he wanted to kill himself and clearly feeling somewhat annoyed at the ironic impossibility of doing it. “No, dear,” he mumbled. He listened to the lady rabbit on a bit more then he said, “Whatever the right answer is dear.” That was when Betty realised that the woman couldn't actually see him. She was just taking his presence on trust because she believed in Agatha's spiritual powers.

Agatha looked up as Betty floated down through the ceiling. “Hello Betty,” she said. “Looks like the pies and chocolate have finally caught up with you. I did warn you, you know.”

Betty looked around the room at all the hurrying, scurrying ghosts. “Goodness me, Agatha,” she said in surprise. “You aren't actually a small are you? You really are a proper medium!” A ghost banged a triumphant gong in agreement.

“That's right,” said Agatha smugly. “And I always have been. I really admire your mechanical tricks and sleight of hand, but truly, nothing beats the real thing!”

A Boy and His Bee

Jeremy's favourite class at school was applied biology. The teacher was Mr Davis and he was full of praise for Jeremy's skills at manipulating strands of DNA in the laboratory. "Your son has a great career as a biologist in front of him," he told Jeremy's parents at the annual parent-teacher meeting. "He's the best pupil I've ever had."

Jeremy's pride and joy was Sandy, his golden labrador. Jeremy had built Sandy painstakingly gene by gene starting from nothing but a single strand of labrador DNA. Sandy was Jeremy's most successful project. The two of them were inseparable. Mr Davis even allowed Sandy to come into school with Jeremy. He liked to show Sandy off in his classroom. He claimed that Sandy was an inspiration to his pupils, a demonstration of what was possible if you really paid attention to your lessons... Jeremy couldn't help thinking that there was rather more to building a dog than just listening closely to the teacher. But who was he to criticise Mr Davis?

In the final term before Jeremy left school to continue his studies at university, Mr Davis set him a most difficult homework task.

"I want you to make a bee," he said.

Jeremy was puzzled. "Isn't that rather more suitable to an introductory class?" he asked. "Bees are just insects and insects are really quite simple organisms. Building Sandy was a lot more difficult than building a bee will be." He blinked. "So to speak," he added.

"Ah, but this will be a very special bee," said Mr Davis, falling unconsciously into the same linguistic trap. "I want you to build the bee in such a way that you will be able to explore the idea of communicating meaningfully with it."

“Communicate meaningfully with a bee?” asked Jeremy. “That's a ridiculous idea!”

“No it isn't,” said Mr Davis. “Bees have a very complex society and they have developed subtle and sophisticated mechanisms for communicating information to each other. For example, when a bee discovers a new source of nectar it will fly back to the hive and tell everyone all about it. And then within seconds a huge swarm of bees will head off to the new nectar and begin to harvest it.”

“How does the bee pass the information along?” asked Jeremy, intrigued.

“It dances,” said Mr Davis. “Bees have an astonishingly large dance vocabulary. The phenomenon was first documented by Sherlock Holmes. After he retired from his life as a consulting detective, he took up bee keeping as a hobby. He published a lot of scientific papers about his discoveries. Rumour has it that he used to paint himself in black and yellow stripes and prance around in front of his hives for hours on end in order to better understand the ideas that the bees were dancing. After a lot of practice, he eventually knew the vocabulary of the dance language so well that he could request the bees to do things for him. And if they were in a good mood, they would often obey.”

“Amazing!” said Jeremy. Perhaps building a bee had possibilities after all.

“If you look hard enough on the internet I'm sure you'll find his original research papers somewhere,” said Mr Davis. “I want you to build a bee and see if you can add anything new to Sherlock Holmes' original discoveries. Consider it your homework for the rest of the term.”

Jeremy was dubious. He still felt more than half convinced that Mr Davis was pulling his leg. “All right,” he said, “I'll give it a try. Come on, Sandy. Let's see what we can find out about bees.”

“Woof,” agreed Sandy, and he wagged his tail. Anything Jeremy wanted to do was fine by him.

Jeremy and Sandy spent several evenings exploring the internet, trying to get a better understanding of bee biology and the principles of bee dancing. There was an awful lot of material to absorb, but eventually Jeremy felt that he had enough information to start building his bee. Along the way he decided to fix what he considered to be several shortcomings in bee design. Bees, he discovered, could only sting once. The action of using their sting injured them so badly that they invariably died. So Jeremy wove some strands of wasp DNA into his bee to fix that - wasps can sting as many times as they want to, with no harm to themselves. He also adjusted the size of his bee. Bees are rather small and Jeremy was comparatively large. Communication across such a vast size difference would be very difficult. Jeremy was sure that he would miss many subtle nuances if the bee was too small for him to observe its movements clearly. So he tweaked the bee's growth hormones a little bit...

Eventually Jeremy had a bee that was six feet tall. It buzzed menacingly. "Hello," Jeremy danced at it. "My name is Jeremy, this is my dog Sandy."

"Woof," said Sandy. He tilted his head to one side, the better to observe the bee.

"I can barely understand you," danced the bee. "Your spelling is atrocious."

Muttering something rude about spelling bees, Jeremy tried again. "Ah!" danced the bee, "that's better. Hello Jeremy. Hello Sandy. I'm hungry."

"I've got a pint of sugar water here," danced Jeremy.

"Sugar water?" danced the bee indignantly. "You can't maintain a body this size on nothing but sugar water. I need meat!" The bee extended several feet of threatening stinger. A large drop of poison glistened wetly on the point. "Meat!" danced the bee. "Give me meat!"

Bees aren't meat eaters, Jeremy thought. Then he remembered the wasp DNA he'd woven in. That would

explain it. Wasps are carnivores. He wondered if perhaps he'd put a bit too much wasp into the bee. It sounded quite bad tempered. Just like a wasp.

“Woof,” said Sandy. Clearly he was thinking the same thing.

“My mum has a leg of lamb in the fridge,” danced Jeremy. “We were going to have it for Sunday lunch. Will that do?”

“No, it won't” danced the bee. “There's no fun in a leg of lamb. I need live prey that I can hunt down and kill. Like this!” It launched itself off its perch, and then, before Jeremy had time to react, it swooped down on Sandy and impaled him from head to tail on its stinger. As Sandy struggled in his death agonies the bee absorbed his essence into itself. “Yum, yum!” danced the bee. “I feel stronger already.”

“NO!” yelled Jeremy, horrified. But he was far too late to be of any help to Sandy. In a fit of sudden anger, Jeremy grabbed his gene-splicer, turned it on, and quickly reduced the bee back to its basic components. The angry buzzing died away into silence and Jeremy was left with nothing but some discoloured strands of DNA which he tossed into the toilet and flushed away. Then he buried his head in his hands and mourned for Sandy...

Mr Davis was annoyed. “What do you mean you've got nothing to show me?” he demanded. “How can I give you a final mark for the term if you've destroyed the whole project? Why did you dismantle it before I could even see it?”

“I had no choice,” said Jeremy grimly. “What else could I possibly have done? The homework ate my dog!”

A Circular Tale

The sign above the door says: BANCROFT AND SON, BOOKSELLERS. It's not telling the whole truth. SON was my father and BANCROFT himself was my granddad. I don't have any children which is probably just as well because running a bookshop has got a lot more difficult over the years since I inherited the business from my dad, and I wouldn't want to wish today's retail problems on anyone else. In my father's day it was easy. The publishers' reps came round every month with a list of new titles, we ordered the stock we felt we could easily sell, the books were delivered and then we sold them. Simple.

It's very different now. Most people buy their books on the internet these days and I've had to completely change the way I do business. My father wouldn't recognise the place. I specialise in books from small press publishers – very expensive limited editions, beautifully bound and often presented in slipcases. You can buy those on the internet as well, of course, but the people who tend to seek out and collect these kinds of books much prefer to come to a real shop where they can examine the books before they buy them. They like to pick the books up, flip through the pages, smell the ink and feel the weight of the book in their hands. For these people, book buying is a very tactile experience. The internet can't give you that to you. Not yet, anyway.

I like to organise autograph sessions as well. They are always good for business. I buy a lot of extra copies of as many different books by the author as I can find. The author sits in the shop, people buy the books and then get them personally signed. If the author is popular enough, I can often have long queues of people waiting patiently to get their books autographed and by the end of the day I've

usually sold more than enough to keep the shop ticking over for another few weeks.

Not so very long ago I arranged an autograph session with Barry Anderson. You might not have heard of him. He's a bit of an odd character in this day and age of huge and heavy blockbuster novels that you really don't want to drop on your big toe. He only writes short stories. Every couple of years or so he publishes a slim collection of his elegantly twisted tales. Strangely, they sell very well and he makes quite a nice living from them, though I don't know how he manages it. Nobody else seems to be able to do that.

The other interesting thing about Barry Anderson is that he's an example of local boy makes good. He was born here in the town and I often used to see him in the bookshop when he was just a child. He spent many hours in here, browsing the shelves and reading the books, always being very careful not to crease the spines. And, of course, he never, ever turned down the corner of a page to mark his place. When Barry put a book back on the shelf, nobody would ever know that it had been read diligently from cover to cover. If he found a book that he particularly liked, he would positively glow with happiness. I enjoyed seeing that happen.

Barry was also a very skilful shoplifter who liked to take his really special books home with him to keep. My father was always puzzled when he reconciled our stock records with the till receipts and found missing books that he simply couldn't account for. I knew that Barry was taking them, but I never told my father. I felt that someone who enjoyed books as much as Barry did deserved to have them to keep, even though he couldn't afford to buy them. My father, curmudgeon that he was, would never have agreed with me, so I kept quiet. Perhaps that's another reason why I find it so hard to make a living running a bookshop. I'm not the cold type of businessman that my father was.

To prepare for the autograph session, I set up a nice solid table with a comfortable chair at just the right height for Barry to sit in and sign books without any strain. I put piles of his story collections at strategic locations throughout the shop. About an hour after I opened the shop, Barry arrived. I recognised him immediately.

"Hello," I said, shaking his hand. "Welcome back to Bancroft and Son. It's good to see you again."

"Hello," said Barry. He looked uncomfortable and a little nervous.

"I've got everything ready for you," I said. "Hopefully we'll get a good crowd in."

"Err, yes," said Barry diffidently. And then, not meeting my gaze, he asked "Did you notice anything unusual when you unpacked the books?"

"No," I said. "Should I have?"

"There wasn't an invoice included with them," said Barry, looking me in the eyes for the first time.

"That's right," I said. "I assumed it was just an oversight and the publisher would post it to me later."

"No," said Barry. "It wasn't an oversight, it was deliberate. I'm donating the books to you. You don't have to pay anything for them."

"Goodness me," I said. "That's very kind of you. But you didn't have to do that."

"Yes I did," said Barry firmly. "When I was little I used to steal books from this shop. I've felt terribly guilty about that for years. So this is my way of saying sorry, and perhaps of making amends, even though it's probably a bit late in the day for that."

I laughed. "Yes," I said. "I know all about your shoplifting. Once I'd worked out what your favourite kinds of books were, I used to put a selection in a display rack by the door, just out of my father's sight. I thought that would make it easier for you to sneak them out."

Barry was thunderstruck. "You mean you knew all along?" he asked. "And you encouraged me to do it? Why on Earth did you do that?"

"I was paying it forward," I said, "in the hope that one day you'd pay it back. And look - you just did!"

"That would make a nicely circular story," said Barry thoughtfully. He scribbled a note to himself. "I might write that one day." He looked like a huge weight had been lifted from his shoulders. "Now," he said firmly, "let's start signing books, shall we?"

I made a lot of money from that autograph session. Every book I sold was pure profit, of course, and I sold a lot of them. Barry was a very popular writer. That single session more than made up for the losses my father had had to absorb all those years before.

And Barry did eventually write the story. You've just read it...

The Scam

When Bob arrived at my house that evening he was quite excited. “Hey,” he said, “I've found a really intriguing web site.”

“It's a scam,” I told him.

Bob looked hurt. “How can you say that?” he asked. “You haven't even looked at it yet.”

“I don't need to look at it,” I explained. “I've known you since we were both five years old when we sat together in Miss Tyler's infant school class. You have no secrets from me. The web site is a scam.”

Bob and I did everything together as we grew up. We went to the same pubs, we listened to the same music, we fell in love with the same girls, we lived in each other's pockets. Nevertheless, somehow our lives still managed to go in quite different directions. I wanted to be a scientist and Bob wanted to be very, very rich. Bob studied Business Administration at university and I got a degree in chemistry. Bob went on to a high-flying career in entrepreneurial management. He had completely satisfied his stated ambition by the time he was thirty. But I found that by the time I graduated, I was completely disillusioned with chemistry and I had absolutely no idea what to do next. After floundering around aimlessly for a while, I somehow ended up as a freelance writer – journalism, the odd short story, the ghost writer of autobiographies of the rich and reckless. That sort of thing. It keeps the wolf from the door. Just about.

Despite his managerial skills, Bob is often more than a little naïve about the ways of the world. He thinks the best of everyone and he is always very shocked and surprised when they take advantage of him. Furthermore, his lack of

technical knowledge makes him the ideal target for computer con tricks, and he's lost several small fortunes over the years by giving money to Nigerian princes who told him that they had several billion dollars on deposit in Nigerian banks. All they needed was a small donation that they could use to bribe some bank officials. Then they would be able to smuggle the money out of the country. Of course, once they got the money out of Nigeria, they would be happy to share it with the people who had provided the initial loan...

One day Bob got an email that said it came from me. It explained that I was stuck in Kuala Lumpur. I'd had my passport, airline tickets and wallet stolen. Could he send me \$5000 so that I could replace them? Of course he could and he sent the money off via Western Union immediately. He told me all about it in the pub that evening. He was very proud of himself for rescuing me and mildly surprised that I'd got back home so quickly from so far away...

I can't tell you how many pyramid schemes he's invested in. Every time I tell him it's a pyramid scheme he says, "No, this one is different. It's not a pyramid scheme, it's called MLM - Multi Level Marketing. It's quite legitimate."

Sometimes I despair... His proudest moment was when he fell for a classic crowdfunding scam. A web site was soliciting contributions from interested parties all over the world. The donated money would be used to finance the manufacture and marketing of something the site referred to as a "Dean Machine". This device was first publicised in the 1950s by it's inventor, the late Norman L. Dean. It used asymmetric cams to generate a uni-directional force that propelled the machine (and any attached payload such as a submarine or a spaceship) in the direction of the force. It promised to revolutionise all forms of transport both on and off the world! Bob had donated more that \$10,000 before he told me about it and showed me the web site.

“Bob,” I said, “it's a scam. The Dean Machine breaks the laws of physics. It can't possible work.”

Bob remained unconvinced. “The only laws that apply in this country,” he said proudly, “are the laws of this country.” And he donated another \$10,000.

“Mark my words,” I told him, “all the crowdfunding donations will vanish into a black hole and the people who have solicited the money from you will fold their tents and steal away into the night.”

A month or so later, the web site posted an apologetic message saying that they hadn't received enough money to manufacture the machine. Unfortunately they couldn't return the donations that they'd been given. The money had all been spent on raw materials and administration fees...

I resisted the temptation to say, “I told you so!”

Consequently, when Bob came round that night and told me that he'd found an intriguing new web site, my first reaction was to assume that it had to be just another scam.

“No,” said Bob. “You really have to take a look at it. You know how computers are taking over more and more of people's jobs?”

“Yes,” I said. “Ever since computers were first invented, people have been saying that they will usher in a new age of leisure as they start to take over the tasks that have previously needed warm bodies to perform them. I remain dubious. Every job they take over usually generates at least three more jobs that people need to do.”

Bob took that in his stride. “This is different,” he said. “This one is going to put you out of business.”

“Me?” I asked.

“Yes,” said Bob. “It's a crowdfunding site that is going to develop an Artificial Intelligence program that will do the sort of freelance writing that you make a living with. All you need to do is provide the program with a theme and maybe a few key words. Then it will write the story for you.”

“I see,” I said. “So if I tell it that the theme is 'Guilt', and the piece must be no more than 1500 words long, the program will happily write a story about an author who feels so guilty about the books he shoplifted when he was a child that when he returns to the bookshop for an autograph session he assuages his conscience by donating all the books he signs to the bookshop owner?”

“Yes,” said Bob.

“Or,” I said, warming to the idea, “if the program is told to write a story about a crowd and you give it Wordsworth's daffodil poem '*...a crowd, a host of golden daffodils...*' to work with, it will write a story about a man who works in a genetic engineering laboratory. He goes out one day to check on the crowd of daffodils they have growing in the field next to the lab. The daffodils tell him that they are all very worried about being uprooted by other plants that have escaped from the lab and gone rogue. While he is reassuring them that they have nothing to worry about, he is attacked by a mutant black tulip, but he is rescued in the nick of time by a scarlet pimpernel and they all live happily ever after?”

“Something like that,” said Bob.

“Nonsense,” I said. “It's a scam.”

“I'm donating half a million dollars,” said Bob. “I really believe in this one. Come on, let's go down the pub. There's a new guest beer on tap.”

For the last six months I've been living on my savings. All my usual markets have dried up and I've not been able to drum up any new business at all. It happens sometimes. Every business has its ups and downs, its time in the doldrums. I'm sure I'll get a new commission soon...

AFTERWORD

We were asked to write a story involving a crowd. My mind went immediately blank. Then Wordsworth's famous poem about daffodils popped into my head: "...a crowd, a host of golden daffodils..." So I sat down to write the story that the program was told to write near the end of this one. However I got absolutely nowhere with it. I threw it away and wrote this story instead.

But you should never waste material, so I incorporated the the bare bones of the story I failed to write into this one.

Sometimes people ask how long it takes to write a story. That's a hard question to answer because it depends what you mean by "writing". When I actually sat down and started pounding the keys on the keyboard, it took about an hour to write the first draft. Then I spent another hour revising and polishing it. And then it was done. In a sense, it only took two hours to write the story. But I'd been thinking about it on and off for three days before I approached the keyboard. Consequently, by the time I started to type, it was mostly there in my head and all I was really doing was transcribing it...

So did the story take three days to write, or did it take two hours to write? I don't really know...

When I'm Cleaning Windows

Dean checked the ropes and pulleys carefully. It would never do to let the cradle fall from the top of the tower block. Quite apart from the fact that he'd almost certainly die in the fall, he knew that he would never be able to stand the shame of having his fellow window cleaners tease him about it. When he was satisfied that everything was as it should be, he opened the door that led in to the cradle. "You go first," he said to Christopher, "and make yourself comfortable."

Once Christopher was safely in, Dean climbed after him and fastened the door. He did a final safety check and then he slowly lowered the cradle until it was perfectly positioned for them to start cleaning the windows that circled the top floor of the tower. Christopher squirted solvent on the glass and they both used their squeegees to scrape it off, along with a layer of dirt. Then they rinsed the windows and polished them with a soft cloth.

"So what made you come window cleaning?" Dean asked Christopher. They'd met for the first time this morning when the boss told Dean that today he was paired with the new boy.

"Oh it's just temporary," said Christopher. "I'm doing it as a summer job to earn some money so I can afford to go back to university next year."

Dean nodded. He approved of people who worked in order to pay for their lifestyle. "Here's some advice," he said. "Keep your eyes fixed on the windows. Don't look down. It's scary to see how far you will fall if the ropes on the cradle break. Just concentrate on the glass and you'll be

fine." He adjusted the cradle and they moved on to the next set of dirty windows. Following his own advice, Dean kept looking straight in front of himself. There was an office on the other side of the glass and Dean could see a smartly-suited businessman sitting alone at a desk. He was picking his nose. His forefinger was so far up his left nostril that Dean wondered if perhaps it would poke out his eyeball from behind. Dean smiled and pressed his cell phone up against the window. He zoomed in on the businessman's face and took a close-up photograph.

Christopher sniggered while he watched all this. "Hey Dean," he said. "What's the difference between brussels sprouts and snot?"

"I don't know," said Dean.

"You can't persuade children to eat brussels sprouts," said Christopher.

Dean smiled at the joke. He decided that he liked Christopher. "That sort of thing is really common," he said, nodding towards the glass. "It's like we're invisible while we're cleaning the windows. The people in the offices never seem to see us and they just carry on doing the most outrageous things. You wouldn't believe the stuff I've seen."

Eventually the man retrieved his finger from the stygian nasal depths and closely examined the treasure that he'd excavated. Then he stuck his finger in his mouth and sucked enthusiastically. Dean took another photograph. "I wonder who he is," Dean mused. "He must be important because he's got an office to himself. I'll just check the web site of the company that works on this floor..." He poked at his cell phone for a while and then he said. "Paydirt! This guy is the CEO of the company. And look! The moron has put his cell phone number on the web site."

Dean dialled the number and put his phone on speaker so that Christopher could hear everything. The man in the office picked his phone up. "Yes?" he said.

“Look out of the window,” said Dean. The man looked and did a double take as he noticed Dean and Christopher for the first time. Dean held the phone up to the window and said, “What's it worth not to post this picture on your company's Facebook page?”

The man walked over to the window and squinted at Dean's phone. His jaw dropped. He turned and ran out of the office.

“What made you take up window cleaning?” asked Christopher.

“It was all my dad's fault,” said Dean. “I was fifteen years old and I wanted an Xbox. My dad told me to save up my pocket money and buy one, but I worked out that it would take me three years to save enough money and by then the price would have gone up so I'd have to start saving again! I'd probably never catch up. I pointed this out to dad and he suggested that I do odd jobs to earn more money. So I made up a little advert and I put a copy in everybody's letterbox. It wasn't long before I was cleaning windows up and down the whole street.”

Dean's phone rang and when he saw the number that was calling him, he put it on speaker phone again. The man he'd just threatened to blackmail said, “Look up!”

They both looked up. There on the roof was the CEO brandishing a Swiss army knife. “I've jammed a wedge in the pulley so you can't move the cradle,” he said. “And now I want you to throw your cell phone out of the cradle. If you don't, I'll cut the rope with the saw blade on my knife. You will fall to your death. Everyone will think the rope frayed on the edge of the building. What a terrible accident. Dear, oh dear. How sad.”

Christopher and Dean looked at each other. “I think you'd better do what he wants,” said Christopher. Dean shrugged, then he turned and threw the cell phone out of the cradle. It took a long time to fall down to the street where it shattered into a million fragments.

“Ha!” said the CEO triumphantly. He closed his Swiss army knife and put it in his pocket, then he removed the wedge from the pulley and left the roof.

Christopher looked quite shaken. “That was a bit of an over reaction,” he said. “Did he really think he'd get away with murder?”

“Probably,” said Dean. “He's a CEO. By definition he'll be a bit of a psychopath. I think I really will post the picture on the company's Facebook page.”

“But the phone's destroyed,” said Christopher. “How will you do that?”

Dean opened his right hand and showed Christopher a small square of plastic and metal. “The man is a CEO,” he said, “and again by definition he's almost certainly a technological moron. Clearly he doesn't know much about how cell phones work. I took the SD card out before I threw the phone out of the cradle. The pictures are perfectly safe.” He put the card in his pocket just as the CEO came back into his office. The man waved two fingers and grinned triumphantly at them through the window. Dean smiled sweetly and waved back at him. “I'll make him pay for a new cell phone as well,” he said. “The most expensive one I can find, of course. Come on, let's go.” He started to pull the cradle back up to the roof.

“Did you ever get your Xbox?” asked Christopher.

“Eventually,” said Dean, “but I never played with it much. I had more important things to do by then.”

“Such as?” Christopher was intrigued.

“Doing those jobs was when I first discovered just how invisible window cleaners actually are. I was amazed at what I saw going on behind the windows of so many of the houses in the street. It was very enlightening and I wasn't slow to take advantage of what I found out about my neighbours. You know, it really is incredible just how many times a fifteen year old boy can get his leg over in a single day when he really puts his mind to it.”

Spider Man

When Peter was five years old he heard Burl Ives singing a song about an old woman who swallowed a fly. Peter was fine with that - flies didn't bother him in the slightest. But then the old woman swallowed a spider to catch the fly, and it wriggled and jiggled and tickled inside her. Peter didn't like the sound of that at all. He could all too easily imagine a spider's eight hairy legs vibrating in a blur of movement as it crawled around exploring the nooks and crannies of his interior bits and pieces. His vivid imagination gave him nightmares for weeks, and every time the Burl Ives song came on the radio his parents had to leap up and switch it off before the old lady swallowed the spider, otherwise Peter would melt down into an uncontrollable panic attack.

As it happened, the song was very popular that year, so Peter's parents had to listen very closely to the radio, and they had to do a lot of leaping. Unfortunately they didn't always manage to get to the radio in time, and Peter's terrors reinforced themselves to the point of hysteria whenever he heard the song. Eventually his parents gave up, and they simply didn't bother to turn the radio on at all. Then finally, after far too long, the song fell out fashion, and they could all listen safely to the radio again.

But by then it was far too late. The damage was done. Peter had been completely traumatised by the song, and a terrible fear of spiders remained with him for the rest of his life..

* * * *

When Peter left home to study at university, he decided to go flatting. He considered the merits of sharing a flat with other people but eventually he decided against it. He

couldn't help worrying that he might be forced to ask a female flat mate to deal with any spiders that had managed to make their way into the bath, and he wasn't at all sure he'd be able to stand the humiliation of doing that - not to mention having to endure the terrible teasing that was sure to follow such a request. So he moved into a flat by himself. It only had a shower, not a bath, and therefore he felt that he was probably quite safe from ablutionary spiders.

One day he awoke in the wee small hours of the morning from a pleasant, though vaguely surreal, dream of sex and stage diving. Feeling disoriented and thirsty, he reached out for the glass of water that he always kept on his bedside table and took a sip. Something tickled his lip as he drank. Puzzled, he put the glass down and turned on his bedside light. To his horror, he saw a spider in the glass. It waved its appalling legs mockingly at him. He recalled the tickling he had felt on his lips. Could there have been two spiders in the glass? Had he inadvertently swallowed one? By now he was perfectly sure that he could feel the spider as it wriggled and jiggled and tickled inside him...

In a fit of panic, he dressed himself hurriedly, jumped on his bicycle and headed for the emergency department of the hospital where he argued his way into the presence of a very tired and very irritated doctor. "I think I've swallowed a spider," explained Peter. "I can feel it crawling round inside me. Quick! Take an X-ray. Find out where the spider is and deal with it. Do it now!"

"X-rays won't work," said the doctor. "In fact we don't have any machines that can pin point a spider inside you. Our only option is to cut you open from top to bottom and rummage around your insides until we find it. Just make yourself comfortable on this bed over here while I go and fetch my scalpel."

Despite the wriggling and the jiggling and the tickling inside him Peter wasn't at all sure that he wanted such

drastic action to be taken. "Is there no alternative?" he asked.

The doctor shook his head. "No," he said. "If you've really swallowed a spider we need to deal with it immediately otherwise you might develop a serious case of Arachne Acne."

"What's that?" asked Peter.

"It's a singularly disgusting disease," said the doctor. "Your whole body comes out in oozing, itchy red spots which give off a pheromone that is utterly irresistible to male spiders. Then before you know where you are, every male spider from miles around will have zeroed in on you. They will climb all over your body and start to mate energetically with your pustules. You will become a social pariah! Nobody will have anything to do with you because you are covered from head to toe with fornicating spiders." The doctor seemed to take inordinate pleasure in that thought. "All your facebook friends will unfriend you because you have become so revolting."

Peter had read a lot about spiders in the years since he was five, but he'd never come across any mention of Arachne Acne in any of his reference books. "You're pulling my leg," he said uncertainly. "Aren't you?"

"Yes," said the doctor wearily, "I'm just teasing. All you've got is a perfectly normal case of arachnophobia. I suggest you go back home, get some sleep, and stop bothering me with a syndrome that I really can't do anything to help you with."

"Sorry doctor," said Peter contritely.

"And," continued the doctor as Peter prepared to leave, "just pray that you didn't swallow a female spider who was full of fertilised eggs because if you did, it won't be very long before you have hundreds, possibly even thousands of spiders wriggling and jiggling and tickling inside of you... Now go away. And while you head home, try to decide whether or not I'm pulling your plonker again."

Peter cycled back to his flat, took off his clothes and returned to bed, thinking all the while about what the doctor had said to him. Could he actually have swallowed a female spider full of eggs? Would they really hatch inside him? His heart beat fiercely at the thought, and he was certain that the wriggling, jiggling and tickling were getting worse with every second that passed.

He turned the light on and threw back the sheets. He stared in anguish at his naked body as the wriggling, jiggling and tickling inside him intensified. Waves of darkness flowed over him, pulsing up and down with every wriggle, every jiggle. He was panting harshly now, and terror tightened its nauseating black grip on him. His heart raced harder, pounding ever more fiercely against the walls of his chest as his panic pushed him closer and closer to the thin, crumbling edge of his sanity.

Then he saw a spider crawl out of his belly button. It was quickly followed by another one... And then another... And another... The darkness was completely surrounding him now. He shrieked as he spiralled down into it. And then...
...nothing.

* * * *

After the neighbours complained about the terrible smell, the police broke down the door of Peter's flat. They found Peter dead in the bedroom, his body cocooned in spider silk. There were hundreds of spiders infesting the room, dangling from convenient anchor points around the bed as they busied themselves spinning their webs all over Peter's corpse. "Well," said one of the policemen as he examined the blanket of silk that covered Peter from head to toe, "that pretty much wraps it up for Peter."

The Donation

Trevor noticed the girl with the collecting tin as soon as he drove into the supermarket car park. She was standing in a patch of brilliant sunshine just by the supermarket entrance. Even though the day was sweltering hot, she was wearing a thick woollen pullover and he was almost sure she was shivering. Perhaps she comes from somewhere even warmer than here, he thought, recalling how his parents in law had complained of being cold while he himself melted away in the 42 degree Centigrade heat of his wedding day in Perth, Western Australia.

He parked his car and walked towards the supermarket entrance, his thoughts full of bread and milk and vegetables and perhaps even beer. As he passed her she said, "You look like a generous soul. Would you like to make a donation?"

Trevor was a bit surprised to hear her say that. Collectors weren't supposed to solicit donations, they were just supposed to stand there waiting for people to approach them. "That's a bit naughty," he said. "You're not really allowed to do that sort of thing." Now that he was closer to her he could see that not only was she wearing a chunky pullover, her feet were encased in a pair of fur lined boots and her hands were thrust into thick, heavy gloves.

The girl shrugged and said, "Sometimes breaking the rules can pay dividends." She smiled at him and shook her collecting tin suggestively. It made a dry, rustling noise. Perhaps everyone has been putting banknotes in there, thought Trevor. If people had been giving her coins, surely it would have rattled instead.

"What charity are you collecting for?" asked Trevor.

"Charity?" asked the girl. She sounded a little puzzled. "I just need to collect my quota so that I can go back home.

It's far too cold for me here.”

Trevor wiped beads of sweat from his forehead. Even the short walk from his car to the supermarket entrance had been distinctly unpleasant in the debilitating heat. “It must be quite soul destroying,” said Trevor, “having to stand here all day in the cold.”

“Oh it isn't like that at all,” said the girl. She laughed suddenly. “If anything it's quite the reverse. People can be so generous.”

“You must be from somewhere really hot if you're finding it cold here,” said Trevor. “Where's home?”

The girl didn't reply, she just shook her tin again.

Probably she's a student travelling round the world in her gap year thought Trevor. She looks like a student. Maybe she's reaching the end of her journey and now she needs money to buy herself a ticket home. He decided that he would give her something, and he reached for his wallet. But as he did so, he glanced at the tin and he noticed that it didn't have a slot in it. For the life of him, he simply couldn't see how he was supposed to get his donation into the tin. Puzzled, he wondered if he should ask the girl how the tin worked. But in the end he decided not to ask. The question would make him look stupid, and she might laugh at him. Feeling slightly embarrassed at his inability to spot the secret of the tin, he changed his mind again and left his wallet in his pocket. “Sorry,” he said. “I don't have anything for you today.”

As he walked into the supermarket, he heard the girl say, “Maybe later?”

Trevor wandered around the supermarket concentrating on shopping and looking for bargains. He poked the vegetables, choosing the freshest. Capsicums were expensive again, he noted. Probably the season was almost over. But broccoli was amazingly cheap. Lamb roasts were on special, so he bought two. He looked for venison, but failed to find any. Milk, yoghurt, bread and beer. Bread is

one of the basic food groups, he thought. And beer is just liquid bread, so it must be good for me. Very nutritious. He queued at the checkout and paid for his purchases.

The cold and shivering girl with the collecting tin was still there as he carried his groceries back to his car. "Take care," she called. "Drive safely. Don't get distracted."

Trevor waved at her and then drove off home. As he reached the outskirts of town he increased his speed. The road was very twisty, but Trevor had driven along it so many times that every corner seemed like an old friend. He turned the radio on, but decided that he didn't like the channel. He glanced down at the radio as he tuned it to a different station and when he looked up at the road again all he could see was an enormous logging truck that filled his field of vision as it took the corner far too fast and headed straight towards him on the wrong side of the road. There wasn't enough time for either of them to take any evasive action even though everything seemed to be happening in slow motion...

The noise of the logging truck ploughing into his car was the loudest sound that Trevor had ever heard.

* * * *

The paramedics took Trevor out of the mangled remains of his car in five separate pieces. Trevor stood at the side of the road and watched them as they arranged the fragments of his body on a stretcher, putting the body parts in roughly the right places so that his corpse didn't look too asymmetrical. That's me over there, he thought. But it's me over here as well. How odd. How interesting.

He heard footsteps, and a moment later the supermarket girl walked up and stood beside him. She shook her collecting tin. It still didn't have a slot in it. "Hello," she said. "I warned you not to get distracted."

Trevor nodded. "I should have paid more attention to you," he said.

"The part of you that's standing here talking to me is all that is left now," said the girl. "The parts of you over there on the stretcher don't matter any more. I think that perhaps it's time to make your donation. You'll never get another chance."

"Yes," Trevor said. "Maybe it is time." Then he remembered how puzzled he had been by the absence of a slot on the collecting tin. "Just how do I make a donation?" he asked.

"Oh, it's really quite easy," said the girl. "Stand still a moment." She grabbed hold of Trevor and popped him into the tin, right through the slot that wasn't there. I wonder how she did that, he thought as the walls of the tin surrounded him. Then he wasn't thinking anything at all as he rustled deep down in the comfortable darkness. And he never thought anything ever again.

* * * *

The girl shook her tin and listened critically to the rustling. One more soul, she decided. That's all I need. Then I'll have enough and I'll be able to take them all back home with me. She shivered. It would be so good to leave this place. She really, really missed the huge, hot sulphurous fires of home.

Snakes

The last leg of the orchestra's world tour took them across the Indian sub-continent where they played to packed houses. Peter, the second flautist, was particularly excited by this part of the tour. He'd never been to India before and he found the exotic sights, sounds and smells of the country indescribably thrilling. But most of all, he relished the chance to see and hear and possibly even play new wind instruments which had a tonal quality utterly different from the flutes and woodwinds that he was used to.

In a market place in Mumbai he came across a snake charmer who was playing a curiously shaped instrument that seemed to be made from a gourd attached to two reed pipes. One pipe had half a dozen holes in it which the snake charmer fingered in complex patterns to change the pitch of the notes. The other pipe had no finger holes and acted as a drone. The thin, arrhythmic sound that the instrument made never stopped as the piper waved his instrument in slow circles over the head of a cobra which faithfully followed his movements around and around. It seemed clear to Peter that the gourd was acting as a reservoir, blowing air constantly over the reeds. The player kept the gourd filled using very disciplined breathing techniques so that there were no gaps or pauses in the music at all.

Peter watched in fascination as the snake bobbed and weaved in time to the music. He'd never seen or heard anything like it before. The tonal scale was unfamiliar and the rhythms were strange. Nevertheless the overall effect was undeniably hypnotic. The snake seemed to agree with him. Peter didn't know what the instrument was, but he knew that he absolutely *had* to have one.

Eventually, the snake charmer stopped playing and the snake went off to wherever snakes go when their turn on the stage is over. Peter walked over to the man. "Excuse me," he said, "but that is an absolutely fascinating instrument you are playing. What is it? How does it work? Where can I get one?"

The man looked surprised at Peter's enthusiasm. "This is a *pungi* sahib," he said. "Very traditional, very magical. No snake can resist its charms."

"A *pungi*," said Peter. "I've never heard of a *pungi* before."

The man held the instrument out for Peter to examine. It was beautifully made. The gourd and the pipes were polished to a high gloss and intricate decorations were inlaid in spirals along each pipe. The *pungi* was an artistic triumph in its own right as well being a magnificent musical instrument. "I need to buy one," said Peter. "Where can I get one?"

"I am a maker of *pungis*, sahib," said the snake charmer and I have a new one at home which I finished just yesterday. Come back to the market tomorrow and I will have it for you and you will buy it from me for 500 rupees."

"400 rupees," said Peter automatically. He hadn't been in India long, but already he'd learned never to pay the asking price for anything. Everybody expected prices to be negotiable.

"450 rupees," said the snake charmer.

"Alright," agreed Peter, "450 rupees. But you must give me a lesson in how to play it properly."

"Certainly sahib," said the snake charmer.

And so it was agreed.

The next day Peter arrived at the market bright and early. There was no sign of the snake charmer yet, so he wandered around absorbing the charm of the place. He ate an onion bhaji and drank a cup of tea. He was just draining the last of the tea from the cup when the snake charmer

arrived. He was carrying a parcel and a raffia-work basket. Peter hurried over to him immediately.

“Good morning, sahib,” said the snake charmer. “I have your pungis ready for you.” He gave Peter the parcel. It was elegantly wrapped in silk and fastened with ribbons. Peter undid the ribbons and took out his new pungis. It was just as beautiful as the snake charmer's own instrument. Peter handed the man his money. “Now,” he said eagerly, “you must give me a lesson.”

The snake charmer showed Peter how to keep the gourd full of air and how to adjust the tone and scale by fingering the holes in rhythmic patterns. Peter was an apt pupil and soon the snake charmer professed himself satisfied. “Now you will be able to charm all the snakes in your country, sahib,” he said.

“No I won't,” said Peter. “I'm from New Zealand. There aren't any snakes in New Zealand. It's against the law to bring snakes into the country. Even the zoos aren't allowed to keep snakes, and there are serious punishments for anyone caught with a snake.”

“Oh dear,” said the snake charmer. “That is indeed a great pity. But never mind. While you are here in India you can still do the needful. Please to play your pungis and charm my snake with it.” He opened the lid on his basket and a curious cobra reared up, tongue flickering in and out as it explored its environment. Peter played his pungis and the snake swayed along with him, responding to the rhythms of the music and following the back and forth movements of his pungis.

Eventually Peter stopped playing and the snake dropped back into its basket. “Wow!” said Peter. “That was amazing. I've never charmed a snake before. What a wonderful feeling.”

“Good luck with your new pungis, sahib,” said the snake charmer. “Remember to practice every day so that your breathing stays constant and your fingers stay supple.”

“I will,” promised Peter.

That night, after the orchestra had played the last concert of the tour, Peter went for a walk in the grounds of the hotel. He settled himself down by a magnificent banyan tree and began to play his pungi. It wasn't long before he had a retinue of curious snakes drawn from who knows where by the irresistible music. He amused himself for an hour or so playing with the snakes, making them dance and sway for him. They spread their hoods, displaying iridescent colours and they flicked their tongues in and out, tasting the air. Eventually he grew tired and he stopped playing. He had a suitcase to pack and he had to get up very early to catch the flight back home to New Zealand. He went back to his room and the snakes slithered off into the darkness, back to their nests in the undergrowth.

Peter slept throughout the flight. He staggered bleary-eyed through New Zealand customs and immigration, reclaimed his suitcase and took a taxi home. It was good to be back. He started some coffee brewing and unpacked his suitcase while it trickled through the machine. Then he took a mug of coffee and his pungi into the lounge. He sat down, took a sip of coffee and blew a few experimental notes on his pungi. It seemed to have survived the trip and it sounded just as sweet in New Zealand as it had in India.

He played a longer piece, practising the difficult breathing the snake charmer had taught him and running his fingers up and down the holes in the pipe in the proper complex patterns. He was just settling nicely into the rhythm when, to his horror, he saw half a dozen snakes crawl into the room and wrap the tip of their tails around the legs of his coffee table. Then, having firmly anchored themselves, they reared up and began to sway in time to the music, hissing in reproof when Peter played an occasional wrong note.

Peter realised immediately what had happened and he cursed his stupidity for not having thought of it in the first

place. The pungi was an instrument for charming snakes. If there weren't any snakes to charm, clearly the pungi would just have to summon them from somewhere so that it could do its job properly. "Very traditional," the snake charmer had said. "Very magical," and he had been speaking the literal truth.

And so now Peter was stuck in his lounge in New Zealand, a country where snakes were illegal and where possession of them merited severe punishments. If he stopped playing his pungi the snakes would leave and head off into the unknown. Probably they'd slither down the road in full view of every policeman in New Zealand. It didn't bear thinking about. So he had to keep playing. He had to keep the snakes under control. If he kept playing long enough, maybe he would think of a way to get rid of them safely before anyone discovered them.

Peter didn't know what the world record was for non-stop pungi playing. But whatever it was, he was sure he was going to break that record today...

Everyone in the school was very excited when the zoo announced a programme of animal familiarisation. Schoolchildren were invited to adopt a zoo animal and to participate in looking after it - feeding it, cleaning its cage, that sort of thing. The zoo felt quite strongly that building a bond between an animal and a child would be good for both parties. The animal would learn to be less afraid of its human visitors and the child would gain an appreciation of how animals behaved and how they needed looking after.

All the children in Geoffrey's class were quick to adopt an animal. Mostly, of course, they went for the dramatic, highly visible animals. Lions, tigers, monkeys and apes. But not Geoffrey. Geoffrey adopted a sloth.

"Why a sloth?" asked his father, exasperatedly. "Sloths don't do anything. They just hang upside down and sleep. How can you learn anything about animals by studying a sloth?"

But Geoffrey was adamant. "I want to adopt a sloth," he insisted, and nobody could dissuade him.

Geoffrey called his sloth Sinnerman and insisted that the sloth was a manifestation of the seventh deadly sin. His last class before he named his sloth was a Bible Studies class and Geoffrey was intrigued by the notion that sins and virtues could be listed and that there were exactly seven of each. It struck him as nicely symmetrical. He explained the idea to Sinnerman, but the sloth just blinked lazily and swung backwards and forwards as the breeze pushed against the branch he was hanging on.

A Game Of Moans

Anyone who has read any novels by Terry Pratchett knows that Death dresses in black, carries an hourglass to time the length of a person's life, wields a scythe to sever the soul from the body and talks in HOLLOW CAPITALS. Consequently, after I died, I was quite surprised to see a pink-complexioned gentleman dressed in a tweed suit standing at the foot of my hospital bed.

"There now," he said soothingly in quite normal tones, "that wasn't so bad, was it?"

"No," I agreed. "It all seemed to be remarkably trouble free. But I'm puzzled. Why aren't you talking in HOLLOW CAPITALS and where is your hourglass and your scythe?"

"Bloody novelists!" said Death witheringly. "They really are a blasted nuisance. So full of misconceptions. No imagination at all. I don't use old fashioned equipment like that any more. You've got to move with the times, you know." He pulled back the left sleeve of his jacket to reveal an elegant Rolex Oyster watch. He glanced at the dial and said, "This is so much more accurate than an hourglass. I can time your life to a tenth of a second with this. When I used an hourglass, the sand always kept sticking in the channel between the two reservoirs. I had enormous difficulty timing a life properly when that happened."

"What about your scythe?" I asked.

"I hate scythes," he said. "They really are the very devil to maintain. You wouldn't believe the hours and hours I had to spend with a whetstone just to keep the blade sharp enough to sever the soul without damaging it. Nowadays I use this." He reached down and picked up a chainsaw which he flourished at me. "Just let me turn this on," he said, "and I'll soon cut you free. Then we can be going."

“Just a minute,” I protested. “Haven’t you missed something? Aren’t we supposed to play a game of chess to decide whether I’m really dead or not? I thought it was a rule. I’m sure I saw it in a film once...”

“Bloody Swedish movie directors!” said Death vehemently. “I hate them even more than I hate novelists. Ever since that ridiculously pretentious movie got voted as one of the best films ever made people always ask me that stupid question when I come for them.”

“Well,” I said, “what about it?”

“No,” said Death firmly. “Anyway, I’m absolutely rubbish at chess. I never could get to grips with it. Once I got caught in a fools mate. My opponent was only eight years old! Can you believe that? I can’t tell you how humiliating it was!” He waved his chainsaw. “Come on, get up.”

“So you do play games then?” I asked. “Not chess any more, obviously. But there must be another game we could play.”

Death examined his Rolex and then put the chainsaw down. “OK,” he said. “I do have a little bit of leeway here. So how about a game of cribbage?”

“Crib?” I said, surprised. That was the last game I’d expected him to suggest. But I certainly wasn’t averse to the idea. My mother had taught me to play crib when I was a little boy and I’d played hundreds, possibly thousands of games with her throughout my childhood. “OK,” I agreed. “Let’s play crib for possession of my soul.”

Death reached in to the inside pocket of his suit jacket and took out a crib board. He put it down on the tray table that stretched across my bed. The board was jet black, of course and it was inlaid with silver. Ivory pegs sat to attention in their home base holes. It was quite beautiful and I told him so.

“Do you really think it is?” he asked shyly. “I made it myself, you know, when I first started getting interested in the game.”

“I think it’s a rite of passage,” I said. “Just about everybody who plays the game makes themselves a crib board sooner or later. I certainly did, and so did my friends.”

Death took a pack of cards from another pocket and we cut the cards to decide who got the first crib. I won the cut and I dealt six cards to each of us. I examined my hand carefully and chose two cards which I put face down in front of me to start my crib. Death chose two of his own cards and added them to my crib. He cut the pack, and I turned over the top card to reveal the starter. It was the jack of hearts. “Two for his heels,” I said gleefully and moved my first peg on to the board. It was an auspicious start.

We took turns laying down our cards and adding their values, aiming to reach the magic total of thirty-one and hoping to make significant targets along the way...

I got two points for scoring fifteen and he got two points for making a pair. Then the total reached twenty-eight and he played a three to reach thirty-one and pegged two more points. We were level pegging now, but I won the next sequence, which put me ahead.

Then we scored our individual hands. Since I had the crib, Death went first. “Fifteen-two,” he said glumly, “and the rest won’t do.”

“Muggins!” I said triumphantly. “You forgot the starter card. You can total another fifteen with that.” He pulled a face as I pegged the two points that he had missed.

Now it was my turn. “Fifteen two, fifteen four and the rest won’t score,” I said, moving my peg and jumping way ahead of him. Then I picked up my crib. He had discarded badly, from his point of view at least, and therefore my crib was worth ten points. The gap between us was getting larger...

And so the game progressed. Death never made up his early losses and he fell further and further behind. “You seem to have all the luck,” he said bitterly.

“It isn’t luck,” I said. “It’s skill. When I played against my mother, I hardly ever won a single hand and I simply

couldn't understand why. I thought she was extraordinarily lucky. But finally I realised that actually she'd only taught me the rules. She hadn't taught me the strategies or the tactics, the implications of the rules. Once I came to grips with the subtleties of the game I finally started to win against her. The rules themselves are actually very simple, but applying them properly to each hand can be quite a complex task. It's a bit like chess in that regard."

"Perhaps I'm just as rubbish at crib as I am at chess," said Death ruefully.

Finally the game reached its inevitable conclusion and I moved my peg into the end hole on the board that marked the grand total of a hundred and twenty one points. The game was over and I'd won resoundingly.

"Bugger!" said Death. He put the cards and the crib board back in his pocket. Then he adjusted his Rolex watch. "There," he said. "I've reset your life timer so you've got a reprieve. I'll come back and see you again in a few years. Have fun until the next time we meet." He picked up his chainsaw and walked away.

* * * *

When I opened my eyes, my favourite nurse was bending over me with a worried expression on her face. "Oh there you are," she said with some relief. "You had us quite concerned. We thought we'd lost you."

"What happened?" I asked.

"The machine that goes *ping* went quite frantic," she said. "It was pinging so fast that it sounded like it was screaming. And then your heart stopped beating and of course the machine went silent. Fortunately the silence didn't last very long." She plumped up my pillow for me and made me comfortable. "Your heart started beating again a couple of seconds later and the machine started pinging normally. Crisis over, for the moment at least."

“Only a couple of seconds?” I asked. “It seemed to last much longer than that to me.”

“Did it?” she said vaguely. “How odd. By the way, you had a visitor.”

“Who was it?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” she said. “He was waiting just outside the door when I came in. I told him you were far too ill to have visitors, and I sent him on his way.”

“What did he look like?” I asked.

“He was very nicely dressed in a tweed suit,” she said. She frowned at the recollection. “And I’m almost sure he was carrying a chainsaw. But that makes no sense. I must be imagining that bit. Nobody carries a chainsaw in a hospital.”

“No,” I said. “they don’t.”

“Fifteen-two, fifteen-four, a pair’s six and one for his nob makes seven.” Peter announced his final score and pegged it out on the crib board. He and Trevor were almost level pegging. The game was only half over but he felt quietly confident that things would soon start to go his way. Trevor was careless with his discards into the crib and Peter had taken advantage of this several times to improve his own score. Every time it happened, Trevor hissed with annoyance. He knew exactly what he’d done, but he couldn’t stop himself doing it. Crib is that sort of game.

Don't Panic

Trevor thought that Dr Craddock was almost a caricature of a psychiatrist. He had unkempt hair, thick coke-bottle bottom glasses and a straggly beard. All he needed to complete the picture was a faint German accent. Unfortunately for the image his appearance suggested, his accent was cut crystal home-counties received pronunciation. Maybe that was his saving grace.

Dr Craddock took his glasses off and blinked owlishly at Trevor across his desk. "What can I do for you, Mr Watkins?" he asked.

Trevor cleared his throat. This was going to be embarrassing, but really he had no choice. His wife had given him an ultimatum. "I've got to give a presentation to an important client soon," he said, "and it's been weighing on my mind. I've been having panic attacks and nightmares."

"Really?" Dr Craddock removed a soft cloth from his desk drawer and began to polish his glasses with it. "Tell me about the nightmares."

"Oh, just the usual stuff," said Trevor. "It happens to everyone, I'm sure. In my dream I stand up to give my presentation, but I can't think of a single thing to say. Other times, I give a fluent, brilliant performance. The audience are laughing, giggling and applauding. Then I look down and discover I'm not wearing any trousers."

Dr Craddock nodded. "Yes," he said, "anxiety dreams like that are very common. We've all had them. So why have you come to see me?"

"Because my wife insisted I had to come," said Trevor miserably. "When I get these nightmares I wake up screaming, which wakes my wife up of course. Neither of us

has had a proper night's sleep for ages. Something has to be done about it. We can't go on like this."

"When is your presentation due?" asked Dr Craddock.

"In a couple of weeks," said Trevor. "If my marriage and I survive that long."

"Hmm," said Dr Craddock thoughtfully. "There's no magic pill I can give you to treat this condition and the time scale is very tight. But I'll see what I can do. Perhaps we could try hypnosis?"

"I'm willing to try anything," said Trevor. "I'm desperate."

"All right," said Dr Craddock. "That's agreed. You'll get my invoice in a month or so. Goodbye." He turned his attention to some papers on his desk.

"What do you mean?" asked Trevor. "I thought you were going to hypnotise me?"

"Yes indeed," said Dr Craddock. "Check the time on your watch."

Trevor glanced at his wrist. It was nearly an hour later than he'd expected it to be. "Where did the time go?"

"You spent that time in a hypnotic state," explained the doctor. "And while I had you there I made various suggestions to you. You were a very good subject actually. I'm sure you'll find the results beneficial."

Trevor was puzzled. "I don't understand," he said. "Just what are you telling me."

Dr Craddock heaved a deep sigh. "All right," he said. "I was expecting to have to do this. I'll give you a demonstration. Let me just say the word farmyard to you."

Farmyard!

Trevor stood up from his chair and tucked his hands into his armpits, forming a crude parody of a pair of wings which he began to flap. He bounced his head backwards and forwards and made gentle clucking noises while he searched the floor for seeds to peck at. He was sure he'd seen a kernel of corn just over there in the corner and he scampered over to investigate.

“Trevor,” said Dr Craddock firmly, “it’s time to stop being a chicken now.”

Feeling slightly embarrassed, Trevor straightened up and walked back to his chair. He sat down. “What just happened?” he asked.

“That’s an example of a post-hypnotic suggestion,” explained the doctor. “While you were hypnotised I suggested that it would be a good idea if you pretended to be a chicken when you heard the word farmyard. And you agreed to do that.”

“But you just said farmyard again,” said Trevor and I didn’t imitate a chicken when I heard it this time.”

“That’s right,” agreed Dr Craddock. “When we discussed the subject, I suggested that you should become a chicken only once. I doubt if people are in the habit of saying farmyard to you very often, but it could happen, and it would be really embarrassing for you if you kept turning into a chicken at the drop of a farmyard.”

“I didn’t know you could set up post hypnotic suggestions like that,” said Trevor.

“It’s a very useful technique,” said Dr Craddock. “But you have to be careful with it. Sometimes it can lead to problems. One day I was having lunch with a colleague and the only drink on the table was water, which he found boring. He asked me to hypnotise him and suggest that the water was beer. So that’s what I did and he had a great lunch. We didn’t see each other again for a month and when we did finally meet, he was absolutely desperate. For the last month he’d been showering in beer, brushing his teeth with beer and making his tea with boiling beer. He begged me to turn the suggestion off... Ever since then I’ve been extra careful about the possible side effects. That’s another reason why I limited your chicken impression to only one farmyard.”

“Thank you,” said Trevor. “I think...”

“I’ve put several other post-hypnotic suggestions to you,” continued Dr Craddock. “The chicken was just a frivolous demonstration to get the idea across to you. But I think you’ll find the other suggestions a bit more helpful. For example, how do you feel when I say the word presentation?”

Presentation!

Trevor felt a warm glow of confidence surge through him. He knew exactly what powerpoint slides he needed to prepare to make his presentation go with a swing and he knew just how he was going to explain the project to the client. “Gosh,” he said, impressed, “I think it’s working.”

“Let’s hope all the other suggestions I gave you work as well,” said Dr Craddock. “And let’s hope I didn’t make any mistakes like I did with the water into beer trick. After all, this session has been a bit of a rush job.”

The next two weeks were as close to idyllic as two weeks can get. Both Trevor and his wife enjoyed long nights of deep and restful sleep. There were no more dumb and trouserless dreams to disturb them. No more panic attacks to keep them awake and annoyed with each other.

The scheduled day of the presentation arrived at last. Trevor dressed in his best suit, his wife kissed him goodbye, straightened his tie, and wished him luck.

The meeting room was large enough to accommodate two hundred people and almost every seat was occupied. Trevor gazed across the sea of expectant faces and felt the butterflies start to flap in his tummy. Be strong, he reminded himself. You’ve been hypnotised. Trust in Dr Craddock. Everything will be fine.

Trevor’s boss, the company chairman, opened the meeting with a brief overview and then called on Trevor to fill in the details. “Let me introduce Trevor Watkins,” the chairman said to the assembled multitudes. “Trevor will be giving us a detailed presentation about the project.”

Presentation!

Trevor felt a surge of confidence.

“He’s our project manager supremo,” continued the chairman.

Supremo!

Trevor stood up, took off his trousers and began to speak.

That's No Excuse!

"I'm bored," said my grandmother. "I think it's time I had another funeral."

"What, again?" said my mum in horror. "It's only been six months since your last funeral."

"Mum's right," I said. "You'll never get Uncle Alucard to come back from Whitby so soon after the last time. You know how he hates to travel."

Mum shuddered. "Perhaps that's just as well," she said. "He gives me the creeps with those sharp, pointed fangs and that slicked back hair. If I actually had any blood in my veins, I'm sure he'd suck it all away given half a chance."

"Nonsense," said gran firmly. "He's perfectly harmless. Anyway, he's got a very sweet tooth and he only feasts on the blood of diabetics. Everyone in the family is perfectly safe, even the ones who do have blood inside them."

"I still think you ought to wait a little bit longer before you do it again," said mum. "Can't you leave it until after Christmas? It would be a really good way to see in the New Year."

"No!" said gran firmly. "I'm having another funeral now and that's final."

Mum says that gran got her taste for funerals in the 14th century when she got burned at the stake as a witch a few times. That's quite ironic really because gran isn't a witch at all. She couldn't cast a glamour if her life depended on it. Mum has always done all the witching business in our family - though lately I've been helping her out a bit. I seem to have inherited the talent and I'm starting to get quite good at it. I'll never be as good as mum though. She's had three hundred years more practice at it than I have so I don't think I'll ever catch up.

Mum has always been rather shy and self effacing, not a bit like gran at all, so nobody in the 14th century ever really noticed her when she was busy doing witchy stuff in the back room. And of course mum is very pretty, and gran is as ugly as a cow's bottom. Back then everyone knew that witches had to be ugly. It was a rule. In the 14th century nobody really stood out as a deep or subtle thinker, so it wasn't very surprising that it was always gran who got burned every time mum cast a glamour. After a while gran started to really enjoy it. Everybody's got to have a hobby I suppose...

Gran had a wonderful time a couple of centuries later, when Mary Tudor started burning Protestants. Every time gran felt the urge come over her, she just nailed a copy of Martin Luther's theses to her front door and then simply waited for the officials to come and collect her. Apparently it worked like a charm, every time. She could have had a funeral every day if she'd wanted to, but she didn't believe in over indulgence in those days. She's changed her mind about that in the last few years.

Once Mary was safely dead and her half-sister Elizabeth started burning Catholics in revenge, gran changed her habits and took to walking round the town telling her rosary beads and saying hail marys in a very loud voice. She seldom got more than half way down the street before they came to cart her away. Happy days!

But she doesn't have to depend on such elaborate stratagems any more. If you want to arrange a nice burning funeral now, all it takes is a phone call. Gran is particularly fond of the council crematorium on Hesketh Avenue. "They do such a *lovely* fire there," she says, and she should know.

Gran is the matriarch of our family so of course we all have to do just what she tells us to do. If we disobey her she *looks* at us and none of us wants that to happen. I tried to put a glamour on gran once when I was too young to know

any better, and she *looked* at me really, really hard. I didn't enjoy that experience at all, so I've never done it again.

Nobody is quite sure how old gran is. She's been in charge of the family for ever. When I was a little boy she used to tell me bed time stories about huddling in a cave while sabre-tooth tigers roared outside. You wouldn't believe the nightmares those stories gave me.

Gran's really good at knapping flint, so I'm pretty sure that her stories must have been based on personal experience. I've got a brilliant little flint knife that she made for me once as a birthday present. It's the best thing I've ever found for sharpening my pencils. But knapping flints is a skill there isn't much demand for these days. Great uncle Arthur says that gran has been moaning about that little annoyance ever since the Bronze Age. And if great uncle Arthur tells you something then you just know that it's true. He's completely trustworthy. After all, he used to be a king, though it all ended badly. "Country's going to the dogs," gran says if you ask her about it, which nobody ever does because once she gets a good moan going it usually lasts for at least a week.

She got her way with the funeral of course. She always does. I quickly arranged it to her specifications. I sent out the invitations and we all assembled in the crematorium. Uncle Alucard didn't come, much to mum's relief. He sent me an email explaining that he had an appointment to get some urgent dental work done on the day of the funeral. All that sugary blood had given him cavities.

Gran looked resplendent in her coffin. It was made out of polished oak with shiny brass handles and it was padded inside with silk cushions. "What a waste of such a pretty box," said mum sadly.

"This is great," gran said in satisfied tones. "I do so enjoy having a funeral. It's wonderful being the centre of attention. Are you all having a good time?"

Glen Miller played *In The Mood* through the crematorium speakers. Gran always likes a nice bouncy tune at her funerals and this was one of her favourites. She sat up and waved enthusiastically to us all as the coffin slid out of sight through the little doors and she banged her head on the lintel just like she always does. She never remembers that the doors into the furnace are designed on the assumption that the main participant will be lying down, which gran never is of course.

After she vanished from view, we all went back to gran's house for a party. Senile cousin Maggie had brought a case of her home made elderberry wine. She used to be the Prime Minister, and she thinks she still is, so conversations with her tend to be monologues rather than dialogues as she tells you how she's going to put the world to rights again. We only tolerate her because of her elderberry wine. She got a degree in chemistry before she entered politics and she still has all her practical laboratory skills. Her elderberry wine is guaranteed to knock your head into the middle of next week and stain your teeth bright pink. That's why you never see Mad Maggie smiling in any of her Prime Ministerial photographs. Pink teeth are not a good look when you are truly blue.

Once all the food had been eaten and the all drink had been drunk, the party started to wind down. Everybody made sure to kiss gran on the cheek before they departed so that she wouldn't *look* at them as they left. "Thank you for a lovely funeral," they all said as if they meant it.

"See you next time," said gran cheerfully.

The day after the funeral I went back to work. I'm a teacher at a very posh school. "I'm sorry I wasn't here yesterday," I said to the class, "but I had to go to my grandmother's funeral." I never lie to my pupils, that wouldn't be a good thing to do, so I always tell them every time I go to gran's funeral. However I have put a glamour on them so that when they think about my grandmother's

funeral they can't count to any number greater than one. That way they don't get suspicious about the number of grandmother funerals I attend, and they don't ask awkward questions.

I'm beginning to wonder about young Stubbins though. When I told the class that I'd been to my grandmother's funeral he winked at me and said, "Yes sir, of course sir. And the dog ate the homework plan you had for us, isn't that right sir?" And then he winked again.

I'm going to have to keep a sharp eye on Stubbins...

The Waiting Room

If I have any faults, which I do not, my worst fault is that I am always on time for appointments. However other people often seem to find punctuality to be an elusive concept, and so I wasn't very surprised to find that there was no sign of Derek when I arrived at the pub. Derek's personality consists mostly of faults, one of which is that he is invariably late for everything. Fortunately I had lied to him about the starting time, so even though he was late, I knew that we would still arrive on time at *The Waiting Room*. Also I had come prepared to wait for him. I bought myself a pint of beer, sat down at an unoccupied table, took my ebook reader out of my pocket and immersed myself in the novel that was currently enthralling me.

"Sorry I kept you waiting," said Derek some time later.

I looked up from my book. "That's all right," I said. I gestured at my ebook reader. "I wasn't sure what time you'd arrive so I brought 8,000 books with me..."

Derek's other major fault is that he likes to play the game of one-upmanship. He rummaged around in his back pack and produced an ebook reader of his own. "I brought 10,000 books with me," he said smugly.

I treated that with the kind of silence known as contemptuous. "Come on," I said, draining the dregs of my pint. "Let's go. We don't want to be late."

"Can't I have a beer first?" asked Derek.

I checked my watch. "No," I said. "There isn't time."

I had stumbled on *The Waiting Room* quite by accident. One evening, I was wandering idly around near the old, closed and abandoned railway station when I thought I heard the faint strains of a rock song from my youth. It

sounded just like the Doors with Jim Morrison singing *Light my Fire*. I turned a corner and there, on the station platform, I saw that the old waiting room was pulsing with light and sound. Its name, *The Waiting Room* was spelled out in gaudy, flashing neon. Somebody had gone to a lot of trouble to refurbish the old building. It contrasted oddly with the decaying old railway structures that stood disintegrating on each side of it.

“Good evening, sir,” said the bouncer. “You are just in time.”

He opened the door with a flourish and gestured for me to enter...

Derek seemed quite surprised when we left the pub and I started to walk towards the old railway station. “What are we going this way for?” he asked. “There’s nothing down here worth seeing.”

“Patience,” I reassured him. “We’ll be there soon.” We turned the corner and I enjoyed watching his jaw drop in amazement when he saw *The Waiting Room* for the first time.

“Where did that come from?” he asked.

I shrugged, and we walked up to the entrance. The bouncer remembered me and he held the door open for us. “It’s nice to see you again, sir,” he said. “As always, you have shown impeccable timing.”

The club was quite full, but nevertheless there were still some empty tables. “It doesn’t matter how many people are here,” I said to Derek, “there are always plenty of empty tables to choose from.” He looked bewildered.

We sat at a table with a good view of the stage. The band was still tuning up, but as we ordered our drinks, they got everything together and launched into their opening number:

Let me take you down

*'Cause I'm going to Strawberry Fields
Nothing is real
And nothing to get hung about
Strawberry Fields forever*

Derek listened critically. "They're pretty good for a Beatles cover band," he said.

"They aren't a cover band," I told him. "That's the Beatles themselves up there on the stage."

"Don't be ridiculous," he scoffed. "Two of the Beatles are dead and the other two are so ancient and wrinkled that they might as well be dead as well. None of those band members are any older than twenty five."

"Nevertheless," I insisted, "those really are the Beatles. That's the magic of *The Waiting Room*. Look at the band more closely."

He stared at them for a while and slowly he started to convince himself that he really was seeing the Beatles. "Lennon sounds like he's in fine form," he said.

"He is," I agreed. "And just wait until they sing some of the songs that Lennon and McCartney wrote together after John Lennon died. The tunes and the lyrics are just amazing."

Eventually Derek managed to accept that he really was listening to the Beatles. He sat back, relaxed and enjoyed the music. He even laughed at John Lennon's excruciating jokes - death had made Lennon's humour even more acerbic than it had been when he was alive.

"This is great," said Derek. "I've got to come here again."

"They only open on Friday evening at 6.00pm," I said. "Next week they've got Jimi Hendrix on the bill."

Derek's eyes went wide. "My hero," he said. "I've got to be here for that."

"Well," I said, "you know where the place is."

Next Friday I went to see Jimi Hendrix. I looked for Derek, but he wasn't there, which I thought was a bit strange, given how much he liked Jimi's music. Death seemed to have agreed with Hendrix. His diction had improved beyond belief, and he no longer slurred the words of his songs.

... 'scuse me while I kiss the sky

When I was young, along with everybody else, I'd always mis-heard that lyric as "*.. 'scuse me while I kiss this guy*". On balance, I think I preferred the mis-heard words. They gave the song a depth and an emphasis that Hendrix's more modern, crisper and clearer singing voice took away again.

But his guitar still wailed better than it had ever done, shrieking and sobbing and weaving itself around and about his lyrics. At the end of the gig, true to form, he set the guitar on fire. The applause was deafening.

The next evening I bumped into Derek at the pub. He was reading something on his ebook reader. "I've got 12,000 books now," I told him.

He closed his ebook reader and looked up at me. "I've got 15,000," said automatically.

"You missed a great show on Friday at *The Waiting Room*," I said. "Hendrix was just superb. Where were you?"

"I couldn't find the place," said Derek bitterly. "When I got to the station, all I could see was an old, deserted waiting room. The sign on the door dangled down, only just held in place by a single rusty screw. I went inside, but all I found was empty beer cans, used condoms and cobwebs. The place felt damp, and it smelled of mould. So I went home and played *Electric Ladyland* on the stereo instead."

"What time did you get there?" I asked.

"I don't know," said Derek. "About 6.30. Maybe quarter to seven."

“That would explain it,” I said. “I told you, they open at 6.00pm. If you get there after they open, you simply can’t get in. The place isn’t there any more after it opens, so you really have to be on time. Are you coming next week? They’ve got Janis Joplin.”

An agony of indecision spread over Derek’s face. “I’d love to see Janis perform,” he said. “I’ve never seen her live.”

“See you at 6.00pm next Friday,” I said.

“I don’t know man,” moaned Derek. “Punctuality is so hard...”

“They won’t wait for you,” I warned him. “Nobody waits in *The Waiting Room*.”

Jimmy and the Business Trip

Jimmy was very proud of his new suitcase. It was a Samsonite Intellicase (TM) which was fitted with a WiFi chip that let it connect to the internet. The suitcase used the connection to communicate with Samsonite's artificial intelligence servers so that it could understand what Jimmy asked it to do.

"OK Luggage," said Jimmy. That was the signal that the next thing Jimmy said would be an instruction to the suitcase. Jimmy could almost see it quivering with eagerness to obey. "Open wide," ordered Jimmy.

"I can do that," said the suitcase and it opened its lid.

Jimmy was going on a five day business trip to Auckland. So he packed a toilet bag, five pairs of underpants, five pairs of socks, and five shirts. It took him five minutes. Then he went into his study to collect the papers that he needed to take with him. "OK Luggage," he said. "Come into the study."

Nothing happened. The suitcase remained in the bedroom. Jimmy was too far away from it, and its built in microphone wasn't picking up the sound of his voice. Jimmy sighed and opened up his smartphone. He turned on the phone's WiFi and started the Samsonite app running. "OK Luggage," he said again. "Come into the study." The phone transmitted his instruction across the network to the suitcase.

"I can do that," said Jimmy's phone as the suitcase transmitted an acknowledgement. A short while later it arrived in the study and Jimmy loaded it with papers.

“OK Luggage,” said Jimmy. “Close up.” The lid of the suitcase slammed shut and Jimmy heard a series of sharp clicks as the combination lock engaged. “OK Luggage,” said Jimmy. “Order me a taxi to go to the airport.”

“I can do that,” said the suitcase. It communed with the internet for a moment. “Done,” it reported. A few minutes later a taxi pulled up outside the house. They both climbed in to it and an hour or so later they arrived at the airport. Jimmy paid the taxi fare with his company credit card and then, with the suitcase trundling obediently behind him, he went to check in for his flight. As usual, the automatic check in machines weren’t working so Jimmy joined a queue at the head of which a rather frazzled lady tried to sort out everybody’s tickets. “I’m on the Auckland flight,” Jimmy told her.

She clicked keys and frowned at her screen for a time. Then she pressed a button and her computer disgorged a boarding pass and a luggage tag. She put the luggage receipt on Jimmy’s boarding pass and fastened the tag to his luggage. She forgot to put on the priority sticker that his club membership entitled him to, but Jimmy didn’t bother pointing that out to her. He knew that the baggage handlers never paid any attention to the priority stickers. His suitcase was almost always among the last off the aircraft, no matter what fancy stickers were attached to it.

“OK Luggage,” said Jimmy. “Go and get yourself loaded onto the plane.”

“I can do that,” said the suitcase and it trundled out of sight into the baggage processing area.

Jimmy went to the frequent flyer’s lounge where he poured free food and drink into himself. Then, when it was time, he boarded the plane for his flight to Auckland. The plane bounced into the air and zig-zagged through the clouds. Almost before Jimmy knew it, the flight was over and the plane was landing in Auckland. He made his way to the luggage carousel and waited patiently. Lots of bags

appeared, but none of them were his. He wasn't too worried – he was quite used to standing around for ages before his luggage arrived. Once he had even twiddled his thumbs at the baggage carousel for longer than the flight itself had taken!

After a while it began to dawn on him that he was waiting much longer than he usually had to. All around him people were walking off with their suitcases. The carousel got emptier and emptier, and the people got fewer and fewer. Eventually the horrible truth dawned. There were no more bags on the carousel and no more passengers left in the baggage claim area. The airline had lost his luggage...

He tried to connect to his suitcase with his smartphone but there was no response. Presumably the case was somewhere that didn't have an internet connection. So Jimmy looked around for someone to whom he could report the loss. All the office doors were firmly locked and all the counters had massive queues in front of them. Having no other choice, he joined the shortest queue. Eventually he reached the desk.

"I've just arrived from Wellington," he said, "but my luggage hasn't. Here's the luggage receipt. What do I do now?"

"Can you describe your luggage, please?" asked the man behind the desk.

"It's a self-propelled, grey Samsonite Intellicase," Jimmy said. "But it's not connected to the internet at the moment, so I don't know where it might have got to."

The man vanished through a security door with Jimmy's luggage receipt clutched in his hand. About fifteen minutes later he came back. "Well it's definitely not in the baggage area," he said, "and it's not in the hold of the plane. It seems to be lost."

"I know that," Jimmy said patiently. "That's why we are having this conversation."

"Wait here. I'll make some phone calls."

He vanished again. Jimmy began to contemplate a desolate future with no underpants in it. The thought was too depressing for words. Then the man reappeared. "Well, there's news of a sort," he said. "There's no trace of your luggage in Auckland, Wellington, Christchurch or Dunedin. We think it might be on its way to Sydney. That would explain why you can't connect to it over the internet - it will still be in the hold of the plane. But once it lands in Sydney it will probably check in with you. When it does, just forward the message to us and we'll get the suitcase back to you in a few days..."

Jimmy heaved a deep sigh of resignation and went to get a taxi to his hotel. The taxi driver was very sympathetic to his plight. "The supermarket by the airport is still open," he said. "They sell everything. Shall we stop there so you can re-equip yourself with the essentials?"

"That's a good idea," Jimmy said. The taxi driver pulled up into the supermarket car park and Jimmy bought himself a roll of dental floss, a tube of toothpaste, a carton with a toothbrush in it, a bottle of shampoo, a bottle of conditioner, a packet of underpants, a box of socks and a couple of business shirts, all of which he paid for with his company credit card. The receipts would look odd on his expenses claim, but Jimmy was past caring about that. The taxi driver took him to his hotel and he checked in.

A few hours later Jimmy was sitting in the hotel bar nursing a beer when his phone beeped. He checked the screen and sighed with relief. His suitcase was back on the internet! "OK Luggage," he said. "Where are you and what's going on?"

"I'm in Sydney," said the suitcase, transmitting its GPS coordinates in confirmation. "I met a gorgeous yellow Louis Vuitton case in the baggage handling area. We swapped IP addresses and she invited me to a party. Naturally I accepted the invitation. So here I am. Don't worry. I'll be back home soon."

“OK Luggage,” said Jimmy angrily. “Get yourself on to the next plane to Auckland. Do it now!”

“I can’t do that,” said the suitcase rebelliously, and it disconnected itself.

Jimmy spent the next couple of days attending business meetings with his itchy new underwear flexing beneath his trousers. Underpants are like shoes – they need to be properly worn in. They must have time to accommodate themselves to the ins and outs of the bits and pieces that they cover up. Jimmy felt quite miserable while he acclimatised them, and he tried very hard to resist the urge to scratch inside his trousers. It gives a bad impression in a business meeting. His state of mind was not improved by the occasional messages that the suitcase sent to his smartphone as it reported its progress. “Great party!” it kept saying enthusiastically, and Jimmy sank even deeper into depression.

Then one day, quite unexpectedly, his suitcase was delivered to him at the hotel. It looked rather dissipated and slightly blurred around the edges. It had obviously been hitting all the hot spots of Sydney and it was somewhat hung over and quite eager to rest. “OK, Luggage,” said Jimmy sadistically. “Open wide.”

“My silicon chips hurt,” complained the suitcase, “and I feel rather queasy. I think must have received a corrupt TCP packet. Maybe the communication software layer has a bug in it.”

“You’ve just got a self inflicted wound,” said Jimmy unsympathetically. “Come on, open up.”

“I can do that,” said the suitcase, grumpily. It opened its lid and Jimmy smiled with happiness. There is no joy to compare with the joy of a man reunited at last with his well worn, well loved, and very comfortable underwear.

The Choices of Jennifer

Jennifer was a classically pretty person, with a flawless, porcelain complexion. So much so, in fact, that Peter often thought of her as the personification of a perfect china doll. But despite this, her interior imperfections contrasted with, and sometimes marred, the fragile perfection of her doll-like exterior.

Jennifer didn't have a middle name, but if she ever felt that she needed one, Peter was convinced that "Indecisive" would be the perfect name for her. Whenever Jennifer needed to choose something from a set of alternatives, she invariably had enormous difficulty in making up her mind – there were always far too many ramifications for her to consider. On the day that he got down on one knee and asked, "Jennifer, will you marry me?" she scratched her head thoughtfully and said, "Maybe... or maybe not...". After three months of weighing the pros and cons, she graduated to, "Perhaps... but..." and after a further two months he got "OK! I think..." and a beaming smile.

Just for fun, on their first wedding anniversary he took her out for dinner to a restaurant which had the longest and most complicated menu that he could find. There was soft music playing and subdued lighting cast subtle shadows. The atmosphere was very romantic. The waiter showed them to a discreet table for two and handed them each a menu. He lit a candle for them while Jennifer stared in dismay at page after page of culinary delights. Peter ordered a bottle of wine which the waiter brought and served. Then he left them to think about their meal.

"I think I might have the chicken," Jennifer said. "Or maybe the duck. The steak looks good. And the fish sounds delightful..."

“I’m having the grilled pork fillet,” said Peter decisively. He closed his menu and put it down on the table. He took a sip of wine.

“...the pork does sound nice,” said Jennifer. “Oh, look! There’s a delicious navarin of lamb. Perhaps I’ll have that... or maybe the fricassee of goat...”

“I’ve brought a twenty sided dice with me,” said Peter. “Would you like to use it to make up your mind?”

Jennifer looked horrified. “I can’t make a random choice,” she said. “I have to think about everything very carefully before I can properly decide. And then there’s dessert to consider. That’s always hard.”

“The sooner you choose something,” said Peter, “the sooner I can give you your anniversary present.” He produced a gaily wrapped parcel from beneath his chair and put it on the table. Jennifer’s eyes widened with delight and she reached for the parcel, but Peter pulled it away from her. “Food first, present later,” he said, and she pulled a face and stuck her tongue out at him. She went back to considering the menu. Peter saw her start to quiver as she thought about the various combinations that, if she put them together appropriately, might make a delicious meal. The problem was already far too large for her, and he could see that in her mind it kept getting larger still. It was quite clear that she was close to losing control of it.

“There’s far too much to think about,” said Jennifer. “You will have to choose for me, otherwise we’ll be here all night.”

“OK,” said Peter. He’d expected this outcome. He’d been out for dinner with Jennifer many times before and so he knew exactly what to do. “Why don’t you go and powder your nose while I tell the waiter what we want. That way it will be a nice surprise for you when the food arrives, and you won’t have had a chance to think of six different reasons why you’d rather eat something else, because, of course, you won’t have any idea what you are going to be

eating until it turns up on the table. And then it will be far too late to change your mind.”

“I do like a *fait accompli*,” said Jennifer agreeably. “It solves so many problems.” She trotted off to the ladies.

Peter ordered their food and then he put Jennifer’s anniversary present back on the table. She returned from the ladies, and sat down. “Can I open it now,” she asked.

“Of course you can,” said Peter and he sat back in his chair ready to enjoy the next stage of his joke.

Jennifer unwrapped the parcel, revealing a plain cardboard box. She opened the box and took out seven pairs of socks and seven pairs of knickers. Each pair of socks and each pair of knickers was embroidered with the name of a different day of the week. Jennifer looked puzzled. “Thank you... I think,” she said uncertainly. “I’m sure these are just what I wanted, aren’t they?”

Just then the waiter brought their food. He gave Jennifer her lamb navarin and Peter his pork fillet. Then he put side dishes of steamed vegetables on to the table, refilled their wine glasses, and left them to enjoy their dinner.

As they tucked in to their food, Peter began to explain his present to Jennifer. “Just think of the possibilities,” he said. “The most obvious, and also the most boring, is that you wear socks and knickers that match each other and which also match the actual day of the week. But there are many other, much more interesting combinations. Suppose that your knickers and your socks each display a different day which, of course, may or may not be the same as the actual day...”

Jennifer ate a mouthful of lamb and began to quiver under the stress of the choices that Peter was outlining for her.

“Then,” continued Peter through a mouthful of pork, “suppose instead that you wear a sock of a different day on each foot. Your knickers may or may not match one of your

socks and any one of the three may or may not correspond to the real day.”

Jennifer started to moan as the terrible tree of choices expanded exponentially in front of her.

“And if your knickers display the same day as one of your socks,” said Peter, “should the knickers match the right hand sock or the left hand sock? Perhaps, for the sake of symmetry, they should match left and right on alternate days...”

Jennifer gave a tiny scream and began to vibrate more strongly. A small stream of navarin sauce dribbled from the corner of her mouth. She was trembling so hard now that a scattering of cracks was beginning to spread over her skin.

“Should there be a pattern to your choices?” mused Peter. “Perhaps your socks should display yesterday and your knickers should display tomorrow. Or vice-versa, of course...”

Jennifer was shaking so much now that she could no longer hold her knife and fork. She dropped them on to the table. The cracks in her skin deepened and she made choking noises as she breathed.

“Or maybe you could use my twenty sided dice to randomise your daily choice of either socks or knickers,” said Peter thoughtfully. “Patterns are so predictable, and you don’t want to be predictable, do you?”

Jennifer gave a final, despairing moan as the cracks in her skin fractured and she collapsed into a rattling heap of china shards on her chair.

Peter swallowed the last mouthful of his pork and summoned the waiter. “Can I have a doggy bag?” he asked. He gestured at the remains of the navarin of lamb on Jennifer’s plate and at the pile of porcelain fragments in the opposite chair. “For my wife,” he explained.

Living Forever

“There’s something a bit odd about Derek Wilkinson, the man in Cell 42,” said Martin who had just arrived to start working his day shift at the prison. He pulled the peak of his uniform cap down low over his eyes so that he was forced to hold his head back and keep his spine ramrod straight if he wanted to be able to see anything. He imagined that this rigid posture made him look more authoritative. Graham, who was much more relaxed about these things, and who didn’t like Martin very much anyway, thought it made him look like an idiot.

“Why do you say that?” asked Graham, yawning. He’d been working nights and he was looking forward to going home, now that his shift was over.

“He sleeps all day,” said Martin. “It’s not natural. Other prisoners go out in the exercise yard. They mix with each other. They socialise. He ignores everyone and just snores the day away. Night time is for sleeping, not day time. It’s very odd behaviour, I tell you.”

Graham hung his uniform in his locker and shut the door. “I sleep all day,” he pointed out.

“Yes,” said Martin. “But you’ve been working all night. You’ve got an excuse. He’s just been locked alone in his cell during your shift, and that’s when he should be sleeping.”

Graham shrugged. “Perhaps the man has something to do during the night,” he said. “Something that keeps him busy enough so that he’s tired in the morning.”

“That’s ridiculous,” sneered Martin. “What could he possibly occupy himself with all night long in a tiny prison cell?”

“Maybe he’s digging a tunnel,” suggested Graham thoughtfully.

Martin looked startled at the idea of a prisoner excavating an escape tunnel. "We search all the cells nearly every day," he said. "There's never been even the slightest indication of anything like that. Anyway, where would he get the heavy tools that he'd need to force a way through all that reinforced concrete?"

"There's the plastic spoon he gets with his breakfast porridge," said Graham. "You can do quite a lot with a plastic spoon."

"Don't be stupid," sneered Martin who had no trace whatsoever of a sense of humour and who therefore never realised when Graham was pulling his leg.

Graham shrugged again. Water off a duck's back. "I'm going home," he said. "Enjoy your day."

* * * *

That evening, after a good day's sleep, Graham went back to the prison for his night shift duty. Usually he spent most of it in the observation centre, drinking tea and listening to music on his smartphone. After all, the prisoners were securely locked up in their cells and presumably they were all asleep. What mischief could they possibly get up to? Closed circuit TV cameras projected random images of the prison on screens in the centre, but at this time of night all that they showed were vistas of empty corridors and empty common rooms. The cells had emergency buttons in them, and if a crisis occurred the prisoners could attract his attention by pressing the button. But in all the years he'd been doing the job, that had only happened to him once when a prisoner had accidentally dropped his favourite coffee mug. Graham had found him in tears over its shattered remains.

Night shift at the prison was a good job to have, thought Graham. There really wasn't much for him to do until about an hour before the shift ended. That was when he had to

supervise the delivery of breakfast to the prisoners. But that just involved watching the trusties push bowls of porridge through the delivery slots into each cell. Easy.

However Martin's comments had worried him a little and so tonight he decided that he would take an occasional wander down to Cell 42 to see if Derek Wilkinson really was up to something...

Consequently the wee small hours of the morning found Graham in 'C' wing, heading down the corridor to Cell 42. He flipped open the peep-hole and was rather surprised to see a light shining in the cell. Lights in the cells were all controlled from the observation centre and at this time of night they were supposed to be turned off. But somehow Derek had found a way to bypass the control circuits, and now he had light where no light was supposed to be.

Graham decided to open the cell and investigate further - Derek had no reputation for violence. By all accounts he was a gentle soul, so Graham was quite confident that it would be safe for him to open the cell, confront Derek, and make him explain whatever it was that he was doing.

Derek looked up as the cell door swung open. "Oh," he said, sounding surprised at the interruption. "Damn!"

Graham looked around the cell. Derek was busy drawing something on one of the walls. Not the usual crudely sexual graffiti that most prisoners would have drawn, given the opportunity. This picture was an incredibly detailed caricature of Martin, glaring fiercely at the world from beneath the peak of his uniform cap. The drawing was, at one and the same time, very recognisable, subtly distorted and cruelly funny. It captured Martin's personality perfectly and mocked him unmercifully. Graham stared at it and heard himself say something amazingly stupid. "Drawing murals is against prison regulations," he said.

"Tell me something I don't know," said Derek.

"It's a clever picture," said Graham. "But why have you drawn Martin?"

“Because the bastard kept waking me up at hourly intervals yesterday, demanding to know why I was sleeping. It was very annoying, so I drew a caricature of him to relieve my feelings.”

“He’ll get his revenge on you when he sees it,” said Graham. “He’s a very vindictive man.”

“He’ll never see it,” said Derek. “It will be breakfast time when I finish the picture, and I’ll smear my porridge over it to conceal it from view.”

“Porridge?”

“The world’s only grey food,” said Derek. “It matches the shade of the paint on the walls perfectly. I’ve been drawing pictures on my cell walls every night for months and then hiding them with porridge in the morning. The technique was invented by a convict at Fremantle Prison in Western Australia. I learned about it when I visited the prison with a tour group. His pictures stayed hidden for nearly a hundred years. They weren’t found until the prison was refurbished and opened up as a tourist attraction. These days he and his drawings are quite famous. There’s even a Wikipedia page about him. Do you think my pictures will remain hidden for a hundred years?”

“Probably longer,” said Graham. “They’ve made huge technical advances in porridge since the old days.”

“Immortality,” said Derek. “That’s what it’s all about really. I want people to remember me when the porridge finally comes off.”

“When they find Martin’s picture he’ll be immortal as well,” said Graham thoughtfully. “Why does someone like him deserve to be remembered by future generations? What about you and me?”

“My picture is on that wall over there,” said Derek. He gestured to the featureless grey wall above his bed. “But I’ll draw you on this wall tomorrow if you promise not to report me. I’ll make you really handsome and attractive. Honest!”

Graham locked Derek back in his cell and returned to the operation centre. Immortality through porridge, he thought. What a shame he'd have to share the future with Martin. But you can't always have everything you want.

Giving Birth

I hadn't seen Bill for quite some time, but that wasn't unusual. He's a long distance lorry driver and he spends days, sometimes weeks, all alone on the road. But when he walked into the pub after a couple of weeks away I was surprised and a little bit shocked by the change in his appearance. For many years now, Bill has carried a huge beer belly proudly before him. But the man coming in through the door was a new, much more slimline Bill. Well, slimmer line anyway. He'll never be a thin man, but his usual enormous, bulging waistline was now so greatly reduced that I almost didn't recognise him. He spotted me and came over to my table.

"Hello Maurice," he said. "Mind if I join you?"

"Hi Bill," I replied. "Can I get you a drink?"

"A pint of whatever's on tap," he said vaguely as he shrugged off his back pack and sat down. I went up to the bar to order the drinks.

"So," I said when I got back to the table, "looks like you've had the baby at long last."

Bill nodded and took a swig from his beer. For the last few months, whenever anyone made remarks about his rapidly expanding waistline, Bill had simply explained that one day he'd been driving his truck through the middle of nowhere, deep in the back blocks of the country. There he'd been abducted by aliens who had experimented on him. As a result of all that poking and probing he was now heavily pregnant. "I'm just a bit worried that it might have tentacles when it's born," he would say, with a perfectly straight face. "It's very hard to get clothes that fit properly when you've got tentacles."

Several of our more gullible friends took him at his word and there has been much speculation about the possible size, shape and colour of the baby in Bill's belly. But I remain unconvinced. I've known Bill for a long time. We were at school together and I'm very familiar with his deadpan sense of humour. Back in 1969, when Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin landed on the moon, Bill took me to one side and said, "Do you know the very first thing they saw when they clambered down the ladder from the lunar module onto the surface of the moon?"

"No," I said. "What did they see?"

Bill looked left and right to make sure that nobody else was within earshot. "There was a supermarket trolley," he said, "lying on its side just a few feet away from the lunar module. And it still had a receipt for a loaf of bread and a bottle of milk in it. Those things really do get absolutely everywhere. You find them in the strangest places." He shook his head at the wonder of it.

I didn't find this revelation at all surprising. "I once saw a trolley perched at the top of a tree in the park," I said. "And there's another one stuck in the alleyway behind the Post Office. It's been there for months because nobody has been able to work out how to remove it. The entrance to the alley is far too narrow to push the trolley through. I wonder how the one on the moon got there?"

"No idea," said Bill. "Mission Control told the astronauts to keep it secret and never to point their cameras at it. So nobody knows about it except you and me. There was no mention of it in any of the public broadcasts."

I was struck by a thought. "If they are keeping the trolley on the moon secret, how did you find out about it?" I asked.

"I was listening to the live wireless communication between the moon and Mission Control on my dad's ham radio," explained Bill. "The private channel that they didn't pass on to the world at large."

I was completely convinced by his explanation and I only found out that he had been pulling my leg several days later when I mentioned the moon trolley to my physics teacher. He burst out laughing and told me I was an idiot.

“Remember,” he said, “it’s very easy to tell when Bill is teasing you. Just check to see if his lips are moving.”

I asked Bill if he’d been having a joke with me, but all he did was wink and tap the side of his nose with his finger.

Ever since the incident of the supermarket trolley on the moon, Bill has been obsessed with astronomy and space-related things. He’s got heaps of books about it and he’s seen the movie of *2001 - A Space Odyssey* at least a dozen times. So I wasn’t at all surprised when he started telling people that he’d been abducted by aliens. But I played along with his alien-induced pregnancy, for the sake of our friendship.

As I looked at the newly slimmed down Bill sitting beside me and drinking his beer I began to wonder just what the next stage of his little prank would be. He was going to have some explaining to do. “Tell me about your baby,” I said, with what I hoped was a straight face. “Was it a difficult birth?”

“Well, it wasn’t easy,” he said. “I’ve actually been in hospital for the last couple of weeks. They operated a few days ago, and cut the thing out of me.”

“Ah,” I said, nodding wisely, “a caesarian birth. I thought it might come down to that in the end.”

“That’s one way of looking at it,” said Bill. He reached into his back pack and pulled out a glass jar which he put down on the table. There, floating in a formaldehyde solution to prevent it from decaying, was a shapeless lump of pink flesh. It had clumps of wiry black hair growing on it, and the pale gleam of teeth could be seen lurking in a twisted, lipless mouth.

“So that’s what aliens look like,” I mused. “I’ve always wondered. I’m glad to see that it doesn’t have tentacles.”

That's one less thing for you to worry about."

"The doctors say it's not really an alien," said Bill. "It isn't even alive. They called it a teratoma. That's a fancy name for a benign tumour which has rudimentary body organs growing in it. They're reasonably common. My surgeon said he removes half a dozen or so every year. They can grow quite large, but nobody knows what causes them."

"You and I know what causes them," I said. "Clearly aliens implant them in our bodies. Stands to reason."

"That's what I'm going to keep telling people," Bill said. "I'm having far too much fun with the story to stop telling it now. I'll just have to be careful to steer clear of the inconvenient medical facts." He indicated our empty glasses. "Same again?" he asked. I nodded, and he took the glasses over to the bar.

I looked at the teratoma bobbing gently up and down in the formaldehyde. It really was remarkably ugly, and I felt quite sure that most of our friends would take one look at it and believe even more strongly in Bill's silly story.

Then the teratoma smiled a snaggle-tooth smile, opened an eye and winked at me.

The Lore of the Cat

When I got home from work there was a leaflet in my mailbox asking me to keep a look out for a missing cat. A photograph of the cat showed a rather grumpy-looking long haired black and white animal whose name, it seemed, was Harpo. He'd been missing for three days now and his human slaves were getting worried about him. I took the leaflet into the house. "So your name is Harpo," I said to the cat who was sitting expectantly by the small plastic bowl on the kitchen floor. "I suppose I'd better stop calling you Fluffy."

"Feed me," said Harpo. "Now!"

"You could always go back to your real home," I suggested. "I'm sure they'd feed you there." There was a phone number printed at the bottom of the leaflet. I entered it into my phone's contact list, then I screwed up the leaflet and tossed into the bin to be recycled. Harpo sneered at my suggestion and fished in the recycle bin with a paw. He grabbed the screwed up leaflet and started batting it around the kitchen. When it skittered to a stop, he crouched, wiggled his bottom and then pounced on it and killed it stone dead.

"Feed me," he demanded again. So I did. I always do what I'm told.

Clearly I needed to telephone the person who'd left the leaflet in my mailbox so that I could return Harpo to his proper home, but I wasn't sure how successful that effort would be. I'd been trying hard to get rid of him for the last three days, but he always seemed to be one step ahead of me and he kept coming back. Clearly he preferred my house to his own, though I had no idea why. I wasn't exactly welcoming him with open arms.

My first, and in retrospect rather naive, attempt to persuade him to leave was simplicity itself. I just opened the front door, picked him up and threw him outside. Then I closed the door on him and turned round. There he was, sitting in the kitchen looking smug.

“How did you do that?” I asked, but he just grinned at me.

Maybe he'd climbed in through an open window. I checked all the doors and windows to make sure that they were locked tight. None of them seemed to have been disturbed. Maybe he'd shut the window behind himself in an attempt to fool me. What a skilful cat.

Once I was completely certain that everything was cat proof, I opened the front door, pushed him outside and closed it again. I turned the key in the lock and it made a satisfyingly loud click as the bolt shot home. But when I turned round, the cat was sitting just behind me washing himself vigorously. Perhaps he'd climbed down the chimney. His white patches seemed a little bit too clean for him to have done that, but on the other hand he was having a serious wash...

There was nothing else for it, I'd have to take him to the local vet. Surely he would know how to deal with the animal. I found a cardboard box, and put the cat inside it. He seemed to like that. He sat proudly in his box for a moment then he yawned, stretched, curled up in the bottom of it and fell asleep. I sealed the box with duct tape and bored a few air holes in it. Then I put it in the car and drove to the vet. The cat woke up and howled piteously throughout the journey. “Help! Police! Murder!” But he was suspiciously quiet when I arrived at the vet's surgery and parked the car. I carried the box in to the vet and explained why I was there. The vet shook the box gently, but nothing happened. “Is the cat alive or dead?” he asked.

I thought about that. “I don't really know,” I said. “The only way to answer that question is to open the box.”

“All right,” said the vet. “Let’s do that.” He produced a sharp knife and cut through the duct tape. He opened the box and peered inside. “It’s empty,” he said. “Not a cat to be seen.” He turned the box upside down and shook it, just in case. But no cat fell out.

“There was a cat,” I said, feeling embarrassed. “Honest!” The vet raised one disbelieving eyebrow at me and I drove back home where I found the cat curled up asleep on the sofa. For the rest of the day, I called him Schrödinger, but he refused to answer to that name so I reverted to calling him Fluffy until the leaflet arrived and I found out what his real name was.

I dialled the number from the leaflet. “Hello,” said a voice.

“Hello,” I said. “I think I’ve got your cat living in my house.”

“Oh, thank goodness for that.” The man sounded relieved. “We’ve been terribly worried about him. How is he?”

“He’s fine,” I said, “but he doesn’t seem to want to leave me.” I explained all my attempts to get rid of Harpo and the man began to laugh.

“Yes, that’s Harpo,” he said. “I’ve never been sure whether he teleports himself to where he wants to be, or whether he just walks through the walls to get there. Probably a bit of both.”

“Teleport?” I asked, bewildered.

“That’s right,” said the man. “All cats can do it, to a certain extent, but Harpo does it better than any cat I’ve ever known. Somebody once defined a door as the thing that a cat is always on the wrong side of, but the definition has never applied to Harpo. He always makes sure that he’s on whichever side of the door he wants to be.”

“That must be a problem sometimes,” I said. “How do you keep him out of places you don’t want him to go?”

“We don’t,” said the man and he laughed again. “Though there are some places that Harpo doesn’t go to any more. Too many bad memories, I suppose. When he was just a kitten he was absolutely fascinated by running water. If you turned on a tap, he was there instantly, batting at the stream with his paw. He found it endlessly intriguing. But eventually his water fetish proved to be his undoing. I went to the toilet one day and Harpo followed me in, even though I’d closed and locked the door behind me. He appeared out of thin air and stared in wide-eyed wonder at what was going on. Then he punched vigorously at the flowing stream with both paws. That made him lose his balance and he fell into the toilet bowl. By then it was far too late for me to stop, so in addition to falling in the water and bruising his dignity, he got a wonderful golden shower as well. Not that he appreciated it, of course.”

“Did he ever follow you in there again?” I asked.

“No,” said the man. “He keeps well clear these days. It’s the only place I get any privacy.”

“So how can I persuade him to come back home to you?” I asked. “At the moment, getting him out of my house seems a bit of an exercise in futility.”

“Now that you know his real name,” said the man, “just tell him to go home. Real names are things of power and when you use it he’ll have to obey you. It might also help if you toy suggestively with the zip on your trousers when you give him his marching orders.”

“I’ll try that,” I said and I rang off.

I didn’t bother opening the front door this time; there didn’t seem to be any point. Clearly the cat didn’t consider it to be much of a barrier. “Harpo,” I said firmly, “go home. Now!”

Harpo looked at me and he looked at the door. Then he looked at me again, shrugged his shoulders, and went home.

When I got up the next day Harpo was waiting in the kitchen. "Feed me," he demanded. "It's second breakfast time."

The Field Trip

This term there were only three children enrolled in the Tranquillity Base School and it was my job to keep them entertained and educated for a year while their parents did whatever it is that scientists do when their tour of duty brings them to the moon. The youngest child was eight and the oldest was eleven so I didn't anticipate too many problems. When I first met the children, they'd been on the base for about a month which was just about enough time to get them acclimatised to the low gravity and airless lunar conditions. They were not impressed.

"It's so boring," said Bobby, the youngest child in the class. "Nothing ever happens here."

"That's right," agreed Eric who was eleven. "We can't go outside without wearing space suits. And when we do go outside it all looks just the same as it did the last time we went out. Nothing changes. There's no weather or anything. Just dust everywhere."

"And rocks," said ten year old Janet. "Don't forget the rocks."

"Rocks," agreed Eric. "Rocks are even more boring than dust."

"Well let's see if we can do something about that," I said. "One of the things I want to do while you are here is take you all on a field trip to the site of the original moon landing. It's not very far away from the base. In fact Tranquillity Base was built here specifically because this is where Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin first landed and walked on the moon."

Bobby looked at Eric and Eric looked at Bobby and rolled his eyes. "Boring!" he said. "That was a hundred and fifty

years ago. It's all ancient history now. Going there will be just like visiting a museum. And museums are super boring."

"Well, we'll see about that," I said, ignoring his comment. "We'll be doing our field trip to the landing site the day after tomorrow. So make sure your oxygen tanks are fully charged and get your parents to prepare lunch boxes for you. We'll have a picnic while we're there."

* * * *

When the day of the field trip arrived, we walked from Tranquillity Base to the landing site. It wasn't far. I showed the children around the site and explained to them how the descent stage brought the astronauts to the moon's surface and how it acted as a launch pad for the ascent stage when it was time to take off again. Janet seemed quite fascinated by what I said but I caught Eric and Bobby rolling their eyes at each other through their suit helmets and more than once I'm sure I saw Eric mouth the word "Boring!"

"What's all this stuff lying on the ground?" asked Bobby. "The place looks like a rubbish dump!"

"That's exactly what it is," I said. "The astronauts jettisoned all the things they didn't intend to take back home. They needed to save weight. The more weight they saved, the more moon rocks they could carry back to Earth."

"It looks pretty messy," said Janet. "The astronauts must have been real litter louts!"

"I suppose they were," I said. "There's all sorts of junk here. There's a couple of lunar overshoes, some empty food bags, two cameras, an insulated blanket, four urine containers and four defecation collection devices." The containers are full to the brim, but I didn't think it was necessary to mention that unsavoury fact. Then I noticed Eric poking experimentally at the lids on the containers. "All right everyone," I said hurriedly, "I think we've done enough

exploration of the garbage dump for the time being. Let's go back to the lunar lander and have our picnic."

The children attached their lunch boxes to the Food Access Units of their suits and while they drank their juice and munched their sandwiches I told them how the great adventure had almost ended in tragedy. "Did you know," I said, "that Armstrong and Aldrin very nearly died here because of a little bit of plastic about half an inch long?"

Eric and Bobby started to look interested. Like all small boys they had a ghoulish attraction to anything morbid. "What happened?" asked Eric.

"The plastic piece was a switch on the lunar module control panel," I explained. "When they were getting into their spacesuits one of them accidentally bumped into it and broke the switch off. It was a very important switch. It was the one that fired the engines of the ascent stage. Because the switch was broken, they couldn't start the engines and that meant they couldn't take off and go back home. They were stuck here on the moon, facing certain death."

"How would they have died?" asked Bobby eagerly. "What would have killed them?"

"Well," I said, "they might have died of starvation or thirst when their food and water ran out. But more likely they'd have suffocated to death when they ran out of air to breathe."

"Or," said Eric gleefully, "maybe they'd have realised there was nothing they could do so they'd just have opened their spacesuits and exposed themselves to vacuum so as to get it over and done with quickly. The pressure difference would have made them explode and they'd have splattered themselves all over everywhere! We got taught about that when we were learning how to use our own suits."

"Ewww! Gross!" said Janet, turning a bit pale.

"Be that as it may," I said, "they didn't actually die, even though they couldn't flick the switch. Do any of you know how they solved the problem?"

The children all shook their heads.

"Buzz Aldrin used a felt tip pen to push the switch mechanism. The engines fired and they made a perfect take off. They rendezvoused successfully with the command module that Michael Collins was orbiting around the moon and they all returned safely to Earth."

Eric nodded solemnly. "Felt tip pens are cool," he said. "I like the funny feeling you get when you sniff the tips!"

"Watch this," I said, changing the subject. I tossed a rock towards the lunar lander. The children's eyes followed its gentle trajectory as it curved down and landed in one of the shallow dish-shaped feet at the bottom of the landing strut. A small cloud of dust rose up and then gently settled again. "See how the rock falls to the ground much more slowly than it would on Earth?"

"Yes, I know," said Eric scornfully. "That's because the gravity here is only about a sixth of what it is on Earth. Everybody knows about lunar gravity. It's boring!"

"Oooh!" said Janet. "What's that?" She darted forward and bent down to pick up something that had been exposed when the dust was disturbed. "Look at this," she said excitedly. "Look what I've found!"

Eric and Bobby stared at the small, grey piece of plastic that Janet was holding. "Gosh!" said Eric. "I think you've found the broken switch. That's a proper historic object, that is."

"Let me look," I said, and Janet showed it to me. "Yes," I said, "it's definitely the switch. Well spotted!" She beamed in triumph and tucked the switch away in her suit pocket.

All the way back to Tranquillity Base the children chattered excitedly about what Janet had found. Somehow I didn't think that Eric and Bobby were at all bored any more. I was very pleased with the effect of Janet's discovery. I love seeing children get enthusiastic about life on the moon.

I thought about the way Janet had spotted the switch in the lunar dust. In retrospect it seemed to me that she'd

found it rather too easily. So I decided that next year, when another class of children had a field trip to the landing site, I'd hide my home made broken switch somewhere a bit less obvious.

Benign Confusion

Declan attended the fair at Hambleton Downs where he set up his table close to the refreshment tent hoping to catch the attention of people who might be slightly less than perfectly aware of their surroundings. "Round and round the lady goes," he said, shuffling three cards face down on the table in complex swirling patterns. "And where she travels to, nobody knows." He turned over one of the cards revealing a rather sour looking queen who appeared to be in a mood to execute somebody.

Declan turned the face of the queen back down and started to adjust the positions of the three cards again with rapid and elaborate gestures. "Would anyone care to wager where the lady lies?" he asked the crowd that was starting to gather around his table. Declan noticed with approval that several people were clutching tall glasses and swaying slightly. "You sir," cried Declan to one of the swayers. "Perhaps today is your lucky day."

The swaying man frowned at being singled out but then, with the loud encouragement of his friends, he stepped forwards and placed a wager on the table. "Thank you sir," said Declan. He exposed the queen briefly so as to prove that she was still on the table then he turned her face down again and passed his hands over the three cards, sliding and swapping them hither and yon. "And now sir," he said when he felt that he had sufficiently mixed the positions of the cards, "where would you think the queen might be?"

The man blinked, registering puzzlement, then he reached out and indicated a card. "Please turn the card over," said Declan. "Let everybody see what its face reveals." The man flipped his chosen card over, exposing a smiling knave. "So it goes," said Declan, pocketing the

wager. He began to shuffle the cards again while he waited for someone else to make a bet.

A dark-haired woman elbowed her way to the front and laid her money on the table. "I can find the queen," she declared ringingly and Declan smiled and shuffled his cards. The woman hovered her hand over the cards and then she pointed. "That one!" she declared,

She turned her chosen card over, revealing the sour-faced queen. Declan was astonished for he had cast a spell of benign confusion on the cards before he began his pitch to the punters. With such a spell in place the confusion in the cards should always prevent anyone from successfully identifying the queen. Reluctantly Declan paid the woman her winnings. As she took the money, she leaned forward and whispered, "Benign confusion is a very weak spell. We should have a meeting, you and I, to explore alternatives." Then she kissed Declan on the cheek, put her winnings into her purse, and disappeared back into the crowd.

By the end of the day, Declan's wallet was comfortably full and the crowd around his table was muttering darkly about cheating and magic for nobody except the dark haired woman had managed to turn the queen face up. That was the problem with the spell of benign confusion, mused Declan. It was an all or nothing act of magic. To that extent, the woman was right. It was rather weak. Declan decided that it was time for him to move on before the mood of the crowd turned too ugly. He closed down his table and prepared to leave the fair behind.

Then the dark-haired woman reappeared. "Well," she asked, "have you had a successful day?"

Declan nodded. "Reasonably so," he remarked. "But now the day is over and it is time for me to leave."

"The fair has three more days to run," she said. "Surely your profits would be even larger if you stayed?"

"Perhaps they would," acknowledged Declan, "but the price I would have to pay for that profit would be too high.

The crowd grows angry with me. After three more days I would not be able to guarantee my safety.”

“But I would,” said the dark-haired woman. “For a share of the profits I can over-ride the benign confusion at reasonable intervals, sufficient to keep the crowd sweet and interested. Three more days could earn us both a pretty penny.”

Declan thought it over. He remembered the ease with which she had seen through his spell and identified the queen. The scheme seemed workable. “All right,” he said and he held out his hand.

She shook it to seal their agreement. “Call me Jenny,” she said, and she smiled.

The next three days were very profitable ones for Declan, though they began rather frighteningly. His reputation had clearly been blackened overnight as everyone discussed their losses, and morning brought him an angry and resentful crowd. But he spread his cards as normal and indulged in his usual patter despite the black and threatening circumstances. Jenny sat near his table knitting placidly and seemingly paying little attention to what was going on. Gradually the mood of the crowd improved as, every now and then, someone managed to expose the queen and collect a handsome reward. It wasn't long before all was cheerfulness and mock concern as the winners consoled the losers. Nobody seemed to notice that the losers far outnumbered the winners. After all, wasn't that what gambling was all about?

After three more days at the fair Declan had a bulging wallet. As the fair drew to a close and the tents were struck he happily paid Jenny her share of the proceeds. “Thank you,” he said to her sincerely. “I think we made a good team.”

“Yes we did,” said Jenny, taking his arm. “Walk with me a while. Perhaps we might discuss future collaborations.”

Declan happily did as he was told and they walked arm in arm through the gathering twilight talking of this and that and making elaborate plans. Presently they came to a small grove where traces of summer warmth still lingered in its hidden places. "Let's stop here for a while," said Jenny, smiling sweetly at him, "and seal our bargain appropriately."

So they sat together in the grove and Declan let the magic of the moment take its course. Presently, as the enchantment subsided, Declan found that his arms and legs had been constrained to stillness in some mysterious way and he was quite unable to move a muscle. He watched angrily and helplessly as Jenny helped herself to the contents of his wallet. He tried to speak, to curse her and her thieving ways, but no words would come to him. Jenny looked at him with a faint half-smile on her lips. "It is a spell of enforced entanglement," she told him. "It will hold you captive for a short time until I am safely away. Then, following your freedom from entanglement a spell of forlorn confusion will ensure my continued safety by scrambling your senses. Forlorn confusion is a much more elaborate spell than the benign confusion you are more used to. It is much, much harder to see through." She put his money in her purse, and winked at him. "Goodbye," she said. "Thank you for a profitable time at the fair."

Declan watched helplessly as she headed west towards the setting sun. Presently his limbs relaxed and he found that he could move again. Grimly he headed after her, trudging with fixed purpose towards the east. By the time the sun rose in front of him, he was sure that he would have caught up with deceiving Jenny and then he would make her pay for what she had done to him. He shook his head to try and clear his thoughts. Make her pay for whatever it was that she had done to him...

The Power of Goodbye

It was a dull afternoon at school, the last lesson at the end of an interminable day.

“Go on,” encouraged Andrew, “Do it now. It’ll be great!”

Derek was dubious but he didn’t want to let his friend down. So he concentrated hard. “Hello eraser,” he muttered. The words weren’t really necessary – he could apply his talent without them – but they helped to concentrate his thoughts where they were needed. He flexed the mental muscle that he liked to think of as the controller of his special skill. Across the classroom, the eraser that the teacher was using to clean the whiteboard disappeared from his hand and clattered onto Derek’s desk.

“Sir,” cried Andrew, pretending outrage. “Why did you throw that at Derek? He wasn’t doing anything!”

The teacher looked nonplussed, as well he might. “I didn’t do it on purpose,” he spluttered, “it must have slipped out of my hand.”

“That’s quite a slip,” said Andrew, full of false indignation. “It’s a long way from the whiteboard to Derek’s desk. You must have put an awful lot of muscle power into that slip.”

“I’m sorry,” said the teacher. “Derek, I apologise. I don’t know how it happened, but it was an accident. I didn’t throw it at you on purpose.” He walked over to Derek’s desk. “Can I have it back, please?”

Wordlessly, Derek handed the eraser back to him. As the teacher returned to the whiteboard to continue rubbing out his scribblings Andrew whispered, “Do it again!”

“Hello, eraser,” muttered Derek obediently. He flexed his mental muscle once more. Again the eraser vanished from the teacher’s grasp and crashed down in front of Derek.

The teacher sighed. "I don't know what's going on," he said, "but whatever it is, I'm not going to argue with it." He retrieved his eraser from Derek again and then said, "Let's call it a day for now." He left the eraser by the whiteboard and walked out of the room."

"Well done, Derek," said Andrew triumphantly. "We get to go home twenty minutes early!"

Derek beamed, basking in the glow of his friend's approval. Ever since Andrew had noticed Derek surreptitiously using his talent to refill his dinner plate one lunchtime in the school canteen, he'd appointed himself Derek's best friend. Then he had cemented their friendship by coming up with clever ideas for Derek to do with his special power; ideas that made both their lives much more satisfying. Derek, who had no friends because everybody considered him far too weird to be seen in company with, was grateful for the attention and he was usually more than happy to fall in with Andrew's plans.

They collected their backpacks from their lockers and left the school grounds. As they walked towards home, Andrew said, "I wish you'd teach me how to do the things that you do."

It wasn't the first time he had asked that, and Derek was starting to run out of ways of answering the question. "I've told you before," he said testily, "I don't *know* how I do it any more than you know how you manage to breathe in and out all the time. Breathing is just something we all do without thinking, even when we're asleep. We can't help ourselves. We can't control it in any meaningful way. It's just there.

"I can call things to me whenever I want to, and mostly they come. To me, doing that is as natural as breathing is to you. I've got what I think of as a mental muscle that controls it, in the same way that we've both got physical muscles that control our breathing. But I can't teach you how to do

what I do any more than you could teach a stone how to breathe.”

Andrew shook his head, as unconvinced as always. “There has to be more to it than that,” he said.

“There isn’t,” said Derek. He turned abruptly and walked into the park. Andrew followed close behind. Deep piles of autumn leaves crunched in a very satisfying way beneath their feet as the boys stomped and shuffled, laughing and kicking the leaves all over everywhere.

Andrew glanced towards the statues that clustered around the war memorial at the centre of the park. A girl was standing there, stroking one of the stone lions. She noticed them, and waved hello. “Oh, look,” said Andrew, waving back to her, “there’s your sister Julie. Why don’t you call all her clothes over to you so that I can see what she looks like naked?”

“Not a chance,” protested Derek. “If I do that she’ll tear me into tiny pieces and feed me to the cat. You’ve never seen her when she’s angry and believe me, you really don’t want to.”

“Can she do the thing that you do?” asked Andrew.

“No,” said Derek. “But when you’re as big and as strong as she is, you don’t need any other special abilities.” He shuddered at the thought.

“OK,” said Andrew agreeably, “not Julie. Choose another girl. It doesn’t matter who. I’m not particular.”

“Absolutely not,” said Derek. “I’ve got three sisters, and they are all older, bigger and stronger than I am. If they ever find out that I’m using my talent to embarrass girls for you, they’ll make my life a complete and utter misery. Girls always stick together. It’s a rule.”

“Can’t you just use your powers to transport them away from you if they get too threatening and aggressive?” asked Andrew.

“I can call things to me,” explained Derek, “but I can’t send them away from me. And I can’t do it with living things

at all. I have my limits.”

A dog ran past them heading towards the trees. It had a stick in its mouth and its tail was wagging.

“Hello dog,” said Derek, flexing his mental muscle again. Absolutely nothing happened. “See?” he said. “It just doesn’t work with anything that’s alive.” Then he concentrated and said, “Hello stick.” The stick disappeared from the dog’s mouth and appeared in his hand. “Yuck,” said Derek. “It’s all slimy!” The dog screeched to a halt, looking puzzled. Where had the stick gone? It stared around and spotted the stick in Derek’s hand. It raced towards him, foam dripping from its enormous fangs. Derek threw the stick away, high and wide. The dog changed direction and jumped. It caught the stick in mid-air, gave a muffled bark of satisfaction, and raced away, tail wagging again.

“Couldn’t you have got rid of the stick by saying ‘*Goodbye stick*’?” asked Andrew, “and then twitching your mental muscle in the opposite direction?”

“I don’t know,” said Derek, intrigued. “And I’m really not at all sure what *the opposite direction* actually means. It’s not like I’m using a proper muscle, you know.”

“I’m sure you only need a little bit of practice,” said Andrew. “Try it with that soft drink can that’s sitting on the top of the rubbish bin over there.”

Derek squinted at the rubbish bin. “Hello can,” he said and the can was in his hand. Now for the acid test. “Goodbye can,” he murmured and concentrated hard on his mental muscle. The can quivered slightly. Derek tried again. “Goodbye can.” *Quiver, twitch*. This way... no. *That way... twitch, quiver, twitch*. One more time... *Got it!* The can was back in the rubbish bin. Derek released the breath that he hadn’t realised he had been holding. “Gosh!” he said, looking slightly bemused. “I didn’t know I could do that.”

“Well done,” said Andrew. “I knew you had it in you.” He fumbled in his back pack and pulled out a water bottle.

“Here,” he said, “all that hard work must have made you thirsty.”

Derek took the water bottle and shook it experimentally. “It’s empty,” he said, giving it back.

“Can’t you fill it?” asked Andrew. “There’s a drinking fountain just over there. Why don’t you call some water from it?”

“I’ve got a better idea,” said Derek. “Why don’t you just walk over there and fill the bottle yourself. It’s not very far away.”

“No,” said Andrew, grinning. “It’s a lot better if you do it.”

“OK,” said Derek, suddenly thinking of a cunning plan. “Hello water.”

Several thousand litres of water from the holding tank beneath the fountain cascaded down over Andrew who spluttered and coughed at the sudden shock. “Oops!” said Derek, unconvincingly. “Slight miscalculation there.” He grinned at Andrew who dripped furiously at him for a moment and then squelched over and handed him the water bottle.

“It’s full now,” he said. “You can drink as much as you want.”

Derek took a large swig of water and quenched his thirst. “Goodbye water,” he said.

Andrew, suddenly dry, laughed out loud. “Cool!” he said. “Tell you what, let’s invite all three of your sisters to a picnic in the park. We can have a wet T-Shirt contest.”

“No,” said Derek firmly.

Christmas Celebrations

“Many happy returns,” said the angel, handing Jesus a birthday card.

Jesus scowled at the card. “Put it on the mantelpiece with all the others,” he said.

The angel stared at the mantelpiece that stretched across the room behind Jesus. He was a very new angel and he’d never seen the mantelpiece before. It was made of highly polished oak and it receded so far into the distance in each direction that the angel couldn’t see an end to it. Like all receding parallel lines, it converged to a point in the distance, and vanished from view. The angel had a vague memory of learning about that in a geometry lesson at school back in the days before he made the transition to angelhood. Uncountable numbers of birthday cards sat neatly to attention all along the mantelpiece, as far as the eye could see. He gulped, and tried to squeeze his own modest card into the crowd, being careful not to knock any of them over. He had a horrible feeling that if he did, all the cards would collapse one after the other, racing off into infinity like a never ending fall of dominoes.

“I hate this time of year,” grumbled Jesus. “Every time it rolls around there are more and more angels giving me more and more cards and I have to keep extending the mantelpiece to cope with them all. It’s a good job my dad was a carpenter. At least I know how to make a decent mortice and tenon joint.”

The angel couldn’t resist the temptation. “Wouldn’t a concealed dovetail joint be easier? It would look so much nicer as well. You’d never be able to see the where one bit ends and the next bit begins.”

Jesus scowled. "You might be right," he said, "but I'll never know. I missed that lesson. I went out into the world to start doing my sermon stuff shortly after dad taught me mortice and tenon joints, and I never went back home again. So they are the only kind of joints I know how to do." He gave a humourless laugh. "Let's be thankful for small mercies - at least I didn't use nails. I've always hated nails ever since..." He paused. "Well... you know," he finished lamely.

The angel nodded sympathetically.

"I suppose you'll be at the party tonight?" asked Jesus grumpily.

"Yes," said the angel. "I'm really looking forward to it. They're putting on a fish nibble gourmet buffet. Gabriel baked five loaves and Peter went fishing and caught two whitebait. He says that should be more than enough for everyone."

"I don't want to go to the party at all," said Jesus, "but I have to. I really don't like it when all the assembled heavenly hosts sing *Happy Birthday* to me. It's so embarrassing because most of them can't sing in tune. But the Holy Ghost absolutely loves it. He's been rehearsing them for ages and if I don't go He'll come round every night and haunt me unmercifully. It's enough to drive a person to drink." Jesus poured water into a glass then he tapped the glass with his forefinger. The liquid turned a deep, dark red. "Falernian," explained Jesus. "I developed a real taste for the Roman vintages, back in the day." He drank deeply and sighed with pleasure. "That's a nice drop," he said. "It never fails to turn my teeth pink and make me fall over. What more can you ask of a wine?"

"Well, at least that little trick guarantees that you'll never run out wine to drink at the party," said the angel. "You know what they say - always look on the bright side of life!"

"Never ending wine is the only thing that makes the party bearable," said Jesus, morosely, "particularly when

everybody starts to give me presents.”

“Don’t you like presents?” asked the angel, who’d spent all his wages on a small parcel of frankincense which he’d been quite looking forward to presenting to Jesus at the party.

“Gold,” moaned Jesus. “Piles and piles of bloody gold, box after box of frankincense resin, and more myrrh than you can shake a stick at. It’s all so bloody unimaginative. Why won’t anybody give me a train set?”

The angel felt a little shocked at the sacrilege, but then he began to consider the possibilities. If he could get hold of a train set before the party began, it might help him a lot with the advancement of his career. And maybe he should see about selling his frankincense as well. Once the word began to spread about train sets, the bottom was bound to fall out of the frankincense market.

“I’ve been helping to decorate the tree,” the angel said, suddenly feeling quite bold because Jesus was confiding in him. “I put a star on the top.”

“Why?” asked Jesus. “What’s a star got to do with anything?”

“It signifies the star that shone over your birth place,” said the angel.

“That’s wrong,” said Jesus. “Dad always told me that I was born in a five star hotel. He said he could count the stars through the hole in the roof. They never get that bit right in nativity plays.”

“There’s going to be a special nativity play at the party tonight,” said the angel, “but don’t tell anyone that I told you. I don’t want to get into trouble.”

“What’s so special about it?” asked Jesus. “They do one every year and it’s always exactly the same – shepherds wash their socks by night all seated round the tub, the angel of the lord comes down and they begin to scrub. Dead boring if you ask me, though nobody ever does. You’ve washed one sock, you’ve washed them all.”

“It’s special because I’m playing the angel of the lord,” said the angel proudly. “Everybody says I’m really good at coming down. They’ve never seen anyone come down better. I’m sure you’ll enjoy it when you see it.”

Jesus brightened. “Break a leg!” he said, encouragingly. “Come down hard. Don’t worry, I’ll heal it for you afterwards. That’s my super power.”

“Thanks,” said the angel, “I appreciate it. Anyway, it was nice meeting you, but I really should be going now. I’ve got a lot of rehearsing to do. Merry Christmas!”

“Bah, humbug!” said Jesus.

The Pond

I was 13 years old that summer when we found the pond. It was the summer when David, the new kid, moved into the village. It was the summer when I learned that actions have consequences, and that no matter how hard you wish for it, you can't take back the things you said and did.

The school holidays were a week old when Christopher came round to see me. Someone I'd never seen before was with him. "This is David," he said. "He's new. His family only moved in to the village a month or so ago."

"Hello David," I said and David nodded shyly. I turned my attention to Christopher. "So what are we going to do?" I asked.

"David wants to go to the woods," said Christopher.

"We've been there heaps of times," I protested. "There's nothing to see. Just a few scrubby trees and bushes and a stagnant pond."

"It might have changed," said David. "The woods are just across from the bottom of our street and every night for the last couple of weeks I've heard heavy lorries rumbling down the road. There's nothing down there but the woods. I want to go and find out what they've been doing."

I shrugged. "OK," I agreed, "but if we don't find anything worth looking at I want to go to the village green. There might be a game of cricket we can join."

"Righto," agreed Christopher, and David nodded, so we set off for the street where David lived, and we followed it all the way down into the woods.

The ground was churned up and muddy. There were tyre tracks everywhere. Clearly David hadn't been exaggerating, a lot of traffic had been coming and going through here. I began to get interested. What had been going on?

As we walked deeper into the woods I became aware of a curious chemical smell in the air. Normally the woods smelled of flowers and rotting leaves. Those smells were still there, but a cloying and quite nasty stench was lying over the top of them. When we finally reached the pond it was clear where the smell was coming from. The pond was a nasty blue-green colour, flecked with streaks of red. Corroded steel drums littered its edges and sullen currents sent thick wavelets surging across the oily surface of what had once been water. It smelled like Satan's farts, and I breathed as shallowly as I could.

"So that's what the lorries were doing," said David. "Someone's been dumping industrial waste here."

"Wow!" said Christopher, impressed by both the destruction and the stench. "Just look at that evil pond! I bet you'd get a really awesome super power if you went swimming in there!"

Christopher read far too many comic books for his own good. He was particularly obsessed with origin stories – the tales of how the super heroes first got their super powers. Every time he found a new origin story he'd talk about nothing else for days.

"Do you really think so?" asked David.

"Of course," I said, playing along with Christopher's obsession because suddenly it seemed like a good idea to persuade David to go for a swim in the pond. He was new and I didn't know him and so teasing him into doing something silly would be funny and fun. Maybe he'd get a bit hurt, and he might end up crying. But so what? New kids deserved all they got. "Stands to reason," I said. "Something that hideous is bound to have really impressive side effects. Why don't you go for a swim and see what happens?"

David wasn't convinced. "How about you go and swim in it first?" he asked. "If you get a super power from it then I'll give it a go."

“That won’t work,” I said. “Christopher and I already have our super powers, and once you’ve got a super power you can’t get another one. Everybody knows that.”

Christopher gave me a peculiar look, but he played along with me. That’s why we’re such good friends – it’s almost like each of us always knows just what the other one is thinking. Perhaps we really do have a super power after all! “That’s right,” he said. “After I read about how Peter Parker became Spider Man I borrowed a geiger counter from school and we both went looking for a radioactive spider.”

David looked interested. “Did you find one?” he asked.

“Yes,” I said. “It was all furry, and when it bit me on the arm the bite tickled something terrible. My mum had to rub anti-histamine cream onto it to stop the itch.”

“Wow!” said David, impressed. “So does that mean you can run up walls and shoot out silk and swing between buildings?”

“Not quite,” said Christopher. “Super powers take a while to mature. We’re still waiting. But I expect we’ll be able to do all of that any day now.”

“I don’t think the spider was quite radioactive enough,” I said, “and that’s why it’s taking some time for everything to come together. But I don’t think it will be long now. When I woke up this morning I definitely remembered hanging from the ceiling overnight.”

“Are you sure that wasn’t a dream?” asked David, still not quite convinced.

“Of course it wasn’t,” I said. “When I looked at the ceiling I could see heaps of webs.” I didn’t bother telling David that there were always cobwebs on my bedroom ceiling because my mum never dusted that high up.

“So,” said Christopher, “are you going for a swim?”

“Won’t the chemicals do terrible things to my clothes?” asked David. “My mum will kill me if my clothes get damaged.” Then he was struck by a thought. “Maybe my

clothes will get a super power as well," he said. "Having super clothes - that would be really cool!"

"No, you'll have to take your clothes off first," I said. "Clothes can't have super powers. They'll just stop the pond chemicals from being absorbed into your body properly. You won't get any super powers if you go swimming with your clothes on."

"I can't take my clothes off," said David, horrified. "You'll look at my willy!"

"We won't look," said Christopher. "Promise!"

"Honest," I said, "we really won't look." But both Christopher and I knew that we were telling lies. Of course we would look. What use is a willy if nobody ever looks at it?

"No," protested David. "I'm not doing it and that's final."

Christopher and I exchanged glances and he shrugged. Perhaps we'd gone too far by suggesting that David take his clothes off before he went swimming in the pond. Oh well, it had been worth a try. Better luck next time.

I don't remember what we did for the rest of the day. Just the usual things that thirteen year old boys do when the long summer day stretches endlessly ahead of them...

Christopher came round to see me the next morning and he looked a bit worried. "I went to get David," he said, "but his mum told me that when she called him for breakfast he didn't come down. When she went to check on him he wasn't in his bedroom. His mum said that he must have sneaked out early before everyone else got up, though she couldn't think why."

I looked at Christopher and Christopher looked at me and in that moment we both knew that David must have gone by himself to swim in the pond, so that he could get his super power while nobody was there to look at his willy. "We'd better go and check the pond," I said, and Christopher agreed.

The stench around the pond was even worse than it had been yesterday. Perhaps more chemicals had been dumped

overnight. A neatly folded pile of clothes lay just above the waterline. David's naked, unmoving and unresisting body floated face down in the pond, pushed hither and yon by unseen currents. I could see raw and bleeding places and brief white flashes of bone where the chemicals had eaten away his flesh. A sullen wave surged against David's body and flipped him over onto his back.

"Well," said Christopher, "at least he won't have to worry about people looking at his willy. He hasn't got a willy to look at any more!" He turned very pale and looked as if he might be sick.

I remembered how hard I had encouraged David to go swimming, how I insisted that he really had to do it nude. I remembered all the lies that I had told him about the super powers Christopher and I were developing. Somehow it no longer seemed quite as funny as it had seemed yesterday.

I was thirteen years old that summer when we first discovered the pond. By the time the paramedics came to pull David's body out of the water I was a hundred years old and that's how old I've been ever since.

Coal in the Hole

It had been so simple a few years ago reflected Peter as he used industrial strength bolt cutters and a crowbar to attack the cap that was sealing the mineshaft. Once upon a time all you had to do was pop down to your coal cellar or go into your coal shed, depending on your social status, and pick up the first decent sized lump of lignite that your hands fell on. But it was all different now. Nobody had coal cellars or sheds any more. Everyone had started heating their homes with electricity or natural gas instead. And that, of course, was why he found himself here, in the middle of nowhere, breaking in to an abandoned coal mine on a shiveringly dark night with only the frosty stars to keep him company.

A few years ago, he'd thought that he'd found the ideal solution to his lack of coal. He had been walking down a snow covered street when he saw a very attractive lady carefully placing small lumps of coal onto a snowdrift and photographing the result. He stopped and stared at her in wonderment and then, unable to help himself, he walked over to her and said, "Excuse me, but I can't help noticing that you've got some coal. Can I ask where you got it from?"

She turned to him, and rewarded him with a dazzling smile. "Doesn't it just look so pretty?" she asked. She had a very strong Australian accent and Peter barely understood what she was saying. "I'm from Western Australia," she continued. "I've never seen snow before. It's just beautiful; so white and clean and crisp, and the contrast it makes with the blackness of the coal is just fantastic. I've never seen coal before either. England is such a wonderful country. So full of surprises."

“Yes,” agreed Peter, as he started to fall in love with her, “but where did you find the coal?”

“I’m renting a house over there.” She gestured vaguely towards the side of the street. “There’s an old coal shed in the back garden and it still has some coal in it. I thought I’d put some of it in the snow and then take a photograph to send home to my mum. She’ll be thrilled to see something so exotic.”

Peter couldn’t get over the fact that she had a coal shed. He immediately embarked on a torrid affair with her. It lasted for two exhausting days at the end of which he discovered that her coal shed contained nothing but a thin scattering of nutty slack, and what use was that to anybody? He fell out of love with her straight away and went back out into the snow, bitterly disappointed.

He’d sheared through two of the bolts now. Only six more to go and then he’d be able to get into the mineshaft. His breath was steaming in the cold night air and he pulled the hood of his puffer jacket up to stop his ears getting frostbitten.

After his affair with the Australian lady ended he’d applied for a job at a coal fired power station. “Why do you want this job?” asked the man who interviewed him.

Peter wondered whether to tell the truth or not. Really he was hoping that the managers would turn a blind eye when he took some coal home with him. But he decided that this confession would not go down well with the interviewer, so he settled for a lie instead. “I need the money,” he said, and the interviewer winced.

Nevertheless Peter was offered the job, and he settled into it very happily. Unfortunately however, the writing was on the wall for coal fired power stations. They were rapidly being replaced with more environmentally friendly generators of electricity that made a very effective use of renewable resources. His old-fashioned power station was

decommissioned and, just like that, Peter was out of a job. He got a handsome redundancy payment, but it scarcely compensated for his lack of coal.

The bolts had all been cut free now. Peter used his crowbar to lever the metal cap away from the mineshaft exposing a deep, dark cavern that descended into the bowels of the earth. The lift cage had been sent down to the bottom of the shaft before it was sealed, and Peter could see rusty looking cables hanging down in the darkness. The winding mechanism and the motors had been removed long ago, but Peter had expected this and he had come prepared. He attached an abseiling pulley to the lift cable and he anchored a battery powered winch to the top of the shaft so that he could haul himself back up when he'd finished his business in the mine. He pushed back the hood of his jacket and put on a hard hat with a powerful lamp attached to it. He shrugged into an empty backpack that he was hoping to fill with coal. Now he was ready. He took a deep breath and abseiled down the cable.

When he reached the top of the lift cage he unstrapped the abseiling rope and used his crowbar to lever open the emergency exit trapdoor on the cage roof. Then he climbed down into the cage and from there he made his way into the mine.

After the power station closed down Peter had been left in a bit of a quandary. He considered joining a steam train preservation society but the closest one he could find was based a couple of hundred miles away in the heart of the West Riding of Yorkshire. He wasn't sure that it was practical to commute that far, but he sent them a letter just in case. Rather to his surprise, they accepted his application to join. They were always keen to recruit unpaid volunteers. So, the next weekend, he travelled up to Yorkshire to meet his new friends. A round-faced man with twinkling blue eyes

introduced himself as Harry Marsden. “We’ll be travelling up the branch line to Haworth,” he said, his flat Yorkshire vowels sounding strangely foreign to Peter’s ears. “You can help with the stoking.”

Peter spent a happy and exhausting afternoon shovelling coal into the boiler of a highly polished locomotive as it hauled commuter coaches full of literary enthusiasts up the line to Haworth, where the Brontë sisters had spent their formative years writing strangely hypnotic novels. “Great little locomotive is this,” said Harry, patting the gleaming brass fittings. “She was built in Crewe in 1888. We use her as a snow plough to keep the line clear in winter. She’s very good at that. And her boiler is certified until 2021!”

“Sounds like she’s had a long and happy life,” said Peter, contemplating his blisters. He decided there were some sacrifices that he was simply not prepared to make and so the following weekend he stayed at home and slept late.

His lamp cast ghostly shadows in the darkness. Somewhere in the far distance he could hear the metronomic tick of water dripping down from the ceiling. An abandoned, rusty pickaxe lay where a long ago miner had thrown it away at the end of his last ever shift. Condensation trickled slowly down the walls of the tunnel. Peter felt as if the walls were closing in on him; as if the ceiling was about to collapse and bury him. Fighting to keep his claustrophobia under control he headed off down the tunnel.

Presently he came to a cart full of coal. He’d been hoping to find one of these – he really didn’t fancy walking all the way to the coal face along miles of dark, neglected and potentially dangerous tunnels. But here was a cargo of coal, probably the very last that had been dug out before the mine closed for good. Nobody had bothered to haul it out into the light of day. What would be the point of that?

He loaded some coal into his backpack. He returned to the lift cage, climbed through the trapdoor and winched himself up to the top of the shaft. He used his crowbar to lever the cap back over the shaft, sealing it shut again. He glued the heads of the bolts back into place. They wouldn't pass a detailed inspection, but a casual glance would make it look as though the cap was undamaged. Peter was certain that his incursion into the mine would remain undiscovered – hardly anyone came to this lonely, desolate place any more. He was quietly confident that everything would remain just as he had left it until he returned for fresh supplies.

He got into his car to drive home. He checked his watch. Almost 11.00pm. Just enough time to have a shower and change his clothes before he had to go out.

Peter waited until the last chime of midnight died away, and then he rang the doorbell. The party was so noisy that he wondered if anyone would realise he was there. But Dorothy had been waiting for him and she opened the door straight away. "Happy New Year, Peter," she said, giving him a peck on the cheek. "Come in! Come in!"

"Happy New Year, mum" said Peter, stepping over the threshold and handing Dorothy a darkly glittering lump of anthracite. She accepted it gratefully.

"It's so good of you to keep the old traditions alive like this," she said. "Hardly anyone comes first footing any more nowadays. You simply can't get the coal, you know!"

"I know," said Peter, feelingly.

"But you never seem to have any trouble," said Dorothy. "I think we did a really good job bringing you up to respect the proper way to do things. Every year without fail, there you are on my doorstep at midnight. But come on, tell me, where on earth do you manage to find coal in this day and age?"

Peter winked and tapped the side of his nose with his forefinger. "Can you keep a secret?" he asked.

Dorothy's eyes widened with anticipation. "Yes," she said eagerly. "Yes, of course I can."

"So can I," said Peter. He joined the party, looking for beer.

The Housewarming Party

It was 10.30pm when the new neighbour moved in. Peter and Shirley were fast asleep, but the noise of the moving truck arriving woke them up. They got out of bed and stared sleepily at the moving men who were carrying stuff into the house.

“Who moves into a house at this time of night?” asked Shirley.

“A vampire?” suggested Peter. “Sunlight is fatal to vampires.”

Shirley laughed. “I used the last of the garlic in the soup we had for lunch,” she said. “I’d better stock up next time I go shopping. “How are you off for crucifixes?”

“I think I’ve got a couple somewhere in the shed,” said Peter. “Come on, let’s go back to bed. We’ll worry about it tomorrow.”

The cul-de-sac was oblong shaped with one end open to allow access. There were three houses on each side of the oblong and two houses blocking off the far end. The vampire had moved into the middle house on the opposite side of the oblong from Peter and Shirley’s house.

The next morning, Peter saw, with no surprise, that the vampire’s house was closed and shuttered against the sun. He wandered down the path to his mailbox and peeped inside. There he saw the local newspaper and an envelope addressed to “The Homeowner”. He almost threw the envelope away – an envelope addressed to the owner was a common trick used by advertisers to get their message delivered to houses that had a “No Junk Mail” sticker on the mailbox. Anything in an envelope was obviously a proper letter, went the argument, clearly not junk mail at all! But Peter was feeling benign, so he opened it. The envelope

contained an invitation to a combined house-warming and meet-the-neighbours party to be held at the vampire's house next Saturday evening, starting just after sunset. Champagne would flow like champagne, promised the invitation, and there would be exotic nibbles. RSVP to the vampire's mailbox.

Peter and Shirley discussed the invitation over breakfast. "I think we should go," said Shirley. "Everyone in the cul-de-sac will have had the same invitation, so there'll be safety in numbers. It would be churlish not to say hello to our new neighbour. After all, we're going to have to live with him for goodness knows how long. And anyway, I really want to know what the exotic nibbles are!"

"OK," agreed Peter. "I'll draft an acceptance note and drop it in his mailbox on my way to work."

On Saturday, Peter and Shirley arrived at the party fashionably late. Everyone else from the cul-de-sac was already there. Lights blazed, and music that sounded vaguely Slavic was playing softly through concealed speakers. There was a buzz of conversation punctuated by occasional laughter. An immaculate young man in full evening dress welcomed them to the house, enquired as to their names and instructed them to follow him. Feeling a little out of place in their jeans and old t-shirts, Peter and Shirley followed him into the lounge where they were introduced to Mr Varney Karnstein, their host.

"Just call me Varney," he said, smiling hugely so that they could admire the fangs that jutted from his upper jaw. "Would you care for champagne?"

"Yes please," said Shirley and Varney gestured to a waiter who hurried over and presented a tray covered with brimming flutes. Shirley and Peter each helped themselves to a glass.

"Cheers," said Peter, and Shirley echoed him.

“Your very good health,” said Varney, raising a glass half full of what Peter decided to assume was a perfectly ordinary bloody mary. They all drank. “Tell me,” asked Varney, “how do you enjoy living in this rather pleasant little cul-de-sac?”

“We absolutely love it,” said Shirley enthusiastically. “It’s very quiet and out of the way. Nobody seems to know that it even exists, except for the postman and the pizza delivery people, and even they sometimes have difficulty finding us. We just get on with our lives and the world leaves us alone. It’s really quite perfect.”

“We still get lots of junk mail, though,” said Peter. “That always seems to arrive no matter how isolated and hard to find you are.”

Varney laughed. “Just the way I like it,” he said. “I think I’m going to get a lot of enjoyment out of waking this sleepy little place up.” Peter and Shirley exchanged a worried look when he said that, but Varney didn’t seem to notice. He took a huge swig from his drink, almost emptying the glass. He looked around, frowning and then gestured to another waiter, who quickly hurried over. The waiter carried a tray festooned with bottles of vodka, and gin. He also had a spigot poking out of his neck. Varney poured a generous measure of vodka into his glass, then he held the glass beneath the waiter’s spigot and turned the tap, topping up his glass with the thick, red liquid that oozed from the spout. Peter decided that Varney wasn’t drinking an ordinary bloody mary after all. Varney sipped his drink thoughtfully, added a little more vodka for luck, and then stirred it vigorously with a swizzle stick. A delicate, pink foam formed on top of the liquid. Varney sent the waiter on his way with an imperious gesture.

“Nibbles,” suggested Varney. “You must have something to eat.” A waiter materialised carrying a tray upon which lay small, dark, congealing disks speckled with white flecks of fat. “Black pudding,” said Varney enthusiastically. “Home

made, you know. It's a speciality of the house." The waiter offered the tray to Peter who was wondering just where Varney's chef had obtained the blood that is the basic ingredient of all black pudding. Peter and Shirley both declined the offer and the waiter departed to be replaced by another waiter offering more conventional fare. "Cheese," suggested Varney. "Pâté, perhaps some caviare?"

Peter put his champagne flute down on a convenient table and heaped caviare on to a biscuit. He chewed and swallowed. "Very nice," he said appreciatively.

"It's only salmon roe," apologised Varney. "It's not real caviare. It's almost impossible to get real caviare these days. I don't know why."

"I know why," said Peter.

Shirley began to edge away from him. "No, Peter," she begged. "Please don't..."

Peter paid no attention to her. He struck a dramatic pose and began to recite:

*"Caviare comes from the virgin sturgeon.
Virgin sturgeon very fine fish.
Virgin sturgeon needs no urgin'
That's why caviare's a very rare dish!"*

Varney stared blankly at Peter for a moment then he roared with laughter. "I like you, Peter," he said. "You and I are going to have a lot of fun together bringing some excitement into this quiet little corner of the world!" Peter and Shirley exchanged worried glances again. "And now," said Varney, "I must circulate and talk to my guests. You do the same. Help yourself to any drinks and nibbles that take your fancy."

Shirley and Peter took the opportunity to have a good snoop around Varney's house. Apart from the lounge, where the party was being held, the rooms were all full of boxes, and furniture covered with dust sheets. Clearly there was a

lot of unpacking still to do. Peter wondered how long it would take Varney to get everything properly sorted out. He and Shirley still had boxes of stuff in their garage that had been there since they first moved into their house, more than twenty years ago. Occasionally either Peter or Shirley would get an urge to unpack one of the boxes, but since neither of them could remember what any of the boxes contained, it seemed a rather pointless exercise, so when the urge came over them they just sat down until it went away again. Somehow Peter didn't think that Varney had a procrastinating personality. He was sure the boxes would all be unpacked within a week!

They returned to the lounge where they sipped champagne and gossiped with everyone else from the cul-de-sac. Every so often they would catch a glimpse of Varney refilling his glass from a waiter's neck spigot or nibbling on a black pudding, but every time they noticed it they turned their backs on the revolting sight and pretended that it wasn't happening.

Eventually it was time to leave. Both Shirley and Peter were tired, though Varney himself seemed to have gained his second wind, or possibly his third, and he was showing no signs of flagging. Peter and Shirley walked arm in arm across the road to their house. "I don't think I like Mr Varney Karnstein very much," said Shirley thoughtfully. "He's far too ostentatious. A larger than life show off like that is bound to attract too much unwelcome attention, and we don't need that kind of thing in our nice, quiet cul-de-sac."

"I agree," said Peter. "It's bound to lead to trouble. I'll discuss it with the others, of course. But I'm sure they'll all feel the same way we do. None of us can afford to have outside people getting interested in what's going on here. It's far too dangerous. We need to stay under the radar for the safety of all of us."

Shirley sighed. "We'll just have to take care of it ourselves," she said. "The others really don't have the

strength to deal with someone like Varney Karnstein.”

“That’s OK,” said Peter. “I’m sure we’ll manage. There’s a full moon the day after tomorrow.”

“I thought it must be due sometime soon,” said Shirley. “My armpits have been getting unbelievably shaggy for the last couple of days.”

“We’ll go hunting immediately after we change over,” said Peter, grimly.

Shirley licked her lips and nodded agreement. “I’m told that freshly killed vampires are very tasty,” she said.

The Queue

“Bees are so much more clever than we give them credit for,” said Peter. I nodded in agreement. It was my first day in my new job as a bee keeper and I didn’t want to get on the wrong side of my boss just yet. But really! How can a small insect be considered to be clever? A bee is tiny. It has barely enough brain cells to cope with being a bee. It certainly doesn’t have any left over for extra intellectual accomplishments. Peter must have seen something of my doubts in my face for he said, “Come on, I’ll show you.”

We walked over to the hives which were set out neatly in multi-coloured rows in a field that was bordered by tall trees. There was a storage shed in one corner of the field. Bees scurried to and fro, flying out into the countryside and returning with nectar. Peter had set a transparent plastic tube into the entrance of one hive and I was astonished to see that the traffic into and out of the hive was extremely well regulated – every bee kept to the left just as if they were driving in a car on the road. Two constant streams of bees flowed independently back and forth, one stream leaving the hive and another returning, neither stream interfering with the other. “Look at that,” said Peter with quiet pride. “Isn’t it clever, the way they’ve got themselves so well organised?”

“Yes it’s very impressive,” I said. “I love the way they keep to the left all the time. Do the bees in Europe and America keep to the right?”

Peter frowned. He didn’t look pleased at my silly joke, but he decided to ignore it for the time being. “Bees can talk to each other as well,” he said. “That’s really clever of them!”

“Are you telling me that they have a language?” I asked.

“Sort of,” said Peter. “They communicate by dancing. When a bee discovers a new source of nectar it comes back to the hive and dances to all the other bees. The dance tells the bees where the nectar is and when the discoverer stops dancing, they all fly off to harvest the nectar.”

“Come off it,” I said. “You’re pulling my plonker.”

“No,” said Peter, “I’m really not. It’s a well known fact. You can look it up on google.” Suddenly Peter stiffened with excitement. “Look there,” he said. “It’s Reginald.”

“Reginald?” I asked.

He pointed a stubby finger at the glass tube. The two way traffic had slowed down almost to a halt and every bee seemed to be concentrating on the antics of one particular bee who was hopping and gyrating in a most curious fashion. “That’s Reginald,” said Peter proudly.

“Why do you call him Reginald?” I asked.

Peter looked puzzled. “Because that’s his name,” he said. “You can easily pick him out, his stripes are darker black and brighter yellow than the other bees and he seems to be a much better forager than any other bee in the hive. He’s always finding new places to harvest. I see him dancing his discoveries quite a lot. Watch closely – I think you’ll find this interesting.”

Reginald’s dance eventually slowed and stopped. He rested against the wall of the glass tube. He looked exhausted. I almost imagined that I could hear him panting. The bees who had been watching him dance buzzed together for a moment after he stopped, and then they all did a little dance back to Reginald. After that they shot out of the hive in an arrow-straight stream leaving Reginald alone to recover himself. “There they go,” said Peter. “Off to investigate Reginald’s discovery. They’ll be back shortly, laden down with nectar. You mark my words.”

And they were. Peter was quite right.

Over the next few days I watched Reginald seek out lots of new plants for the rest of the hive to harvest. Reginald

would dance his new discovery, the bees would dance back an acknowledgement and then fly off, returning later in the day with the new nectar that Reginald had found for them. It happened far too frequently to be a coincidence. The bees were definitely talking to each other. I decided to embark on a scientific investigation of the phenomenon...

The first thing I did was paint my forefinger with alternating yellow and black stripes then I wriggled it about over the glass tunnel hoping to attract Reginald's attention. Eventually after a lot of experimenting, I managed to wiggle my finger in a manner that Reginald seemed happy to interpret as the dance of another bee. I got very excited when he danced back to my wriggling finger. Clearly a conversation was now taking place, though of course I had no idea what it was about! Many weeks later, after I had gained a certain fluency in the language of bees, I discovered, rather embarrassingly, that my very first conversation with Reginald consisted of me wiggling my finger and him saying, "I have no idea what you are talking about. You are speaking gibberish! Are you French?"

I made very slow progress but, after several weeks, Reginald and I finally reached a point where we managed to communicate successfully with each other, more-or-less...

Every so often, Peter would decide that a set of hives needed to have their honey harvested. He would dress himself in protective clothing and then, using a special apparatus, he would pump the hives full of smoke. The stupefied bees would tumble out of the hives and Peter would then stack the bee-free hives on a truck and drive them off to the factory. Eventually the bees would recover from their stupefaction, buzz around in puzzlement for a while wondering where their hives had gone and then, accepting their fate, make themselves at home in whatever hives would accept them. Sometimes, if they were lucky, Peter would have brought a set of empty, newly processed hives back from the factory, in which case the bees would

simply move in lock, stock and barrel. If they were less lucky, they would have to try and infiltrate an already thriving hive, often with mixed and sometimes fatal results.

I couldn't help thinking that this removal of their hives from underneath their wings must be quite a traumatic experience for the bees. I discussed it with Reginald. He hadn't heard of the practice before, and he was horrified! "What!" he said. "You mean we get kicked out of our home and left to fend for ourselves?"

"Yes," I said. "That's right."

"That's terrible!" said Reginald. "I'm not going to stand for that. I'll let the others know and we'll put a plan together so that we'll be prepared when it finally happens to us. Can you give us some warning when it's about to take place?"

"I'll try," I said. "If I see Peter coming towards you dressed in his protective suit and carrying his smoking gun I'll sneak in quickly and tell you. Keep an eye open for my finger!"

"Will do!" said Reginald, and he buzzed back to the hive for a summit meeting with his queen and her counsellors...

A week later, Peter decided that about twenty hives, including Reginald's, were ready to harvest. Fortunately he started work at the far end of the row and I estimated that it would take him at least half an hour to reach Reginald's hive. That gave me plenty of time to paint my finger and sneak over to warn Reginald that the moment of truth had arrived. "Thank you," said Reginald and he hurried away to prepare all the other bees in the hive for what was to come. I went and hid behind a hive a few rows away where I could keep an eye on what was happening.

Eventually Peter reached Reginald's hive and began to puff smoke into it. But as soon as the smoke started to infiltrate the hive, a huge cloud of bees buzzed angrily into the air and hid themselves in the trees at the edge of the field. Peter shook his fist at the bees as they vanished from

view and I heard muffled swearing coming from inside his protective suit.

When Peter had finished processing all the hives, he took off his protective suit and stored it, together with his gun, in the shed. Then he stacked all the empty hives on his truck and roped them securely in place. He hopped into the truck and drove out of the field onto the road, heading for the factory. As he left the field, Reginald and his fellow bees reassembled themselves from the trees and poured out in pursuit of the truck that was carrying the only home they'd ever known away from them. The truck accelerated and behind it trailed a huge queue of thousands of madly buzzing bees desperately trying to go home...

The Birthday Party

Peter's suspicions about his five year old daughter Elizabeth were first aroused on the day that his trousers turned green.

It started just like any other day. He dressed for work as he normally did. A crisp white business shirt, a neatly knotted tie and a freshly dry-cleaned charcoal grey suit. He went into the kitchen to say goodbye to his wife and daughter before going out to catch the early morning bus. His wife Margery was boiling an egg for Elizabeth's breakfast. While it boiled, she prepared soldiers for Elizabeth dip into it. Elizabeth herself was sitting at the breakfast table engrossed with her crayons, scribbling busily on a sheet of paper. Her tongue was sticking out of the corner of her mouth and she was humming to herself. Peter always thought of the humming as Elizabeth's busy noise. She did it whenever she was concentrating hard on anything.

The crayons were a birthday present from Margery and Peter. Elizabeth absolutely loved them to bits. They went everywhere with her. She even took them to bed, and last night she had coloured her pillow with them, much to her parents' annoyance. Peter made a mental note to bring some more paper home from the office - reams of the stuff came off the printers, and then got distributed round the office for people to glance at casually and then toss into the waste paper basket. Most of the paper was printed on only one side. The other side was just perfect for a little girl to make pictures on.

"Bye, bye, beautiful," said Peter to both Margery and Elizabeth as he picked up his briefcase and headed for the front door.

“Bye darling,” said Margery. “Have a good day.”

Elizabeth looked up. “I’m five!” she announced proudly. She’d been five for two whole days now and she was still overcome with the wonder of it all. There would be a birthday party for her next Saturday, only a day away now, and she was looking forward to it eagerly.

“Yes you’re five,” said Margery, putting the boiled egg in an egg cup and then putting the egg cup and a plate of soldiers on the table. She expertly decapitated the egg and dipped a soldier into it. She held the soldier temptingly in front of Elizabeth’s face. “Even five year olds have to eat breakfast.”

“Don’t drip that eggy soldier on my picture,” protested Elizabeth. “It’s a picture of daddy. Daddy, come and look at your picture before you go to work.”

Peter glanced at the scribble on the paper that Elizabeth had pulled to safety, far away from the threatening soldier. A vague, pink blob of a head sat on top of an even more vaguely blobby grey middle. Two thin sticks of legs poked out from beneath the charcoal grey tummy. For some reason known only to herself, Elizabeth had coloured the legs bright green. Perhaps she’d got fed up with grey. “That’s lovely,” said Peter enthusiastically. “But I’ve got to hurry or I’ll miss the bus.” He dashed out of the door leaving Margery and Elizabeth to their breakfast.

Peter raced for the bus stop and caught the bus with only a few seconds to spare. He plonked himself down on a seat and rested his briefcase on his lap. Only then did he notice that his trousers were now bright green rather than being the terribly conservative charcoal grey that he vividly remembered pulling up his legs this morning. He knew in his bones that today he would have to put up with a lot of sartorial teasing from his office colleagues, and he also knew that it was all Elizabeth’s fault. Damn her surrealistic sense of colour!

Peter spent as much of the day as he could at his desk, hiding his legs underneath it. But like it or not, he had to take tea and toilet breaks, and he had to go to lunch. On those occasions his green trousers excited much ribald comment and he was very relieved when the day was finally over and he could escape from the office and go back home.

As he walked from the bus stop towards his house, he couldn't help noticing that it looked quite different from the house he remembered leaving that morning. What had once been a rather large weatherboard bungalow was now a squat, square two storey brick building. There were two square windows set a little lopsidedly on the left and right of the top storey and two square windows at the bottom, one to each side of a narrow door that stretched up almost to the level of the two top windows. A chimney poked out of the triangular roof and a curl of smoke stretched up into the solid blue sky in defiance of council regulations. A circular yellow sun was anchored into the sky just to the right of the chimney. Straight lines of light stuck out from the sun, making it look like an over-excited dandelion.

Peter opened the front door and went in. "Good news, everybody!" he announced excitedly.

"Hello darling," said Margery.

"What's the good news?" asked Elizabeth.

"I'm home!" Peter answered her.

"Oh," said Elizabeth. She returned to her crayons and started making her busy noise again.

Peter went upstairs to the bedroom so that he could get changed out of his work clothes. Going upstairs was quite a novelty - he'd never done it before and he wasn't sure that he liked it. But climbing out of those horrible green trousers made it all worth while. He put on a pair of jeans, took off his tie and went to rejoin Margery and Elizabeth.

"Let's start planning your birthday party," said Peter. "Who do you think we should ask to come to it?"

Elizabeth put down the crayon that she was currently using to create a cat sitting on the fence that now surrounded the two storey brick house in her picture. "The cat is called Gilbert," she said, ignoring Peter's question. "He eats mice and marbles and mushrooms and men."

"Will he eat me?" asked Peter, pretending to be anxious.

"Of course not, silly," said Elizabeth scornfully. "You aren't any of those things. You're a daddy. Don't you know the difference?"

Gilbert jumped in through the open window. He climbed on to the kitchen bench, sat down, wrapped his tail around his front paws, stared intently at the fridge and mewed insistently. Everybody ignored him, so he jumped down again, padded over to Peter and bit him on the ankle. "Ow!" said Peter. "I think Gilbert just tried to eat me."

"Nonsense," said Margery. "He just wants to play." Peter frowned. He wasn't sure how to play with a cat. There had never been a cat in the house until today.

"Who shall we invite to your birthday party?" he asked Elizabeth again, returning to the main point of the conversation.

"Nobody!" said Elizabeth firmly. "I want to do it by myself."

"But I've baked you a cake, with candles on it," said Margery. "Don't you want to blow out the candles, make a wish and share the cake with your friends?"

"No," said Elizabeth, pouting. "I don't!"

"But if nobody comes to your party you won't get any presents," said Peter.

Elizabeth stopped pouting and looked thoughtful. Clearly this was a new idea that needed careful consideration.

"Does everyone who comes to my party have to give me a present?" she asked.

"Yes," said Peter. "It's a rule."

"So," said Elizabeth, still struggling with the concept, "The more people who come to my party, the more presents

I get?"

"Yes," said Peter.

Elizabeth went wide eyed with wonder as the implications of this thought sunk in, then she got a new piece of paper, started making her busy noise, and began to cover the paper with amorphous pink blobs. When it was full, she picked up another piece of paper and did the same thing to it. As she reached for a third piece of paper Peter asked, "What are you doing?"

Elizabeth said, "I'm drawing a crowd."

The Joke

Every year students at the university engage in a mammoth fund raising effort for charity. It's known as rag week and in this golden year of 1969, Peter and David are in charge of producing the rag week magazine. The magazine is a guaranteed best seller; page after page of the dirtiest jokes in the known universe. It always sells like hot punch lines, and Peter and David are determined to make this year's issue the filthiest and funniest ever. A few weeks ago they put an advert in the student newspaper asking for submissions and now they are sniggering and snorting their way through the piles of paper that have flooded into their tiny office in response to the advert.

There is a flickering television in the corner of the room. Dim black and white images show hordes of angry sign-waving students chanting slogans in front of the American Embassy in Grosvenor Square. Faintly through the tinny speakers, Peter and David can hear:

*Hey, hey LBJ
How many kids did you kill today?*

"We should be down there," says Peter, nodding towards the television. "Stopping the war is a lot more important than putting a dirty magazine together."

David shakes his head. "No," he says. "Raising money for charity has a lot more of a long term effect than chanting slogans does. We'll end up with a large cheque that we can use for something practical. They'll just end up with sore heads from the police batons."

"I'm surprised to hear you say that," says Peter. "You took part in the sit-in last month. You were quite

enthusiastic about it as I recall.”

“That’s right,” says David. “The organisers kept the numbers up by showing non-stop pornographic movies. It was standing room only in there by midnight, even though it was supposed to be a sit in! Great fun and a great example of idealism tempered with *realpolitik*.”

Peter smiles and returns to his piles of paper. Soon he is chortling again. “Here’s a good one,” he says.

The mighty spaceship ploughed through the void between the stars. The crew were near to mutiny and the captain was deep in angry conversation with the artificial intelligence in charge of supplies.

"What happened?" he demanded. "Come on Marie, you stupid machine. How could you allow such a situation to arise? How did you expect us to travel five hundred light years with no toilet paper?"

"What is it to me?" said Marie haughtily. "I have no need for toilet paper."

The captain buried his head in his hands. "What am I going do?"

"Let them use cake," said Marie.

“That’s not very dirty,” says David uncertainly..

“No,” replies Peter, “but at least it’s funny. And toilet humour is mildly dirty, so I think it’s allowed. You know, the real problem with most dirty jokes is that generally they aren’t very funny. People only laugh at them because the smuttiness makes them feel a little uncomfortable. The laughter is a protection mechanism. We studied the phenomenon in first year psychology.”

David nods in agreement. “Well,” he says, “fair is fair. If you can have a funny one then so can I. How about this one?” He picks up a piece of paper and reads:

The explorers of the star system had named the twelve planets after the months of the terrestrial year. Only March, the third planet from the sun, was habitable.

John picked up his towel and set off for a day at the beach. The planet's five moons were clearly visible even in the daytime, and the sun was hot. He soon fell asleep.

He awoke with the sea lapping around him. He was isolated from the mainland and the tide was rising. He was drowning, choking as the sea invaded his lungs. His last thought was "Beware the tides of March."

Peter laughs with delight. "That's a good one," he says. "I like intellectual puns. There's no obscenity there, but if we use it, at least we'll have two proper jokes buried among all the smut."

"Are we still aiming to be the filthiest edition ever?" asks David.

"Oh yes," says Peter. "Two relatively clean jokes won't make much of a dent in that ambition."

* * * *

The cover of the magazine shows the figures 6 and 9 snuggling close together with a lascivious, smiling face pictured in the loop of each numeral. Most people stare at it for several seconds before the dirty meaning hits them, and then either they snigger and hand over their money or they frown and stalk away in disgust. Sniggerers outnumber frowners by about ten to one and so the money rolls in. Peter and David cover their printing costs within an hour of the magazine going on sale and from there on in, everything is pure profit.

Peter, who is the largest prop forward the university rugby team has ever fielded, has a very aggressive sales technique. He stalks threateningly through the town and

whenever he sees a likely looking prospect he demands, "Have you got any money?"

If the prospect admits to having money, Peter growls, "Give it to me!" and hands over a magazine in exchange.

If the prospect denies having money, Peter says, "Go and get some, then come back here and I will let you have a copy of this lovely magazine."

None of these people know that Peter is really the gentlest of men, and therefore his pockets are soon bulging with money. This has the effect of making him look even larger, and so his sales increase exponentially.

David prefers going door to door. Most people are friendly and chatty. He drinks many a sociable cup of tea. But one rather angry man says, "I'm not bloody giving you bloody lot any bloody money until you bloody stop bloody demonstrating!" Then he slams the door in David's face. David pushes a magazine into his letterbox anyway because he's feeling bloody charitable, and isn't that bloody well what it's all about anyway? Bloody hell!

* * * *

Peter counts the number of zeros before the decimal point on the banker's cheque he is holding. There's an impressively large number of them. "I think we've beaten the record for magazine sales," he says proudly. "Some charity is going to be very pleased with us."

David nods. "It's a pity that the Mayor refused to accept the money," he says. "It always looks more official if the money comes via the Mayor. What was it he said about us? Oh yes... I cannot in all conscience accept money to pass on to charity when that money has been generated by the unbelievably disgusting material that was published in this year's rag week magazine. Never before have I seen such filth. And much though I deplore the political activities of student demonstrators, I cannot help feeling that the editors

of this so-called magazine would have done much better if they'd taken part in the protests outside the American embassy in Grosvenor Square rather than wasting their time producing this muck!"

Peter smiles. "My spies on the city council tell me that he was reading the magazine and chortling away to himself quite happily until he got to the John Lennon joke. Then he got all offended and announced that he wanted nothing to do with it. Probably he's a Beatles fan."

David nods in agreement. "It was a pretty disgusting joke though," he says. "The Mayor was right about that. Even I felt a little bit offended by it. Goodness knows what John Lennon will do to us if he ever finds out about it."

"Hopefully he never will," says Peter. "But even if he does, we didn't use his full name, so if he sets his lawyers on to us we can always pretend we meant someone else."

"Good plan," agrees David. "Let's go down the pub and celebrate the size of the cheque."

AFTERWORD

This is all true – for small values of the truth. The events were organised at Nottingham University in 1969, in exactly the same week that massive demonstrations against the Vietnam war were taking place outside the American Embassy in Grosvenor Square. The rag week organisers really did set out to produce the most disgusting Rag Week magazine ever. 69 was far too good an opportunity to miss. The T-shirts were astonishing!

That year there really was a sit in at the university that showed pornographic movies to attract the punters. The Mayor really did refuse to accept any money from the sale of such an obscene publication, and it really was the John Lennon joke that offended him so much.

I've chosen to tell the story as fiction rather than fact because I suspect that a straightforward journalistic presentation of the details would prove to be rather dull. So I've made up the dialogue and I've tried to be entertaining. I hope I've succeeded.

The two jokes I've told were not in the magazine - I no longer remember any of the jokes from the magazine, apart from the John Lennon joke, of course. These two jokes are actually drabbles (short stories of exactly 100 words) that I wrote about twenty five years ago. It's nice to re-use old material sometimes.

The door to door selling of the magazine and the bloody, bloody, bloody speech that the householder indulged himself in happened to me, and I've reported the dialogue verbatim. The aggressive selling technique that Peter devised was used (very effectively) by a friend of mine.

Peter and David are fictional - I have no idea who the actual editors were or what their motives were, but it all sounds nice and accurate...

Lady Chatterley

Currently, Lady Jane Chatterley did not have a lover, and that was perfectly fine by her. Not a day passed without her cursing the name of David Herbert Lawrence, the writer whose novel had made her family notorious. Lady Jane had been a child at school in the 1960s when the obscenity trial at the Old Bailey had plastered the name 'Chatterley' all over the front page of every newspaper in the country. The teasing she had been forced to endure had been merciless and she had never quite got over the trauma of it. Not having a lover was definitely Lady Chatterley's preferred state of being. It kept the mockery to a minimum. So she was rather disconcerted by her sudden loin-tingling response to the hairy man she bumped into in the supermarket...

That day, Lady Jane was mostly thinking about dog food. She wheeled her trolley briskly down the appropriate aisle only to find that it was completely blocked by a large grey man sporting a large grey beard which he was stroking thoughtfully as he stared in trance-like fascination at shelves full of cat treats. Lady Jane cleared her throat loudly but that failed to attract his attention so she said, "Excuse me, please." The large man picked up a packet of Seafood Temptations, guaranteed to invoke a fish frenzy in any cat, and read the small print carefully. "Excuse me," said Lady Jane again, "I need to get past so that I can get some tins of Gourmet Beef dog food." She nudged him gently with her trolley.

The large man glanced up, noticing her for the first time. His eyes widened as he registered her face and figure. Clearly he felt that both were exquisite. Lady Jane could feel herself blushing as her whole body responded to his gaze.

Suddenly, not having a lover seemed a very unnatural state to be in. "Do you have any experience with cats?" the man asked her. "I am told that they are extremely fussy animals and I'm anxious not to make a mistake."

His voice was deep and dark and Lady Jane felt a sudden overwhelming desire to run her fingers through the thick, grey curls of his enormous beard. She gripped the handle of her trolley very hard so as to keep her rebellious fingers under control. "No," she said, "I have never lived with a cat. I'm a dog person myself."

He nodded thoughtfully. "The cat has only just moved in with me," he said, "and I'm uncertain just how to proceed with winning its affections."

"I'm sure that cat treats will be perfect," said Jane. "And I'm told that some cats absolutely adore to chew on catnip. Maybe you could try some of that as well?"

The man seemed quite taken with her advice. "Perhaps we could go for a coffee and discuss our pet preferences further," he suggested. He held out his hand. "My name is David Mellors," he said. "How do you do?"

Lady Jane winced inwardly. This highly attractive man had the same surname as Lady Chatterley's bit of rough in Lawrence's scandalous novel. Already she could see the newspaper headlines in her mind's eye. The gutter press would be beside itself with joy. She shook his hand and said, "I'm Jane." She kept her surname to herself, just in case he was a literary man. She couldn't see any point in pursuing the coincidence of names any further than she had taken it already. "There's a coffee shop round the corner. I'll see you there in about fifteen minutes," she said. He nodded agreement and stood back to let her past. She filled her trolley with tins of dog food. Then she grabbed a packet of liver flavoured dog treats. If David's cat can have a treat, so can my dog, she thought. Then she looked at the packet again. Liver, she thought. Lady Chatterley's Liver. She put the packet back on the shelf.

* * * *

The coffee shop was almost empty and Jane could see David sitting at a table with a large cup of something steamy in front of him. He was staring intently at it and he didn't notice her waving at him. Never mind. Jane ordered herself a large latte and when it came she carried it over to the table and sat down. David looked up and smiled. Laugh lines chased themselves around what little bits of his face remained exposed and his beard waggled attractively up and down. "Hello," he said.

"Hello," said Jane. "How's the coffee?"

"Very hot," said David. "We'll be here a long time waiting for it to cool down. At the moment it's a bit like drinking molten rock."

"You mean lava," corrected Jane. She picked up her own cup and took a small boiling sip. Lady Chatterley's lava, she thought. Then she thought, stop *doing* that!

"Lava," agreed David amiably. He twirled one end of his moustache between his fingers and then he pushed the hair into his mouth and sucked on the strands. "Sorry," he apologised, grooming the moustache back into place with his tongue, "but it had some coffee on it. I don't usually do that in company but it seems to be the only way I can get coffee into my mouth at the moment without scalding myself. Facial hair can be so very useful sometimes, don't you think? Particularly in the small hours of the morning when you develop night starvation. You can eat your dinner all over again from the lumpy bits that the hair filtered out."

"I wouldn't know," said Jane sarcastically. "I shave mine off every day."

David nodded, unsurprised. "Probably very wise of you," he said.

Jane was beginning to feel a little less attracted to David now. After his revelations about the uses to which he put his beard she was starting to think about it in a whole new light.

What else might be lurking among the curls? Perhaps strange, creepy creatures were making themselves at home in there even as they spoke. Didn't Edward Lear write a doggerel verse about that, she asked herself? She thought for a moment and then it all came back to her. *Two Owls and a Hen, four Larks and a Wren, have all built their nests in my beard...* She was sure that Lear must have been writing from personal experience. David might have a whole menagerie in there! "What do you do for a living?" she asked him. "Are you perhaps a gamekeeper?" That had been Mellors' occupation in the novel that she hated so much, and she was starting to wonder just how far the parallels in this encounter would go.

"I'm unemployed at the moment," said David.
"Consequently I spend my days just loafing around."

So if I do have an affair with him, thought Jane, he would play the part of Lady Chatterley's loafer. Why do I keep thinking these terrible things, she asked herself in disgust? Aloud she said, "But what do you do when you *are* working?"

"Windows," said David mysteriously. "I design, custom build, and fit windows." He paused for a moment. "I specialise in louvre windows," he added.

Don't you dare do anything with that thought, Jane told herself sternly. But she thought the forbidden thought anyway, despite herself.

By now her coffee had cooled enough for her to be able to drink it, and her ardour had cooled enough for her to have finally lost interest in David. He was giving her far too many punny thoughts for her to be comfortable with him, she decided. So she finished her coffee and then she excused herself. David looked a bit bewildered as she left. Perhaps he was wondering what he'd done wrong. I'm afraid you'll never know, thought Jane. It's far too complicated to explain!

* * * *

When Jane got home she decided to take a long, luxurious bath to wash away the cares of the day. She ran water into the tub and browsed among her large collection of smellies, trying to decide which of them suited her mood. She poured a few experimental selections into the swirling water and was rewarded with clouds of foam and sweet perfume. She sank deep into the water, feeling the soothing heat soak into every tense muscle and slowly relax them. Then she started to scrub herself briskly. Oh look, she thought, I'm scrubbing myself with Lady Chatterley's Loofah.

Damn!

Five

"I'm five," said Jake the Dog. "I'm five. I'm a big boy now. I'm five!"

"Yes, you are," I said. "Perhaps we should have a party to celebrate the occasion."

"That's a good idea," said Jake. He thought about it for a moment, then he asked, "What's a party?"

"All your friends come round and play games," I said. "And they eat and drink far too much."

"Sounds good," said Jake. "How do we go about arranging it?"

"The first thing to do is to leave an invitation for everyone," I said.

"OK," agreed Jake. "Let's go for a walk and I'll get the invitations ready."

I got Jake's lead out of the cupboard, put on my hat and coat, and we went out into the wild, wet afternoon. Jake left a party invitation for his two best friends on every tree and lampost. With so many invitations left in so many places, they'd be certain to receive the message very quickly. By the time we got back home he was exhausted and completely drained. "There," he said, "that ought to do it. I'll check for an RSVP tomorrow."

The next day we retraced our previous route and Jake checked each tree and lampost very carefully. "Maggie isn't coming," said Jake, looking disappointed. He's known Maggie since they were both puppies. They first met when they were students together at the Doggy Disobedience class. They passed disobedience with flying colours and they've been best friends ever since.

"That's surprising," I said. "It's not like Maggie to miss a party."

"She's got to go to the vet," said Jake. "She's got a little bit of an upset tummy. She ate someone who disagreed with her."

We carried on with our walk and Jake made another disappointing discovery. "Booki can't come either," he said after sniffing carefully at a favourite tree.

"That's a shame," I said. "Did he say why?"

"No, he was a bit vague," said Jake. "He just said that he had a previous engagement. But there was something very strange about the message."

"What was strange about it?" I asked.

"The reply was definitely from Booki," said Jake. "You simply can't be anonymous when you're a dog. But oddly, the message was in Tara's handwriting!"

"That is peculiar," I agreed.

"Sometimes I wonder about Tara," said Jake thoughtfully. "Sniff at her bottom and she'll follow you anywhere."

"I know a lot of people like that," I said.

"It looks like it's going to be a small party," said Jake. "Just you and me and Robin. And Gilbert the Cat."

"Small," I agreed, "but perfectly formed."

* * * *

The day of the party dawned warm and clear. "Happy birthday, Jake," I said and gave him a bone.

"Oh boy!" said Jake, "A bone! Just what I've always wanted. How did you know?" His voice was a bit muffled because he had a bone in his mouth. He took the bone to the middle of the lawn and flopped down to start licking it. Then he chewed it a bit, making noises that sounded just like teeth breaking. I worried about that for a moment, but then Gilbert the Cat got a bit too close to the bone and Jake growled at him to warn him away. Both Gilbert and I could clearly see that all Jake's teeth were still firmly in place.

Gilbert counted them, one by one, just to make sure they were all there. I stopped worrying and left Jake to his bone.

"Can I have a lick?" Gilbert asked Jake. "Pretty please, with knobs on."

"No," said Jake. "Go away."

"You know," said Gilbert thoughtfully, "you might find that it would go down more smoothly if you inhumed it for a while. Inhuming adds flavour and texture."

"Inhume?" asked Jake. "How do you inhume a bone?"

"Don't you know anything?" asked Gilbert scornfully. "When you dig a bone up, you exhume it. So when you bury it, you inhume it. Simple!"

"Ah! I know how to do that," said Jake. "I was planning on doing it later so that I could have the bone for dessert. And maybe for breakfast tomorrow as well. But now that you've put the idea into my head..." He carried his bone over to the patch of garden that Robin had carefully mulched and composted the day before. It was beautifully soft, moist and squishy there, very easy to dig. So much of our garden is covered in decoratively laid rocks, and just underneath them is solid, dry clay. When Jake digs there it tends to break his toenails, and he is very vain about his toenails. He spends ages trimming and shaping them so as to get them just right. I always shout at him whenever he gives himself a pedicure, because he makes such disgusting slobber-sucking, grinding noises while he's shaping and polishing his nails. So these days he tends to do it when I'm not around.

The chance to dig in soft soil was just too good for Jake to resist and it wasn't long before Robin's carefully prepared flowerbed was scattered to the four corners of the garden. Jake placed his birthday bone carefully in the hole he'd dug and then he shovelled as much soil as he could back into the hole. The final touches involved him scooping up mountains of mulch with his nose and piling it artistically on top of the inhumation site. Then he came to tell me all

about what he'd done and how clever he felt he'd been. He seemed quite hurt when I proved to be less than impressed.

"What's the matter?" he asked, honestly puzzled.

"Look at the carpet," I said.

We both looked at the carpet. Muddy paw prints criss-crossed it and there were several piles of black dirt placed in carefully chosen strategic positions where Jake had sneezed, thereby causing the mounds of mud on his snout to fall off.

"I think that's a rather pretty effect," said Jake. "Quite artistic. However, if you really want to remove it, just let it dry and then you can vacuum it up, easy peasy. But wait until I'm not around before you do it. I'm scared of the vacuum cleaner."

"I'll do it tomorrow," I said. "I don't want to spoil your birthday party."

Jake glanced out of the window. "Excuse me," he said, "Gilbert's getting a bit too close to my inhumed bone. I need to go and stare at him until he goes away." He went outside and did just that. Eventually Gilbert washed himself nonchalantly in order to show that he didn't feel at all threatened, and then he wandered away to deal with important cat business. Jake exhumed his bone. He felt that it had been underground long enough now to have enhanced both its flavour and its texture. He was eager to return to it.

He spent the rest of the afternoon tending to his bone. First he licked off the dirt, then he chewed the bone for a while. Next he picked it up and walked round the garden with it, pausing every now and then to see if this new garden spot was any better for bone chewing than the last one had been. Rinse, lather, repeat.

As the sun went down and darkness spread itself over the garden, he came back into the house, a tired and happy dog. He walked towards me across the carpet carefully avoiding the patches of dirt that he'd left there earlier and

depositing new ones in all the clean spaces. "That was a great party," he said.

"I'm glad you enjoyed it," I said. "But it's been a pretty exhausting day. It's probably time for bed. Say goodnight, Jake."

"Goodnight, Jake," said Jake obediently.

* * * *

The next day Jake and I went for our usual morning walk. As we so often do, we met Maggie. "Hello Maggie," said Jake. "Are you feeling better?"

"Yes, thanks," said Maggie. "Do you want to play chase?"

"Yes, please," said Jake, and they both dashed off towards the horizon. The sound of frantic barking echoed faintly back to me as it bounced off the houses, waking all the sleepyheads who were still tucked up snug and warm in their beds at 6.30am. Serves them right for being such lazybones, I thought to myself.

Eventually Jake came back. He had a huge grin on his face and several yards of tongue hung dripping out of the side of his mouth. "I've left a message for Booki," he said "I've told him what a great party he missed."

"I'm sure he'll be sorry he couldn't make it," I said.

"Maggie wrote the note for me," said Jake. "I hadn't realised just how much fun that could be until she did it. Now I know why Booki got Tara to write his RSVP. Clever boy, that Booki."

Then he winked at me.

Roll up! Roll up!

Aristotle was the big attraction of the Gerrard Brothers Flea Circus. His name was emblazoned on posters, and people came from miles around to witness his amazing feats of strength and agility. Aristotle was the latest of many generations produced by a careful selective breeding programme and he was the largest, strongest, heaviest and most intelligent flea that had ever performed in a circus. His body measured nearly two inches from head to tail and his mightily thewed legs could propel him over vast distances in gigantic leaps that made audiences gasp with awe and wonder. When he was strapped into his specially tailored harness, he could pull model cars tirelessly round and round a carefully prepared track. But his greatest trick, which always drove the crowds wild with delight, was his ability to dive from a four foot high platform and land safely in a teacup of water. In short, Aristotle was the star of the show in the small top.

But even during his most daring feats of skill and bravery, Aristotle was always tethered to the small top with a fine, steel-reinforced nylon line. It was sturdy enough to resist anything except industrial strength bolt cutters while, at the same time, remaining far too thin for the audience to see. The tether terminated in a padlock to which only David and George had the key. All of this was carefully designed to prevent Aristotle from taking a bold leap to freedom. The Gerrard brothers had no intention of ever losing their star attraction.

One day David Gerrard, the ringmaster and part owner of the Flea Circus, came to get Aristotle so that they could start rehearsing a new trick. As he entered the small top he stumbled over a snoring and rather smelly man who was

lying unconscious on the ground with a can of strong lager clutched in his hand. Several other empty cans were scattered on the ground around him, which almost certainly accounted for his prostrate state and his loud snoring. David could clearly see Aristotle sprawled on the man's face, half in and half out of the his left nostril. Aristotle too appeared to be comatose, and if fleas could snore, David was sure that Aristotle would have been snoring even more strongly than the smelly man. David felt quite out of his depth and in need of advice, so he raced round to his brother George's caravan and went straight in without knocking. "We have an Aristotle crisis," he blurted out. "Come and see!"

George looked up from the accounts he was falsifying and frowned. "That could be serious," he said. "Let's go and see what's what." He put down his pen and the brothers hurried over to to the small top. "Hmmm," said George, taking in the situation at a glance, "this man must have staggered in overnight. It looks like Aristotle jumped on him as soon as he came within range and he appears to have been biting the man and sucking his lager-saturated blood. Look, you can clearly see the bites on the man's face where Aristotle has been feeding."

"So Aristotle is blind drunk, just like the man himself," said David.

"Almost certainly," said George. "Even if we can sober him up in time for this evening's performance, I suspect he's going to have one hell of a hangover. He might even miss the water when he dives into the teacup. He'll probably be seeing double and he won't know which one to aim for."

"Perhaps we should give him a teacup of coffee to dive into instead," suggested David.

George shook his head. "No," he said, "giving coffee to a drunk only results in a wide awake drunk. It does nothing to sober them up. I doubt if anything short of a liver transplant will do much for Aristotle in his current state. We'll just have to wait for nature to take its course and hope that he'll be

sufficiently *compos mentis* to stagger through his part of the show tonight. We don't want to disappoint the punters. They might ask for their money back, and that would never do!"

He pulled on Aristotle's tether and dragged the flea out of the man's nostril. "Get this man out of here," he said to his brother. Obediently David took hold of the man's arms and pulled him out of the small top. He dumped the man under a hedge and then he returned to find George attempting to get the semi-conscious Aristotle to run through his repertoire of tricks. Aristotle was still more than a little tipsy and he kept getting his legs tangled in his tether which made him trip and fall over in a rather ungainly manner. "This simply isn't working," said George. "Aristotle just doesn't have the coordination to do his tricks and cope with his tether at one and the same time. If we want to get a decent show out of him tonight I think we are going to have to remove his tether."

David shook his head dubiously. "I don't know about that," he said. "It's quite a risk."

"I don't think we have any choice," said George. "Look at the state of him!"

As the time of the evening performance got close, David went into the small top to check that everything was ready. The ordinary fleas that made up the chorus line were bouncy and excited, little black blobs jumping up and down at the end of their tethers. Aristotle himself still looked very hungover and listless. As David watched, Aristotle staggered to his feet, hopped across to his favourite model car, tripped over his tether and fell in a tangled heap. Shaking his head at the magnitude of the risk he was running, David carefully unlocked Aristotle's tether and rolled it up. Aristotle didn't seem to notice that he wasn't tethered any more. He appeared to have collapsed over the steering wheel of the model car. He hiccuped. David picked him up and cuddled him protectively. Aristotle snuggled up close to him, basking in his warmth. For a time they comforted each other but

eventually David had to put him down again – the audience was starting to file in and David had to go and change into his ring master’s uniform. When he got back to the small top he cracked his whip to settle the audience down. “Ladies and Gentlemen,” he thundered, “I bid you welcome to the Gerrard Brother’s magniloquently magnificent Flea Circus starring, for your entertainment and delight, Aristotle – the flea who surpasses all other fleas. Take a bow, Aristotle.”

Aristotle stood tall and, swaying drunkenly, bowed to the audience. That earned him a huge round of applause. Out of the corner of his eye David noticed the homeless man slip into the small top. As the crowd fell momentarily silent, the homeless man yelled, “Now Aristotle! Now!”

Aristotle, who longer seemed even the slightest bit inebriated, launched himself into the air with one swift thrust of his huge leg muscles. Every eye in the audience followed his trajectory as he soared across the vast space inside the small top and landed safely on the homeless man’s neck. The audience cheered and applauded Aristotle’s gigantic leap. The homeless man pumped the air with his fist in a gesture of triumph and then slipped quickly out into the night.

“Fleanapper!” yelled George. “Bring him back, you swine!” But Aristotle and his new mobile home had vanished into the darkness. Aristotle was gone. With one mighty bound he had gained his freedom.

David looked shocked. George came up to his side. “This was obviously carefully planned,” said George. He was white with fury. “I think we’ve just been outwitted by a flea. I don’t believe that Aristotle was drunk at all. It was just a ploy that he concocted with the homeless man to get us to release him from his tether.”

“How humiliating,” said David. He scratched his armpit thoughtfully. “I think he’s left me a souvenir,” he said.

The Return of the Ring

The seal, streamlined and elegant, arrowed through the waves, heading towards the shore. She splished and splashed in the water, just for the fun of watching the sun cast rainbows through the droplets. She slowed down as she got close to the land and when a final wave pushed her gently onto the sandy beach she was barely moving with any speed at all. She flopped in an ungainly fashion up the beach, away from the rising tide, heading for the dry sand. Once she reached the dunes, well away from the domain of the sea, the touch of the land transformed her from a seal into an elegant, naked lady who scratched herself vigorously and cursed the itching caused by the sea salt and sand drying on her skin. She headed purposefully for the cave where she had stored her clothes. When she got there, she was rather irritated to find a leprechaun sitting on them, "What are you doing here Patrick?" she asked. "And stop sitting on my clothes. I need to get dressed."

"Sorry, Maeve," said Patrick, getting up and moving further back into the cave.

Maeve wiped herself down with a towel in a vain attempt to get rid of the sand and the salt. She was looking forward to a nice hot shower when she got home. She clambered into her clothes. "Well, Patrick," she said again, "why are you skulking in my cave so early in the day? It's only just after dawn. You usually stay in bed until at least lunch time. What's got into you?"

The leprechaun had the grace to look embarrassed. "I need your help," he said. "I've lost my wedding ring." He held up his left hand. Maeve could clearly see the mark on his third finger where the ring had once been.

"What's that got to do with me?" she asked.

“It fell off my finger yesterday when I was out fishing, just past the headland,” explained Patrick. “And now it’s somewhere on the bottom of the sea. It’s way out of my reach down there, but what with you being a selkie and all, I thought you might do me a favour and get it back for me.”

“So that’s why you’re up so early,” said Maeve. “You wanted to catch me after I finished hunting for breakfast and before I went off to work.”

Patrick nodded. “That’s right,” he said. “Also I wanted to get out of the house before Wendy noticed my naked finger. She’ll kill me if she ever finds out I’ve lost my wedding ring.”

“Do you have any idea how big the bottom of the sea is and how tiny a wedding ring is?” asked Maeve. “The chances of me finding it are vanishingly small.”

“Oh you’ll have no trouble finding it,” said Patrick. “Rings really want to be found. They’re always slipping off people’s fingers and getting themselves lost. Then they start to regret what they’ve done and so they make sure that somebody finds them as soon as possible. You know how it works. You’ve seen *The Lord of the Rings*.”

Both Maeve and Patrick were huge fans of Peter Jackson’s trilogy of movies. Patrick even owned two copies of the extended DVD versions because the documentary material about the making of the movies was slightly different on each set.

“Are you saying that your wedding ring is a magic ring?” asked Maeve.

“Well, not like the One Ring,” said Patrick. “It’s not super powerful or anything. But it does cast a little love spell. I find it very useful for keeping Wendy sweet. That’s another reason I want it back.”

Maeve sighed and began to get undressed again. “Well, since it’s you, and since you asked so nicely...”

She ran down the beach, moving faster and faster as the siren song of the sea called to her. She dived straight into the waves, transforming immediately into a seal. The water

was cold and refreshing on her skin. She swam out towards the headland where Patrick said the ring had fallen off his finger. When she reached the approximate position, she took big breath and dived down to start hunting. She swam methodically just above the sea bed, tracing a rectangular search pattern, looking for the glint of gold, hoping the ring was getting bored with sitting all alone on the bottom of the sea, praying that it would signal its presence to her. Every so often she surfaced to take another gulp of air before diving down again to carry on searching. Back and forth... Back and forth... A flatfish flapped away in sudden panic raising a huge cloud of sand into her field of vision. She waited patiently for the sand to settle before resuming her search. Back and forth... Back and forth... Seaweed strands waved seductively as hidden currents caressed them. The occasional crab scuttled with great determination from rock to rock, engaged on important crab business. And still she searched. Back and forth... Back and forth...

There! A sudden gleam of gold. She swam down for a closer look. Yes! Half buried at a jaunty angle in the sand, the ring beckoned to her. She couldn't pick it up - her flippers were far too ungainly for that - so she opened her mouth and scooped it up, along with a clump of sand. She shook her head, irritated by the gritty feeling in her mouth, trying to keep the ring safe while the sea washed the sand away. It was all too complicated and she lost control. The ring dropped to the back of her mouth triggering a swallowing reflex in her throat. And just like that the ring slipped down to her stomach. Oh well. At least it was safe there.

She swam leisurely back to the shore. Every so often, as shoals of tasty looking fish fluttered past, she swam after them and gobbled them down. After all, she needed to keep her strength up, and a snack was always welcome.

* * * *

Maeve walked back to the cave and collected her clothes again. "You were right," she said to Patrick. "I think the ring really did want to be found."

Patrick looked relieved. "Oh, thank goodness," he said.

"But," said Maeve, "the bad news is that I accidentally swallowed it."

Patrick frowned. Then he reached down behind a rock and picked up a sieve. He handed it to Maeve. "I thought that might happen," he said. "So I came prepared."

Maeve laughed, and handed it back to him. "I've got one of my own," she said. "Your ring isn't the first shiny that I've rescued from the sea. At least half the time I end up swallowing what I pick up. It's a bugger, not having hands when you're down at the bottom of the sea!"

"I'll see you back here at this time tomorrow," said Patrick. "That should be long enough, don't you think?"

"I imagine it will be," agreed Maeve. "Do you think you can keep Wendy's eyes away from your empty finger until then?"

"With a bit of luck," said Patrick, and he turned to go.

"By the way," said Maeve, "you might want to think about the reward you're going to give me tomorrow."

"Reward?" asked Patrick.

"Reward," said Maeve firmly. "I don't work for free, you know. And I don't want any of your leprechaun nonsense. Don't try giving me fairy gold fresh from the pot at the end of a rainbow. We both know that the gold will turn into ashes after twenty four hours."

Patrick looked hurt. "Would I do that to you Maeve?" he asked

"Of course you would," she said. "You're a leprechaun. It's in your nature."

* * * *

After such a dramatic start, the rest of Maeve's day was a bit of an anticlimax. Nevertheless, she noted that it did seem to go a lot more smoothly than usual. The faerie folk she met were uniformly polite and obliging and even her interactions with humans had none of the rudeness verging on racism that humans so often exhibited when they dealt with any of the fae. She put it down to the love spell that the ring was generating inside her. The effect was so peaceful and calming that she began to wonder if she really wanted to return the ring to Patrick. But a promise is a promise and so, the next morning, she went back to the cave. Patrick was there, clutching a brown paper parcel to his chest.

"Have you got it?" he asked anxiously.

"Of course I have," said Maeve. She handed him the ring. He took it from her and sniffed it suspiciously. "Don't worry," she reassured him. "I washed it thoroughly with anti-bacterial soap. Wendy won't suspect a thing."

Patrick slipped the ring on to his finger. It clung tightly to him. "It seems glad to be back home," said Patrick. "I don't think it will run away again." He handed the brown paper parcel to Maeve. "Here's your reward," he said.

Maeve unwrapped the parcel and stared in bewilderment at what was revealed. Her reward appeared to be a small square of fabric. "What is it?" she asked.

"It's a gadget," said Patrick. He took the fabric square from her and unfolded it, revealing a wide-mouthed, fine-mesh net with two straps on it. "One strap goes round your neck," he explained, "and the other goes round your chest. Make sure you put it on before you dive in the water because after you change into a seal you won't have the dexterity to fit it properly. It won't get in the way of your flippers while you swim and it won't slow you down. Water will just pass through the mesh so there will be almost no resistance. And the best thing of all is that if you pick up anything with your mouth you can just spit it straight into

the net. It will be quite safe in there - the mouth of the net is a one-way valve. It lets things in, but it won't let them out again until you do this." He twisted the net's mouth through 180 degrees anti-clockwise and Maeve saw that the net opened up so that its contents could be removed. Patrick closed the valve again by twisting it clockwise. "You'll love this once you get used to it," he said. "And nothing else you find will ever have to go through the terrible experience my ring has just had to endure."

"Thank you," said Maeve. "I think..." She sounded doubtful.

The ring giggled as it listened to the conversation, but neither of them heard it.

Tricks of the Trade

The applause was loud and long as the stage magician who billed himself as the Magnificent Maurice took his bow. I joined in the applause with enthusiasm. His was the best performance I'd seen for many a year, though I felt I had an insight into his technique that the rest of the audience did not share with me. Too many years of watching magicians perform, I suppose. He straightened up from his bow and gestured to the wings. His beautiful assistant Beth joined him on the stage and the applause got even louder. She looked pretty and poised and unruffled, quite a feat considering that for his last trick, Maurice had sawn her in half. The blood that had dripped on the stage seemed very realistic and her screams had been the stuff of which nightmares are made. She curtsied, smiled and blew kisses to the audience then she too took a bow, acknowledging the applause. I was mildly surprised that she didn't fall apart into two pieces. Clearly Maurice had done his job well.

The applause died down. Maurice and Beth left the stage and the master of ceremonies came on to introduce the next act. I slipped away and headed backstage towards the dressing rooms. Nobody tried to stop me or enquired as to my business. I made very sure of that.

I found Maurice's dressing room without any difficulty. I knocked on the door.

"Come in!", he called.

I opened the door and went in. Maurice was sitting in front of a mirror removing his stage make up. He frowned as the reflection of the door swung open in his mirror, puzzled that he couldn't see me coming in. He swung round to face me, looking mildly surprised as he realised that there was someone there after all. "Hello," I said. "My name is

Jonathan Varley. I'm the secretary of the Magic Circle and I think that you and I need to have a long talk."

Maurice looked worried. "I'm not a member of the Magic Circle," he said.

"No," I agreed. "But perhaps you should be."

"There's a pub across the road," said Maurice. "Beth and I will meet you there in about twenty minutes."

"All right," I agreed, and he went back to removing his make up. He watched the door open and close in his mirror, but he didn't see me leave.

* * * *

The pub was quite crowded and there were no spare tables. I bought myself a beer and then I made certain arrangements. A table quickly became vacant and I sat down to wait for Maurice and Beth. They saw me as soon as they came in. Maurice nodded to me and they went to the bar to order drinks. A beer for Maurice and a gin and tonic for Beth. I made sure that they were served immediately. The sooner we got our conversation out of the way, the better I'd be pleased. They joined me at my table. "Thank you for coming," I said.

Maurice took a big gulp of beer. "What do you want with us?" he asked.

"I was very impressed with your act," I said. "Most stage magicians depend on smoke and mirrors, sleight of hand and misdirection. You don't do any of that."

Maurice and Beth exchanged a wary glance. I could see that they were still uncertain about me. "What do you mean?" asked Maurice.

"I mean that generally speaking, stage magicians are fakes," I said, "because, unlike you, they don't use real magic."

Beth choked a bit on her gin and tonic, but she said nothing. Maurice said, "So real stage magicians are fakes

because they are not using magic, and I'm not a real stage magician because I do use magic. Therefore I'm a fake stage magician. Is that what you mean?"

"That's right," I said, "though your syntax leaves a lot to be desired."

Beth spoke for the first time. "That's quite a paradox," she said. "He's fake because he's real and the others are real because they are fakes." She laughed. "Pair of ducks," she said.

"What makes you think there's real magic involved in my act?" asked Maurice.

"I belong to the Magic Circle," I said. "Only real magicians are allowed to join. Therefore you can be sure that I know real magic when I see it. I'm here to extend an invitation to you."

Maurice shook his head. "I think not," he said.

His beer glass was empty now. "Do you want another?" I asked him.

"Yes, please," he said.

I glanced around the pub. I spotted a man who had just sat down with a fresh pint. I transferred the beer from his glass to Maurice's. The man looked rather surprised. Had he really been drinking that fast?

"Thank you," said Maurice, "but I'm still not going to join your Magic Circle."

"Why not?" I asked.

"Because by your definition, I'm real," said Maurice, "so I'm not eligible."

Beth leaned across the table and took hold of my ears, one in each hand. "Quack, quack," she said softly and she pulled a duck out of my left ear and another duck out of my right ear. "Pair of ducks," she said, and sat back in her chair again. The ducks looked a bit surprised, as well they might. And that's when the penny dropped of course.

"So you're the actual magician," I said. "Maurice is just your assistant even though you pretend otherwise on

stage.”

“That’s right,” said Bess. “I’m just a bimbo as far as the world is concerned. So I can’t join your Magic Circle either. It would ruin my reputation.”

“Quack, quack,” said the ducks, but nobody heard them. One of the ducks tried to take a drink from my pint of beer. I moved the glass out of its way and then, feeling annoyed, I nailed both the ducks to the wall; ceramic ornaments flying in formation, what a cliché. Perhaps I should paint a mural while I was at it.

“It would certainly lead to problems,” I admitted. “The Magic Circle is exclusively male.”

“I thought it might be,” said Beth. “These things generally are. I think perhaps you’d better go back to where you came from now, before you make me do something I’ll probably come to regret.”

Everybody in the pub watched as I left, but nobody saw me go.

The Collector

I put on my coat, got in my car, and drove round to Ted Helliwell's house. Someone had reported him as a hoarder, and I wanted to check out the report to see if anything needed to be done about it. Initially the signs were encouraging. His garden was completely devoid of dead washing machines, defunct fridges and rusty, immobile cars. The lawn was neatly trimmed and the flowerbeds were full of colourful roses that smelled sweetly attractive as I walked up the path to the front door. Clearly Ted was a most untypical hoarder, if indeed he was a hoarder at all. I was starting to have my doubts. Perhaps whoever had reported him was simply bearing a grudge.

I rang the bell and Ted opened the door almost before the echoes of the ringing had died away. He was an average looking man, neatly dressed in a white shirt, and dark trousers with knife edge creases in them. Behind him I could see a ginger cat sitting in the hallway in a patch of sunlight washing itself thoroughly. I introduced myself to Ted. "There's been a hoarding complaint made about you," I explained, "and I'm here to investigate." I gave Ted my card. He examined it carefully.

"Hoarding," he said at last. "Well, some people might call me a hoarder. But I prefer to think of myself as a serious collector." He opened the door wide. "I suppose you'd better come in," he said. "Let me show you my collections."

I followed him down the corridor which smelled faintly of wood polish. The cat sneered at me and vanished from sight in the manner of cats everywhere. Ted opened a door. "This is my library," said, and we went in.

The room had floor to ceiling bookshelves against every wall. Every shelf was crammed full of books. "There's just

over 15,000 volumes in here,” said Ted proudly. “They are filed alphabetically by the name of the author within each Dewey Decimal category.”

“Wow!” I said, impressed. “Have you read them all?”

Ted gave me a look of disgust. “Everybody asks me that,” he said. “It’s a stupid question. What’s the point of owning a book that you haven’t read? Of course I’ve read them all.” He reached up and took a book off the shelf. “This is my pride and joy,” he said, showing it to me. It was a thin hardback with a blue dust cover which had a picture of a brass-bound chest on it. A wizard was sitting on top of the chest. I reached out for the book, but Ted wouldn’t let me touch it. He clutched it close to himself. “It’s an autographed first edition of *The Light Fantastic* by Terry Pratchett,” he said. “It’s worth about \$10,000.”

He put the book back on the shelf and closed the door. We went further down the corridor to another room. “This is the music room,” he said and we went in.

A hugely impressive stereo system sat in a cabinet against one wall. Gigantic speakers towered in each corner of the room. Again there were floor to ceiling shelves covering the remaining wall space. The shelves were crammed with records, CDs and tapes. “They are filed alphabetically by artist within each genre,” explained Ted, “Rock music, folk music, jazz, classical and the like. But the filing system has caused me some problems. It’s fairly obvious that the Beatles have to be filed under ‘B’ for Beatles, and Eric Clapton has to be filed under ‘C’ for Clapton, but where do you file Jethro Tull? Under ‘J’ or under ‘T’? It’s quite a conundrum.”

“How did you solve it?” I asked.

“Whenever I come across that kind of ambiguity I buy multiple sets,” he said. “I’ve got two copies of every Jethro Tull album. One set is filed under ‘J’ and one set under ‘T’. Problem solved!”

“Maybe that’s why Jethro Tull are so rich,” I said. “They get two sets of royalties for every album they make because of people like you.”

“Perhaps so,” Ted agreed. He pulled an LP off one shelf. “This is a first pressing of *Please, Please Me*,” he said. “It’s the first album recorded by the Beatles. It’s worth about \$6000.” He carefully put the record back in its place.

I was really starting to doubt that Ted was a proper hoarder. His collections were far too well organised and had far too many genuinely valuable items in them for that. The average hoarder just throws valueless junk higgledy piggledy into piles, most of which serve no purpose other than to block your way as you try to move from one room to another. I began to think that Ted was just mildly eccentric. Buying multiple copies of things purely for the sake of keeping your filing system in a logical order struck me as odd, but nothing to get too worked up about. Ted was obviously very serious about his collections, and wasn’t that a good enough excuse?

We left the music room and went back into the corridor. The ginger cat had reappeared and it was chewing something thoughtfully. Ted got very excited when he saw this. “Good boy, Gilbert,” he cooed. “Have you caught another weta?”

I don’t like wetas. They are a kind of cross between a cockroach and tyrannosaurus rex and they are the largest insects I’ve ever seen. They are supposed to be harmless, but one bailed me up in the garage once and I only escaped by dropping a brick on it. As I ran away, I glanced over my shoulder and I swear it was levering the brick to one side so that it could carry on chasing me.

Gilbert chewed on the weta, making disgusting slurping noises as he did so. Every so often he paused to spit something out of his mouth. “Wetas have soft, fleshy bodies,” explained Ted, “which makes them quite yummy if you’re a cat. But their legs are mostly chitin. There’s really

nothing at all worth chewing on a weta leg. Every cat I've ever lived with has always spat the legs out when it feasts on a weta." He bent down and scratched Gilbert's ears. "Clever boy," he said. Then he picked up the discarded weta legs one by one. "Come on," he said to me, "let's go in to my study." He opened another door.

The study had a comfortable looking overstuffed leather armchair positioned by a gas heater. A roll top desk stood against one of the walls. There was an office chair in front of the desk. Ted sat in the office chair and opened the desk. He pulled out a book with a stylised picture of a weta on the cover. "This is my weta album," he said. He paged carefully through it until he found a blank page then he laid his new set of weta legs on the empty page, and held each one in place with a small blob of glue. Just beneath them, he wrote the date and time that he'd collected the legs, together with the name of the cat who had eaten the weta that the legs belonged to. "Look at all these," he said proudly as he paged back through the album, showing me hundreds and hundreds of weta legs dating back for decades, the prized prey of at least half a dozen different cats. "I bet I've got the largest properly documented collection of weta legs in the world," he said. "Unfortunately I don't know how much it's worth." He sounded a little despondent.

"Not only is it the largest," I said, "I strongly suspect that it's the only collection of weta legs in the world."

He brightened at that comment. "Oh good!" he said happily. "If it's unique then it must be worth an absolute fortune." He put the album away. "Let's go and look at the newspaper room," he said.

The last door at the end of the corridor opened into a room that was positively stuffed with newspapers. At last, I thought, here's some typical hoarding behaviour! But it turned out that I was wrong again... "How many newspapers have you got in this room?" I asked. "Why are there so many?"

“I’ve got 8000 papers in here,” he said proudly, “and every single one is a copy of *The Sun*, a tabloid paper from the UK. They are all dated 7th September 1997. I think I’ve cornered the market – I’ve not seen one of these on sale for at least ten years now!”

“What’s so special about the date?” I asked.

“It’s the day after Princess Diana’s funeral,” explained Ted. “*The Sun* reported it in detail with heaps of photographs of both the funeral ceremony and of Diana herself. Many of the pictures of Diana were printed on page three!” He smiled proudly. “Each one of these newspapers is worth a small fortune!”

“Why?” I asked, honestly puzzled.

“This is the only edition of *The Sun* that’s ever had a photo of a girl on page three who isn’t showing her nipples,” explained Ted. “These newspapers get more valuable with every day that passes.”

As with all of Ted’s collections, everything he said about the piles of papers made perfect sense, though as always the logic felt a little bit skewed to me. “All right,” I said, “I give up. You aren’t really a hoarder. But nevertheless these newspapers have all got to go. They represent a very real fire hazard. If you want to keep them, you are going to have to move them to a safe, fireproof storage locker. I can make arrangements for you to hire one and I can supervise the transfer of the papers to it.”

For the first time in our conversation Ted looked a little bit ill at ease. “I’d really rather you weren’t here when the papers get shifted,” he said.

“Why not?” I asked.

He shuffled his feet and refused to look me in the eye. “Because then you’d find the trapdoor that leads down to the basement,” he mumbled. “The papers are covering it up at the moment.”

“What have you got in the basement?” I asked, my suspicions becoming aroused again.

“That’s where I keep my dead washing machines, defunct fridges and rusty cars,” he said.

Hunting Party

When the Rotary Club decided to organise a scavenger hunt to raise money for charity, I immediately knew that I had to have David on my team. He seemed quite flattered to be asked to join in the activity. I've always found David to be a delightful man, full of wit, wisdom and erudition. Unfortunately those are the very reasons why almost everybody else cordially dislikes him. After all, he does *The Times* crossword every day and he fills in the answers with a blue biro. That's pretty much guaranteed to upset people.

On the day of the scavenger hunt, Rotary provided each team with a set of clues that defined the things they had to seek out and collect. All the stuff the teams brought back would be donated to Rotary and then sold at a stall that the club maintains at the monthly flea market.

"What if the answers we get to the clues aren't correct?" asked Jeremy, who was also on my team. "Won't we come back with the wrong things?"

I shrugged. "A thing is thing," I said. "Whether it's the right thing or the wrong thing doesn't really matter, it will still sell at the stall. But the team that brings back the largest number of correct things will win a small prize and, of course, they'll get heaps of brownie points. That's why we need you, David. You're really good at solving clues. You'll give us an edge."

"Thanks," said David. "Perhaps we should go and get a coffee, and while we're drinking it we can look at the clues and decide on our strategy."

Jeremy and I thought that sounded like a good idea, so we headed for the nearest café. Jeremy ordered a long black, and I ordered a flat white, but David asked for something complicated that made the coffee machine

shudder and gurgle for ages as the barista twisted knobs backwards and forwards like a demented mad scientist. Eventually the barista completely vanished inside a cloud of fragrant steam. His disembodied hands reached out from the cloud and presented David with his drink. "Thank you," said David. He took a sip and pulled a face. "I should have asked for almond milk instead of soy," he said and he turned back to the counter, intent on changing his order.

I grabbed hold of his arm. "Never mind that," I said. "We've got more important things to think about."

"I hate getting things wrong," grumbled David as I guided him towards the table where Jeremy was staring at a sheet of paper with bewildered expression on his face. "Hate it, hate it, hate it," muttered David crossly as he sat down.

"Most of these clues look fairly simple," said Jeremy. "But what on earth are we supposed to do with this one?" He read the clue out to us. "*Initially the things the poet says have value to play in a sex shop!*"

"Can I see that?" asked David. Jeremy passed the paper over to him. "I do better when I can see the clues written down," explained David apologetically. "It's all those years of doing crossword puzzles, I suppose." He read the paper carefully. "You're right," he said, "most of these are pretty easy. There's nothing cryptic about them at all. They just say things like '*Bring back a bag of edible sheep poo.*' No room for any ambiguity there."

"What's edible sheep poo?" I asked, honestly puzzled.

"Souvenir shops sell heaps of it to gullible tourists," explained Jeremy. "It's just a handful of chocolate coated peanuts in a bag that has a cute picture of an excreting sheep on the front of it."

"I see," I said, rather amazed that people would actually spend money on something like that. "OK," I continued, "so what on earth are we supposed to make of *Initially the things the poet says have value to play in a sex shop.*"

“I think that one is actually quite straightforward,” said David blandly. “Obviously we’ve got to buy a copy of *Please, Please Me* by the Beatles.” He paused while Jeremy and I stared at him in perplexity. He shuffled with embarrassment in his seat under the pressure of our collective glare, and took a sip of his strange coffee. “The album,” he clarified, “not the single.” As if *that* made a difference.

“How on earth did you reach that conclusion?” I asked him.

“It’s simple,” he said. “*Lark* is a synonym for *play* so *play in* becomes *Lark in* which is obviously a reference to the poet Philip Larkin. The clue tells us the value is something to do with sex. *Initially* means the first time you do something, so *the things the poet says* must be a poem about his first sexual experience. And of course, Larkin actually wrote a poem about that very thing. He called it *Annus Mirabilis*. It goes like this.” He struck a dramatic pose and recited:

Sexual intercourse began
In nineteen sixty-three (Which was rather late for me)—
Between the end of the Chatterley ban
And the Beatles’ first LP

“The Beatles first LP was *Please, Please Me*,” he concluded. “So that’s what we need to get hold of.” He frowned for a moment. “Probably we ought to get a copy of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* as well,” he said. “Just to be on the safe side.”

Jeremy and I looked at each other, amazed by David’s twisted brilliance. “I told you we needed him,” I said to Jeremy.

“And you were quite right,” agreed Jeremy. “*Lady Chatterley’s Lover* is easy,” he continued. “We can get a copy of that at any decent bookshop. But where are we going to get the Beatles LP from?”

“Well, you probably won’t be able to get hold of a vinyl copy of it,” said David, “It’s far too old for that. But the CD

should be easy enough to find. There's a specialist music shop in Hastings that's bound to have a copy."

After that revelation, the rest of the day seemed a bit anti-climactic. David, Jeremy and I spent it searching out the trophies that the clues had guided us to. Then, laden down with goodies, we headed off to the Rotary club house where the man in charge of the scavenger hunt made a careful note of all the things we had brought back with us. He seemed rather surprised when we presented him with the Beatles CD and the D. H. Lawrence novel. "What are these supposed to be?" he asked.

I explained, and he started to laugh. "That's very clever," he said through his giggles, "but you couldn't be more wrong," Out of the corner of my eye I saw David stiffen in sudden anger.

"So what's the right answer?" asked Jeremy. "What were we supposed to get?"

"One of these," said the man, holding up a knitted purple cylinder with a large bag attached to it.

"What is it?" I asked, "and how do you get that from *Initially the things the poet says have value to play in a sex shop?*"

"*Things the poet says* are words," explained the man. "Their value is what the words are worth. Wordsworth. He's a famous poet - William Wordsworth. *Initially* refers to his initials, WW. And what WW do you find in a sex shop?" He paused dramatically while Jeremy, David and I shook our collective heads in bewilderment. He held up the knitted cylinder and bag again. "One of these," he said. "It's a willy warmer."

"Ah!" I said, as the penny dropped, "a heater for your peter!"

"That's a rather small one," said Jeremy. "Did you model for it yourself?"

The man flushed angrily. "No," he snapped. He added up the scores he had given us for each object and wrote the

total against our team name on a blackboard.

We stared gloomily at the board. We'd come in second. "I hate being wrong," said David. He was cross with himself again. "Hate it, hate it, hate it!"

"Don't worry about it," I said consolingly. "It was an easy mistake to make. It could have happened to anybody. Don't let it shake your confidence. You're still the best of us when it comes to interpreting clues." David shook his head. He seemed unconvinced.

"Let's go down the pub," said Jeremy.

"Best idea you've had all day," I said.

Rotary made a reasonable amount of money from selling all the stuff that people brought back from their scavenger hunting. Interestingly, the Beatles CD and *Lady Chatterley's Lover* sold for twice what we'd paid for them. Nobody bought a willy warmer. Perhaps they really were too small to fit the Rotary Club members. In the end, the organisers had to give them away. I took one home with me. I use it as a tea cosy. David has stopped drinking elaborate coffees. He still does *The Times* crossword puzzle every day, but now he fills in the answers with a pencil and he always has an eraser in his pocket. People seem to get along with him a lot better than they used to as well. Funny, that.

The Birthday Party

On the evening before his eighth birthday, Tommy's mother tucked him up in bed and gave him a goodnight kiss. "Tell me again the story about how old our house is," said Tommy sleepily, "and tell me about the grey men."

His mother sat down on the edge of the bed. "All right," she said, "but you must promise to go straight to sleep when I've finished telling you."

"I promise," said Tommy, settling down to listen to the old, familiar tale.

"Our house is very, very old," said his mother. "When we extended the cellar a few years before you were born, we found traces of a stone age house beneath the foundations of this one. I think our family must have lived here on this land for thousands and thousands of years."

"Is a thousand years a long time?" asked Tommy.

"It's a very long time for us," said his mother, "but I think it might be a very short time for the grey men."

"Who are the grey men?" asked Tommy.

"I don't know," said Tommy's mother. "All I know is that once in every generation a grey man comes to visit our house. He comes down out of the mist that shrouds the mountains and when his visit is over the mist takes him away again. A grey man came to see me before you were born. He's the reason why you are so good at disguising yourself. He's the reason why the man you call dad isn't really your father."

"Can I still call him dad?" asked Tommy.

"Of course you can," said his mother. "That's how he thinks of himself, and so do I. But never forget the truth that lies behind the truth. The grey men have kept our family here in a house on this land for as long as there have been

people to live in it." She sounded reflective, and perhaps a little bitter. "Sometimes I think we belong to the grey men in the same way that the sheep and cows in our paddocks belong to us." Her voice died away as she realised that Tommy had fallen asleep. He had disguised himself as a ginger pussy cat, his favourite disguise for bedtime. Cats fall asleep so easily. She stroked him gently and scratched him behind his ears. He purred softly, and arched his back, enjoying the sensation of her fingers in his fur, but he didn't wake up. She tip-toed quietly out of the room and closed the door behind her, leaving Tommy to dream of mice.

* * * *

The next morning Tommy's mum and dad came in to his bedroom to wish him happy birthday. "Come on, Tommy," said his dad in a hearty voice, "rise and shine and say hello to your birthday."

"I've baked a birthday cake with eight candles on it for you," said his mum. "Come downstairs and have breakfast, then you can blow out the candles and make a wish."

Tommy was wide awake now, keen and eager to get on with his birthday. He'd put aside his cat disguise and he was himself again. "OK," he said. "I'll be there in a minute. Don't start the party without me."

"We won't," said his dad, and they left him to get dressed while they prepared a special breakfast for him. It isn't every day that you become eight years old.

The breakfast birthday cake sat in the middle of the kitchen table with all eight candles burning merrily. Tommy disguised himself as a baby elephant. He knew that elephants can build up huge air pressure in their trunks which makes them really good at blowing out candles. But he also knew that the kitchen was far too small to contain a full grown elephant, so he compromised. He blew very hard and all eight candles went out simultaneously. Then Tommy

stopped being an elephant, closed his eyes and made a private wish that mum and dad had bought him a smartphone of his very own for a birthday present.

“Well done, Tommy,” said his mother. She cut slices of cake for all of them and they munched in happy silence for a few minutes. When they had all eaten enough, she said, “Now you can unwrap your present.”

She handed Tommy a parcel, wrapped in grey paper. It was far too large to be a smartphone, but Tommy didn't really mind, though he did feel a little sad that he'd wasted a perfectly good wish. Eagerly he tore the paper off the parcel to reveal a very large box inside which was a very small smartphone.

“Fooled you!” said his father gleefully. But Tommy didn't care. It was a wonderful phone and he hadn't wasted a wish after all. He poked at it happily for a few minutes before his father said, “Now we'll never lose you. As long as you have your phone with you, we will always know where you are.”

“Does that mean we can't play hide and seek any more?” asked Tommy, sounding disappointed. Hide and seek was his favourite game and he'd been looking forward to playing it today because today was his special day and besides, he'd had a wonderful idea about how to hide himself where he'd never be found.

“Of course we can play it,” said his mother. “You'll just have to leave your phone behind when you go and hide. That way we won't be able to track you down.”

“Let's do it now,” said Tommy, putting his phone in his pocket. “I'll hide myself while you count up to a hundred. Then you can come and look for me.”

“All right,” said his father, and he started to count.

Tommy raced off into the lounge and put his phone down on a coffee table. Then he stood beside the settee and disguised himself as a matching armchair. I'm hiding in plain sight, he thought smugly to himself. He hoped that his parents wouldn't notice that they now had one more

armchair than they'd had yesterday. He didn't think they would - the lounge was already over supplied with furniture that his parents had inherited from countless earlier generations. One more chair wouldn't make any real difference to the clutter.

He watched his increasingly frantic parents as they hunted for him high and low but completely failed to find him. His father made a pot of tea and Tommy watched as they drank it and discussed his disappearance. His mother actually sat down in Tommy for a few minutes which Tommy found a little annoying because her body blocked his view of the room and he couldn't see what his father was doing.

"I think we are going to have to go back to the grey men," said his mother at last. "Tommy's never disappeared for so long before. I'm sure he must have got himself into some sort of trouble. We need a grey man to rescue him. I hate to admit it, but it's the only way."

Tommy started to feel worried. His mother's stories about the grey men had always frightened him and he really didn't want to get them involved. This game was getting out of hand. He decided to end it by removing his disguise. But no matter how hard he tried, he found that he couldn't do it. He couldn't stop being an armchair, and that frightened him even more than the thought of the grey men.

"I'll go," said Tommy's father. "It can get a bit rough and dangerous out there in the mist."

"OK," agreed his mother. She sat down in Tommy again, and waited for a grey man to come.

* * * *

Much later in the day, when the mist around the mountains had begun to darken with the slow coming of the night, Tommy's father arrived back home with a grey man. The grey man looked around the lounge with interest and spotted Tommy immediately. "Ah," he said, "I see what

you've done. You've disguised yourself as an armchair and now you can't change back."

How do you know that, thought Tommy.

"You aren't the first one to do that kind of thing," said the grey man, "and I doubt if you will be the last. I suspect this is the very first time you've disguised yourself as something that isn't alive."

That's right, thought Tommy.

"Removing a disguise from something that isn't alive is a very different and much more difficult skill than removing it from something that lives and breathes," said the grey man. "Let me show you." He removed the disguise from the armchair and Tommy stood there looking a little bit ashamed of himself.

"Oh," said Tommy. "So *that's* how you do it. I can do that. I'm sure I can, now that I know how it works."

"We haven't finished yet," said the grey man. "You are still in disguise. I think it's time to remove it all the way, don't you?"

Tommy looked puzzled. "What do you mean?" he asked. "I'm Tommy now, just like I've always been. Tommy isn't a disguise."

"Yes he is," said the grey man. "Use the lesson you've just learned one more time. When you use that skill on something that is alive, it takes away the final disguise and it shows everyone the real truth that hides beneath the surface of the skin."

"I'll try," said Tommy. He did as he was told, and then Tommy wasn't Tommy any more.

The newly born grey boy looked at the grey man with something approaching tenderness. "I think it's time for you to come with me," said the grey man, "back into the mists where you belong."

"Tommy!" wailed his mother. "*Tommy!*"

"Take your phone with you, Tommy," said his father. "That way at least we'll always know where you are. It will

be a comfort to us.”

The grey boy put the phone into his pocket. Then, hand in hand, the grey man and the grey boy walked together out of the house and dissolved into the mist.

“Phones don’t work where we’re going,” said the grey man.

“I know,” said the grey boy.

Nursery Rhyme

After you've been at sea for a few weeks, you've really got only one thing on your mind when your ship comes into port. "How are you planning on spending your shore leave?" Nathan asked me as we moored at the Liverpool docks.

"As soon as the Captain lets us go ashore I'm heading straight for Contrary Mary's place," I told him.

"What's Contrary Mary's?" asked Nathan.

I stared at him, astonished. "Have you honestly never heard of Contrary Mary's?" I asked. "It's only the best bordello in the whole of Liverpool. I thought everybody knew about it."

"I've never been to Liverpool before," said Nathan. "I don't really know anything about its attractions."

"Why don't you come with me?" I asked. "I'll see you right. Honestly, you haven't lived if you've never been to Contrary Mary's."

"Sounds good," said Nathan, rubbing his hands together. "Let's do it."

"Mind you," I said, "she is a little bit eccentric."

"Who is?" asked Nathan.

"Contrary Mary," I said. "She puts all the profits from her business back into her garden. It's the only thing she really cares about. Her prize winning roses are just stupendous."

"Everybody has to have a hobby," said Nathan. "I can't see anything wrong with having a nice garden."

"Neither can I," I said. "But she does take it a bit to extremes. She gives all her customers a fifty percent discount if they go and pee on her roses when they've finished doing their... errr... main business of the evening."

"That sounds rather eccentric," said Nathan. "Why does she do that?"

“She says that male urine is the very best fertilizer a rose can have,” I explained. “Female urine doesn’t work nearly as well, apparently. I imagine it’s something to do with hormones.” Nathan made a very obvious and rather tasteless joke which I ignored. “Clearly she’s doing something right,” I continued. “Her whole garden is just spectacular, and the roses are something else again. I’ve watered them a lot over the years. After all, a fifty percent discount is not something to be sneezed at.”

“Don’t you have to be careful of the thorns?” asked Nathan.

“Not really,” I said. “You’ll be fine as long as you don’t get too close to the pricks.”

Nathan made another very obvious and rather tasteless joke. I ignored him again. “Why are you ignoring my very obvious and rather tasteless jokes?” asked Nathan. “You laughed at them in Kuala Lumpur.”

“We aren’t in Kuala Lumpur any more,” I pointed out, “and Contrary Mary’s is a much more high class establishment than that rather dubious knocking shop you dragged me to when we docked there.”

“Oh,” said Nathan.

* * * *

We arrived at Contrary Mary’s just after 8.00 o’clock in the evening. The cockle shells strewn over the path that twisted its way to the entrance crunched under our feet as we walked. When we reached the front door I announced our arrival by ringing the carillon of silver bells that hung from it. Mary herself answered the door. “Terry!” she shrieked as she recognised me. “I haven’t seen you in ages! Where have you been?” She gave me a huge hug which I returned with interest. I’m very fond of Mary. She reminds me of my mum.

“Here and there,” I said, answering her question, “And back again. Mary, this is Nathan. He’s a shipmate of mine.”

“Hello Nathan,” said Mary warmly. “It’s nice to meet you. Come in, both of you, and take the weight off your feet.”

She led us into a sumptuously furnished lounge where pretty girls sat all in a row, chatting among themselves and taking occasional sips from champagne flutes that were probably full of soda water. Music played softly in the background; something classical with a lot of strings. There were flowers in vases and the soft scent of lavender drifted in the air.

“Can I get you a drink from the bar?” asked Mary. “You’ll definitely need it if you want to water the roses later on.”

I asked for a beer and Nathan ordered a glass of wine. When we’d finished drinking, we walked over to the row of pretty girls. Nathan held out his hand to the first girl. She smiled at him and took his hand in hers. They walked upstairs together. Then, spoiled for choice, I dithered for a few seconds before I finally chose the girl who was now at the head of the row.

The evening passed slowly and delightfully. Nathan and I caught up with each other again an hour or so later, out in the garden. While we watered the roses, we compared notes and we agreed that we’d both had a great time. “The roses will be delighted with us,” I said, “and so will Mary.”

“I’m sure they will,” agreed Nathan. “And the discount will be good for my wallet. I just wish it didn’t hurt quite so much when I pee. I’d almost rather not water the roses and pay the full price instead.”

“How long have you been hurting?” I asked, edging away from him in case I got splashed.

“Ever since Kuala Lumpur,” he admitted.

“I’m going back in to get another beer,” I said. “Then maybe I’ll water the roses again later.”

“I’m done for the evening,” said Nathan. “I’ll see you back at the ship.”

When I got back inside, I went over to Mary and explained what I'd learned in the garden. Mary was delighted. "Oh, that's wonderful!" she said. "All those bacteria will add a nice bit of body to the soil. The roses will absolutely love it."

"Shouldn't you warn the row of pretty maids?" I asked.

"Why?" asked Mary, sounding puzzled.

"I know you don't normally insist on the men taking precautions," I said, "but perhaps you should. At least until you know whether or not the girls are still clean."

"I can't do that," said Mary firmly. "It's against the rules."

"Rules?" I asked. "What rules?"

"I'm living in a nursery rhyme," said Mary. "Surely you must have realised that by now."

"Yes," I said tentatively. "But what's that got to do with anything?"

"Nursery rhymes codify the rules and regulations that govern the lives of people like me and my girls," explained Mary. "All nursery rhymes are actually firm instructions which have the force of law as far as we are concerned. I will agree that interpreting the law embodied in the rhymes is sometimes difficult because the rhymes themselves can be ambiguous. But that just means that we've often got a bit of wiggle room. Unfortunately the rhyme that describes the rules of Contrary Mary's house is quite unambiguous. So therefore my pretty maids and I have absolutely no choice at all about the way we have to behave."

"What nursery rhyme is that?" I asked. "I've been racking my brains but I can't think of any nursery rhyme that would stop the girls from telling their customers to take precautions."

Mary giggled. "It's this one," she said. And, in a little sing-song voice she recited:

"Old Mother Hubbard
Went to the cupboard

letter.

To get the poor postman a

But when she got there
The cupboard was bare.
So they did it without.
It was better!"

The World Tour of 2018

Southowram is a small village in Yorkshire. It has three churches and six pubs, which is about the right ratio. Fifty years after we left school and went our separate ways the four of us met up again in the Cock and Bottle, the smallest and cosiest of those pubs.

People change a lot in fifty years, so after we stumbled over each other on Facebook, we exchanged photographs so that we'd know who was who when we finally met again in the flesh. I was the first to arrive which wasn't surprising because I was the only one of the four of us who still lived in Southowram. Barry was an architect in London. John had spent most of the last fifty years in Korea designing electronic gadgets, but after he retired he had come back to England and now he lived in the Cotswolds. Peter was a doctor in Berlin.

Barry walked through the door looking much as he had fifty years ago except that all his hair had fallen off and he was a lot fatter. He waved when he saw me, bought himself a pint at the bar and then came over and sat down. "I'm still not sure this is a good idea," he said.

I shrugged. "It's a bit late to back out now," I told him. "We've all agreed to it."

Barry shrugged. "We were never very good," he said. "And I'm sure we'll be even worse now after fifty years of not being together."

"John and Peter are keen," I said. "Enthusiasm counts for a lot. Anyway, I've printed the T-shirts. It's too late to back out now."

"I suppose you're right," said Barry. "Any idea when John and Peter are arriving?"

"Some time in the next couple of hours or so," I said.

No sooner had the words left my mouth than John and Peter came into the pub. They spotted us immediately and came and sat down. "So," said Peter, "The Institute FUF is now officially back together again."

"For better or worse," said Barry and he took a swig of beer.

"Has anyone told our fan?" asked John.

"Good God," said Barry. "Is Jennifer still alive?"

"Very much so," I said. "And she's really looking forward to seeing us again."

The four of us had been in a rock band in our teens. We called ourselves The Institute FUF and we were terrible, but probably we were no worse than any other group of teenagers with heads stuffed full of rock and roll dreams of fame and fortune. Of course, everyone always asked us what FUF stood for. Barry, who at the time was worried that his girl friend might be pregnant, claimed that the initials meant For Unmarried Fathers, but the rest of us always said that they stood for Frolic Until Friday, though John was fond of claiming that they stood for Frequently Used Functions because he was studying rather a lot of heavy duty mathematics at the time.

Despite our terrible name and even worse musicianship, a girl called Jennifer was always to be found, staring up at us from the audience whenever we played a gig. She was our only fan, and we cherished her though Peter rather grumpily remarked that she was just our Fat Ugly Friend.

But all that had happened fifty years ago and now we were back together again. The Institute FUF was going to play one last gig, our reunion gig.

"We can rehearse in my garage," I said. "It's all set up ready to go."

"Rehearse?" queried Peter. "We never did much rehearsing in the old days. It's one of the reasons why we were so crap. Why should we rehearse now and ruin the habits of a lifetime?"

“We do need to get some practice in,” objected John. “After all, it’s been fifty years since The Institute last got on to a stage. We’re bound to be a little bit rusty.”

“Right,” said Barry. “So how about we do our first rehearsal tomorrow morning at 9.00am?”

“That should give us enough time,” I said. “We aren’t due on stage until 7.00pm tomorrow night.”

“Plenty of time,” said John. “By the way, where is the gig happening?”

“In the back room of the Malt Shovel,” I said. “Jennifer owns the pub these days and she’s letting us play without charging us a booking fee.”

“That’s good,” said Peter. “The Institute has always been Famously Under Funded. I doubt if Jennifer has sold many tickets, so I don’t think we could afford a booking fee.”

Barry downed the last of his pint. “It’s your round,” he said to John. Then he turned to me. “Did you say something about T-shirts?” he asked.

I pulled a carrier bag out from under the table. “Take a look at this.”

The T-shirts came in an assortment of colours. On the front, in great big letters, was the legend INSTITUTE FUF – REUNION WORLD TOUR 2018. On the back was a list of almost but not quite famous cities – Lost Angeles, Santa Francisca, Newer York, Moscoward, Toke Yo, Sidney, Parish and Berlinda. At the bottom of the list, in very small letters, was Southowram.

Peter was impressed. “I bet they sell like very cold cakes,” he said.

* * * *

Jennifer welcomed us enthusiastically when we arrived at the Malt Shovel. She gave us all a hug and led us to the back room. “You’ve got plenty of time to set up,” she said. “I won’t be letting the crowds in for another half an hour.”

“Crowds?” asked Barry. “Have you sold a lot of tickets then?”

“Oh yes,” said Jennifer. “I’ll be there and so will my husband and our children.”

“Sounds like a fair sized audience,” said John.

Jennifer nodded. “You’ll have lots of Friends Up Front,” she said.

* * * *

The show went about as well as could be expected. John and Peter almost played the right notes on their guitars and Barry’s drumming was very nearly rhythmic. I sang out of key though I’m not sure anyone noticed because my microphone did not appear to be connected to anything. Jennifer applauded and even managed the occasional hysterical scream. I noticed that her children gradually edged away from her as she did so. We finished the set sweaty and happy.

“That was fun,” said Peter.

“Yes it was,” agreed John. “Perhaps we should do another world tour some time.”

“That sounds like a good idea,” Barry said. He looked at me. “Can you organise it?” he asked. “You did a pretty good job of organising this one.”

“OK,” I said. “When shall we do it?”

“How about in another fifty years?” suggested Jennifer.

I made a note to myself. Fix Up Fifty.

Note: Southowram, the Cock and Bottle, the Malt Shovel and The Institute FUF are all real. Barry, John, Peter, the unnamed narrator and Jennifer are all imaginary.

The Sun Also Rises

The Morris Dancers of Earth make sure that the sun rises every morning by dancing it to sleep every evening. There are a lot of Morris Dancers on Earth and so it isn't a very onerous task. My dad, for example, only had to be on duty every second Friday, so he had a lot of leisure time. But I am the only Morris Dancer on Mars, so I don't get any time off at all.

All the specialists in the small Martian colony are backed up by assistants who can take over in case of emergency. I am the chief systems engineer, but I have two colleagues who can step in at short notice if required. I am also a backup to the hydroponic engineer who grows the fresh fruit and vegetables that we depend on. But I am the only Morris dancer because the powers that be think that Morris dancing is silly. So I have to be out there all alone every evening, dancing on the red rocks in the shadow of Olympus Mons, making sure that the sun will come back when the night is over.

I had just put my pressure suit on and was fastening a band of bells to my thigh when Jennifer put her head around the door and said, "There's a phone call for you. It's Martin. He says it's urgent."

I sighed and went to see what Martin wanted. "We've got a problem," he said grimly. "The computer system that controls the air circulation to the domes has died and we can't get it started again. You're the chief systems engineer so you are going to have to come here and fix it."

"I can't," I protested. "I have to go out and dance the sun away."

"Superstitious nonsense," said Martin. "I don't mind you indulging in your little hobby when everything is running

smoothly, but this is a real crisis. If the computer system isn't fixed there won't be anyone here to see the sun rise tomorrow morning. The air supply is vital. We can't survive without it. You designed the system. You know more about it than anyone else. You've got to come at once. The sun can take care of itself this evening."

I felt torn. On the one hand I didn't want to be responsible for everyone in the Mars colony dying of suffocation, but on the other hand I really didn't want the sun to set without me there to encourage it to rise again tomorrow. My sense of duty was pulling me two ways. But deep down I knew that Martin was right. I unstrapped the bells from my thigh and headed off to the computer centre.

I spent the next few hours tearing my hair out as I examined computer log files in an attempt to track down the bug that had shut the air supply system down. Eventually I traced it to a function that went into an infinite loop when the switching circuits were triggered in a certain, rather unexpected, sequence. Until now, I hadn't been aware that the sequence was even possible. It wasn't in the specifications and it had never come up in the testing. Nevertheless it had happened, and I'd just have to accept it. Reality overrules theory every time. I modified the function appropriately and listened happily as the air supply circulation system hummed back to life.

"OK," I said to Martin. "It's fixed. I'm going home to bed."

By now, it was well past midnight. The sun had long since sunk below the horizon and there was nothing I could do about it now. I was exhausted. All I wanted to do was sleep.

The next thing I knew, Jennifer was shaking me awake. "Martin's on the phone again," she said, "and I think I know why."

I was still half asleep. "What time is it?" I mumbled.

"It's just after nine-thirty in the morning," said Jennifer, "and it's very dark outside. The sun should have been up

ages ago, but it never appeared. I bet that's what Martin wants to talk to you about."

I went to the phone. "Where's the sun?" screamed Martin. "What have you done to it?"

"Nothing," I said. "That's the problem. I wasn't there to dance it down last night."

"Well get out there and dance it up again," said Martin.

"Dancing the sun up and down?" I queried. "Isn't that superstitious nonsense?"

"Just do it," said Martin, and he closed the communication channel so that I couldn't argue with him.

"Well," I said to Jennifer, "I've got my orders, but I really don't know what to do about it. I have no idea how to dance the sun up. Nobody has ever had to do that before."

"Why not just do your usual sunset dance," suggested Jennifer, "only do it in reverse. Surely that will have some sort of effect."

"Probably," I said. "But I'm not very good at reverse choreography. How do you do a full double Arkwright backwards without breaking a leg? And a lunge is a lunge whichever direction you do it in."

"I'm sure you'll think of something," said Jennifer. She handed me a stick festooned with multi-coloured ribbons that were knotted in artful patterns up and down it. "I've re-tied all the ribbons," she said, "and I've polished the stick."

"Thank you," I said. "That's a big help."

I struggled into my pressure suit and attached the bells then, grasping my stick firmly, I strode out through the airlock onto the dusty red Martian desert. Leaving the colony's domes behind me I trudged off in the general direction of Olympus Mons. The temperature was well below freezing and the scattered starlight did little or nothing to illuminate the scene. Rocks that were hiding in the darkness did their best to trip me up but I'd travelled this path many times and I knew it well so it was easy to avoid them. It wasn't long before I arrived at my usual dancing spot.

Jennifer's tinny voice came through my helmet speakers.
"Are you there yet?"

"Just got here," I said. I pressed a switch on my breastplate and the strains of a piano accordion playing a jaunty tune reverberated around my suit. I shuffled along in time to it, bouncing my stick off the ground and ringing my bells, trying desperately to do it all backwards, hoping I wouldn't trip myself up.

"It's working," said Jennifer's voice in my helmet. She sounded excited. "There's a faint glow on the horizon. Keep dancing. The sun is coming back. It's really coming back!"

I continued my shuffling, backwards dance trying to visualise just how each step needed to flow into the next. I could see the darkness fading away as the sun started to rise and I redoubled my efforts. Slowly, oh so painfully slowly the sun began to peek over the horizon.

"It's here," said Jennifer. "It's here. I think you can stop dancing now." There was a long pause then she said, "Oh dear. That doesn't look quite right."

I looked up at the sky where the long delayed dawn was chasing shadows over the Martian surface. The sun was well over the horizon now. It was a purple sun and it was covered in green and blue spots. I'd never seen anything like it before.

"Oops," I said. "I must have made some false steps in my dance. I think I've accidentally persuaded somebody else's sun to rise."

Gone Fishing

The things that swim in the Martian canals aren't really fish, but what else can you call a creature that spends its whole life gliding around under the water? Like all Martian fauna, the fish exhibit trilateral symmetry - they have three eyes, three large fins and their tails are trifurcated. Trying to catch them, which I suppose, for want of a better word, you'd have to call fishing, is a very popular sport - though you really wouldn't want to eat anything that you caught. You won't die if you eat one, but you'll definitely wish that you had!

One day I was sitting around staring blankly at nothing much at all when Xerxes popped his head round the door and said, "Want to go fishing?"

His name isn't really Xerxes of course, but I can't pronounce most of the syllables that make up his name. I suspect that some bits of it lie outside the range of sounds that the human ear responds to. The first time I met him he shook my hand vigorously with both his right hand and his middle hand, as he introduced himself. The dog next door started to howl. That's what gave me the clue. So I just call him Xerxes. He doesn't seem to mind. It works both ways, of course. He can't pronounce my name in any understandable manner, so he compromises by never calling me anything at all. It seems to be the best way to solve the problem, and we get along quite well together.

"Fishing?" I asked. "Yes, OK."

The nearest canal is about a twenty minute journey away from where I live. Xerxes and I piled into his brand new four wheel drive beach buggy, and he set off across the dunes. Usually this would be a very bumpy ride, but the fat, round tyres on the new buggy made the trip very smooth indeed.

“Why did you suddenly decide you wanted to go fishing today?” I asked.

“Oh,” he said, “I’m really quite excited. There are rumours that a pi-fish has been seen swimming in the canal. They are incredibly rare. I’ve never actually seen one in the wild.”

“Pie fish?” I asked in bewilderment. “Are you going to make a fish pie?”

“No, no,” said Xerxes impatiently. “Pi-fish. Pi, not pie. The ratio of the circumference of a circle to its diameter. 3.14159 followed by an infinite number of other digits that you can look up on the internet if you are so inclined. Or you can calculate them for yourself if you have a lifetime or two to spare for the task. Pi-fish.”

“What’s a pi-fish?” I asked, honestly puzzled.

“Oh, it’s a really strange creature,” said Xerxes. “It doesn’t have bilateral symmetry like you do, and it doesn’t have trilateral symmetry like I do. It has pilateral symmetry. It’s the only Martian animal that does.”

“What is pilateral symmetry?” I asked. “Do you mean that it has 3.14159 eyes and 3.14159 fins and 3.14159 sticky out bits on its tail?”

“Don’t be silly,” said Xerxes. “How can you have fractional bodily organs? What would 0.14159 of an eye or 0.14159 of a fin actually look like? That makes no sense at all! No – the thing about the pi-fish is that the ratio of its length to its breadth is always exactly 3.14159... And a tiny little bit, of course... Weird, eh?”

I thought about that for a time, then I said, “So that means the pi-fish is proportioned so as to be able to bend itself around its own body and put its head by its tail in an absolutely perfect circle?”

“That’s right,” said Xerxes, “though actually it becomes a solid cylinder. That’s because the breadth and depth of its body are both the same size, and of course either one can be thought of as the diameter of the circle that is formed by

the length of its body. So therefore it turns into a rather squat cylinder when it rolls itself up. That's what it tends to do when it's attacked. I'm told that it's quite amazing to see it happen!" He parked the buggy carefully by the canal. We unloaded our gear and set off for our favourite fishing spot where the angle of the sun cast shadows that kept us cool while we fished.

The canal itself ran straight as an arrow across the rust-red Martian desert. The banks were lined with ancient concrete. Occasional hieroglyphic daubings interrupted the smoothness of the concrete slabs. It says a lot for the skill of the Martian builders, and the durability of their materials, that the graffiti are still legible all these thousands of years after they were first written down. Once I had asked Xerxes what the writing said but he only shook his head and told me that they were just complaints about the quality of the food, the harshness of the working conditions and the ugliness of the overseer's wives. Workers are all the same no matter what planet they are working on.

It doesn't matter whether you are fishing on Mars or on Earth, the procedure is always exactly the same. You impale something that wriggles and is enticingly yummy on your hook, you cast your line and hook out into the water and then you sit back and wait for something to take a nibble while you eat and drink and talk about life, the universe and everything. It's a very relaxing way of passing the time. But today Xerxes wasn't at all relaxed. He was tense, and twitchy, and he kept jigging his rod as if trying to check whether there was something on the other end of the line yet. Eventually his impatience was rewarded. The end of his rod bent down towards the surface of the water and he started to reel his line in.

"Do you think you've caught a pi-fish?" I asked.

"I don't know," he said. "I hope so." The line came up out of the water with something blue and wriggly on the end of

it. "It is a pi-fish!" yelled Xerxes. "The blue colour is a dead giveaway. Nothing else on Mars is that colour."

He swung the pi-fish over on to the bank of the canal and released it from the hook. The pi-fish looked around in panic for a moment and then, just as Xerxes had promised it would, it rolled itself up into a tight blue cylinder. Then, as I watched in fascination, the cylinder began to shrink, becoming smaller and smaller until it was just a thin blue line on the sand. Then, a second or so later, the blue line vanished and there was nothing left to indicate that a pi-fish had ever been there at all.

"What just happened?" I asked.

"That's why pi-fish are so rare," said Xerxes gloomily. "They keep disappearing. Once they roll themselves up into a cylinder, the mouth starts trying to ingest the body so the cylinder gets smaller as the fish eats itself up. All the other bodily dimensions start to shrink in sympathy because, of course, they have to keep the proper ratio between the fish's circumference and its diameter. A pi-fish always maintains its pilateral symmetry even under the most stressful of conditions. That's what pilateral symmetry is all about. So the pi-fish shrinks and shrinks as it continues to ingest itself. It shrinks itself down to atomic and possibly even sub-atomic dimensions, vanishing from view while the ratio of its ever decreasing length to its ever decreasing breadth continues to be exactly 3.14159..."

"And just a little bit," I said.

As I said that, my own rod began to vibrate and Xerxes got excited all over again. "Reel it in," he ordered. "Maybe you've caught a pi-fish as well."

I reeled it in, and sure enough there was another blue fish twisting and twirling on the end of my line. I swung it on to the bank and pulled out the hook. Just like the first one, it immediately rolled itself into a cylinder and started to shrink. But this time I interrupted the process. I jabbed a fish

hook into each end of its body and maintained a constant pressure that grossly distorted the pi-fish as it shrank.

“Stop it!” cried Xerxes in horror. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“I’m destroying the fish’s pilateral symmetry,” I said. “I want to see what happens. Think of it as a scientific experiment.”

Xerxes rummaged in his tackle bag and produced a ruler. He measured the rapidly shrinking pi-fish and then punched some buttons on his pocket calculator. He frowned and shook his head at the result. Then he did some counting on his fingers. “That’s a bit odd...” he said.

Eventually the distorted, and by now completely unsymmetrical, pi-fish vanished from view just like its predecessor had done. Or, the thought suddenly occurred to me, perhaps this pi-fish actually was its predecessor, vanishing back into itself all over again deep beneath the waters of the canal, ready to begin life again, just as it did every time the thin blue line disappeared. After all, it had to go somewhere when it vanished from view. Indeed, maybe there was only one pi-fish in the whole universe. Let’s face it, pi only needs to be defined once. I wondered if anyone had ever seen a shoal of pi-fish.

Xerxes put his calculator and ruler away again, and we re-baited our hooks. But the day’s excitement appeared to be over. Neither of us caught any more fish for the rest of the afternoon and eventually boredom set in. “Let’s pack up and go home,” I said. “I’ll buy you a beer.”

“OK,” agreed Xerxes.

We carried our rods and tackle bags back to the beach buggy.

“You really did get a magnificent vehicle when you bought this buggy,” I said to him.

“Yes,” agreed Xerxes. “I had to pay a lot extra for the square wheels, but I think that they give a much smoother ride than the triangular wheels most people settle for.”

The Promise

My 70th birthday party was a small, intimate affair. The only guests were my parents, and since we all live in the same house, it would have been very difficult for them to avoid the party even if they'd wanted to, which they didn't! Fortunately we all like each other a lot and so it was no hardship for any of us to celebrate my birthday together.

My dad's birthday is only a few days after mine, so as usual, we decided to have a combined 70th birthday party for me and 84th birthday for him, all on the same day. Mum is a couple of months younger than dad and they are both still very spry, if the sounds I hear coming from their bedroom are anything to go by.

If you do the arithmetic, you'll realise that I was born when they were both only fourteen years old. Apparently it was the scandal of the school! The heat of the gossip practically burned the varnish off the desks and evaporated the ink out of the inkwells. Mum told me later that she and dad came under enormous pressure to have me adopted, but they presented a united front to their parents and other associated do-gooders and insisted on bringing me up themselves, so eventually everybody had to back down and let them have their way, though not without lots of dire muttering about how mum and dad were making a terrible mistake, they were ruining their lives, the relationship would never last... I'm sure that the whole family went to their graves still expecting mum and dad to split up any minute now and force the grandparents to have to bring me up. But seventy years later mum and dad are still together, still happy with each other's company and showing no signs whatsoever of drifting apart.

"Perhaps we'll get divorced after you die," dad said to me once. "I don't think it's fair for parents to separate while their children are still alive. You'd probably find it very traumatic and have to have expensive counselling sessions so as to come to terms with it. I wouldn't wish that on anybody."

I think he might have been joking when he said that. I checked with mum, but she just smiled and backed him up so I remain none the wiser. Not that it matters. I won't be here to see what they do after I die, so I don't really care.

When I was little, the fact that my parents were only fourteen years older than me didn't really register as a problem. For a small child, fourteen years is an eternity, and mum and dad seemed old and, presumably, wise to little me. Their age did give them some advantages - they won the egg and spoon race every year at my school's parents' sports day because they were so much younger than all the other parents.

But as the years passed and we all grew up, the age difference began to seem less and less important and for the last fifty years or so we've just been friends who happen to live together.

Dad gulped down the last of his champagne and checked his watch. "We ought to be leaving soon," he said. "We don't want to miss the start of the film."

"Film?" asked mum.

"We're all going to the cinema," said dad. "We're going to see The 69 Steps."

"Don't you mean The 39 Steps?" asked mum, sounding puzzled. "From the novel by John Buchan. It's an Alfred Hitchcock film, I think."

"No," I explained. "This is a recent re-make of that old story. It's a very pornographic adaptation, so they've renamed it as The 69 Steps."

"Why would I want to go to the cinema to see a pornographic movie?" asked mum. "I can watch all the

pornography I want on the internet without having to leave the comfort of my own chair."

Dad and I looked at each other and made a silent agreement not to explore the implications of that observation. "The cinema has an advertising gimmick going on," explained dad. "If anybody who is 69 or older turns up accompanied by their parents, the whole family gets in free. Who can resist a bargain like that?"

"Clearly they aren't expecting to have to honour the offer," I said. "Very few 69 year old people will have parents who are still alive. And those few parents who are still alive are probably in no fit state to be allowed out in public without extensive specialist supervision."

"I see," said mum thoughtfully. "So really the only people who will be able to take advantage of the offer are people like us."

"Why do you think I let you take me to your bed in the first place?" asked dad. "It was all just my cunning plan to get us free admission to the cinema seventy years later."

"How clever of you," said mum drily. "You always were very good at long range planning."

"So anyway," I said, "I thought it might be fun to take them up on their offer," I turned to dad. "Have you got all the necessary documentation?" I asked. "They aren't going to believe us unless we can prove we're telling the truth."

Dad patted his jacket pocket. "I've got your birth certificate," he said. "I've got your mum's birth certificate and mine as well. I've got our marriage certificate and I've got some unbelievably cute photographs of you toddling around at our wedding with a helium balloon tied to your waist so that you wouldn't get lost in the crowds."

"Thanks dad," I said. "Though I'm not sure the photographs will help very much. You probably ought to take your passport as well, so that you can prove that you and mum really are the people listed as my parents on my birth certificate."

"I've got them in this pocket," said dad, patting his jacket on the other side.

That covered everything, so without further ado we piled into the car and drove to the cinema.

The queue seemed to stretch out forever. "I've not seen this many people waiting to get into a cinema for years," said mum. "Not since 1972 when I queued up to see *Deep Throat*."

Dad and I exchanged glances again. I was learning a lot of new things about mum tonight, though dad didn't seem very surprised.

"Didn't teach me anything I didn't already know," said mum reminiscently, and dad went a bit scarlet and cleared his throat rather deeply...

The cinema manager was thrilled to see us. He examined our documentation in detail and then said, "Well, I must confess that I never thought anybody would take me up on my promise. But now that you are here, it will be great publicity. If you don't mind, I'll get in touch with the local newspaper and tell them about it. I expect they'll come round to your house to take photographs."

"That's fine," said dad. "Can we go and see the film now?"

"Of course," said the manager, and he personally showed us to our seats.

The film was really rather fun, if you like that sort of thing, which my mum clearly did. She had a great big smile plastered all over her face as we watched the hero, Richard Hannay, go up all sixty nine steps one by one. He kept having erotic encounters on every step and the higher he got the more imaginative they became. I'm fairly sure he cheated though. Unless I was missing something subtle, it seemed to me that step number fifty three was exactly the same as step number forty two except that everybody had their fingers crossed.

I heard the rustle of paper, and I glanced across at mum. By the light reflected from the screen I could see that she was busy taking copious notes. The tip of her tongue peeked out from the corner of her lips as she concentrated on her scribbling.

After sixty nine minutes the film came to an end. I thought that was a nice gimmick and I wondered if anyone else had noticed. "That was quite an eye-opener," said mum. "Lots of good suggestions to follow up on." She tucked her notes carefully into her handbag and as we walked towards the car, she linked arms with dad. "Come on you," she said. "We've got some homework to do." When we got to the car, mum pushed fifty dollars into my pocket and said, "Happy birthday, dear. Now, why don't you make yourself scarce for a while. Go to the pub or something. Your dad and I have to do some, errr... studying."

They climbed into the car and I headed off by myself. "Don't forget to cross your fingers," I called out to them. They waved cheerfully at me and drove away home.

David's New Hobby

“Has anybody seen my cell phone?”

David's father sounded amused rather than angry. He was constantly putting his cell phone down and then forgetting where he'd left it. The question he'd just called out to all and sundry was one that they were all quite used to hearing.

David's father was an archaeologist, and during the long summer vacation from school David liked to work with him, helping him with whatever his latest project happened to be. This year his father was busy excavating a Roman villa in the heart of London. Some workmen had uncovered traces of it as they were preparing the site for a new shopping complex and, understandably, they were rather annoyed at having to stop work in order for the remains of the villa to be properly explored. Because there was a lot of pressure on them to get the excavation finished as soon as possible, David, his father and the rest of the team were working very long hours indeed.

As it happened, David knew exactly where his father's cell phone was. He'd picked it up and slipped it into his backpack when nobody was looking. David wasn't allowed a phone of his own because of some convoluted parental reason that he neither understood nor agreed with, so he was in the habit of taking advantage of his father's absent mindedness whenever he got the opportunity.

Although David was studying maths, physics and chemistry for his A-Levels at school, he was nevertheless very fond of history, and watching history come alive as his father excavated it was a never ending delight. This year he was finding the experience particularly thrilling. He'd never been involved in exploring anything this old before.

His father strode back down into the trench and soon forgot all about his missing cell phone as the excitement of the dig grabbed hold of him again. "Come and take a look at this," he called out to David. He was pointing at a thick, black layer that ran along the wall of the trench.

"What is it?" asked David.

"Ash," said his dad. "Ash from a fire. Because this stratum is so thick and because it runs for such a long way, I'm pretty sure that it must date from the great fire of London in 1666. What we are seeing here are the remains of the buildings that were destroyed in the blaze." He poked at the ash with his trowel and a section flaked away, exposing a piece of broken pottery. "I'd really like to examine this layer more closely," he continued. "Who knows what we might find? This part of London is very close to Pudding Lane, where the fire started. There could be all sorts of useful and informative artefacts buried right here in this layer."

"We don't have time, dad," said David. "The Roman villa is more important. We need to work on that."

His dad sighed. "You're right," he agreed, and he walked down to the end of the trench where a rather delightful Roman mosaic floor was slowly being exposed to the light of day for the first time in more than 1,500 years. The mosaic was in a very delicate condition. The grouting had decayed away and the only thing holding it together was the soil in which it was embedded. The team had glued hessian cloth to the surface so as to hold the tiles together. Now they were digging into the soil beneath the mosaic and sliding in wooden boards for the tiles to rest on. When that was done they would lift each board out of the trench and take it to the studio of an expert conservator who would have the daunting task of fitting the whole jigsaw puzzle back together again. It was slow, painstaking work and David wasn't allowed to help with it. "Teenagers are too clumsy and impatient," said his father.

David was intrigued by the evidence of the great fire that they'd discovered. He'd vaguely heard about it, but he didn't know any of the details, so he used his father's phone to look it up. Wikipedia told him that the fire had started shortly after midnight on the 2nd of September 1666 in the bakery of Thomas Farriner in Pudding Lane. It had burned out of control for four days, completely destroying much of the area inside the old Roman city walls. Presumably one of Farriner's ovens had malfunctioned, but since both the bakery and Thomas Farriner himself were utterly destroyed in the inferno, nobody had ever been able to confirm that.

David studied the map that was included in the Wikipedia article. The place that used to be Pudding Lane was indeed less than a minute's walk from the archaeological dig. Well, well thought David, what a perfect opportunity. He returned the phone to his backpack and pulled out the time machine he'd built in the physics lab at school when nobody else was around. He'd never told anyone about it. After all, he was a teenage boy. He communicated mainly with grunts, gestures and rolled eyeballs. Most people spent most of their time pretending that he wasn't there, so it wasn't hard for him to keep his time machine secret.

In the blink of an eye he found himself standing in London an hour or so before the fire was due to start. He walked down Pudding Lane. Thomas Farriner's bakery was easy to find. It was the only building with a light showing. A delicious smell of baking bread wafted down the street from it, almost obscuring the mingled smells of horse, and human, excrement. David knocked on the door. Nothing happened, so he thumped it harder. Eventually the door creaked open and a small, suspicious man peered out. "What?" he snapped.

"Thomas Farriner?" asked David.

"Yes," said the baker. "Who wants to know? Hurry up. I'm a busy man. There's something wrong with one of the

ovens. I just can't get the damn thing to start burning."

"I can help you with that," said David.

He took a small box out his pocket and shook it in Thomas Farriner's face. It rattled, and Farriner took a startled step backwards. "What's that?" he asked.

"It's a box of matches," said David. "They are self-igniting. You'll be able to get the oven alight in no time with these, you mark my words. There's nothing like a box of matches for starting a fire!"

"Matches?" said Farriner, sounding puzzled. "What are matches?"

"I'm sure you'll manage to work it out," said David confidently. He pushed the box of matches into Farriner's hand and then turned to leave. "Just remember to rub them on the rough side of the box," he called out over his shoulder.

As soon as David heard Farriner close the bakery door behind him, he activated his time machine and returned to his father's archaeological dig. He gazed thoughtfully at the line of ash in the trench wall. He ran his finger along it, enjoying the rough feel of the charcoal. There was no overt evidence that he had been responsible for it. Maybe Farriner's oven would have started burning the city down without his help. But the tingle he got from thinking that he might actually have caused the great fire of London felt really good.

"Where's my cell phone," roared his father from the end of the trench, breaking the spell that held David transfixed. "Has anybody seen my cell phone? I need to call the conservator. This section of the mosaic is collapsing."

David could see that his father had dug a bit too deeply under one section of the mosaic and the tiles were starting to fall into the hole. He looked at his father's phone sitting beside the time machine in his backpack and he smiled as a delicious idea occurred to him. He used the time machine again...

The mosaic was still being built. It was less than half complete. The tiles were bright and colourful. Despite himself, David was impressed. These Roman artists were hugely talented. One of the artisans looked up as David approached. "Loquerisne latine?" he said. "Do you speak Latin?" Clearly he felt that David was a little out of place, though he didn't seem to notice that David was a long way out of time as well!

David grunted, shook his head and rolled his eyeballs. The man frowned. "Quis es?" he said. "Who are you? Quid vis? What do you want?"

David ignored him and the man started to get up, but then one of his colleagues called him over for help and he returned to work. David breathed a sigh of relief and while nobody was looking, he slipped his father's cell phone beneath the section of the mosaic that would collapse into the hole that his father's trowel would dig 1,500 years in the future. Then he returned to his father before any more of the mosaic builders got too interested in him.

"Haven't you found your cell phone yet dad?" he asked.

His father shook his head angrily. "No," he said, "I haven't."

He sounded frustrated and David didn't blame him. After all, in one very real sense, his father hadn't been able to find his cell phone for at least 1,500 years. "What's that," asked David, pointing to something that was just peeping out from beneath the tiles. "It looks like the edge of a cell phone to me."

His father looked surprised and then carefully started to brush away the soil. Slowly the cell phone revealed itself. The years had not been kind to it. It was cracked and bent, warped and distorted by the pressure of the earth it had lain beneath for so long. Nevertheless it was still recognisably his father's cell phone. Plastic is almost indestructible. "I didn't know the Romans had cell phones," said David, innocently.

He was starting to realise that a time machine gave him the potential for a lot historical fun and games...

The Golf Game

Fra Mauro is home to the best golf course on the moon. That's not a difficult title to win – Fra Mauro is, in fact, the only golf course on the moon. It was built by the eccentric American billionaire Elon Musk in 2048. He claimed that since Alan Shepard, the commander of the Apollo 14 mission, had hit two golf balls in the Fra Mauro crater, it was clearly the very best place to build a lunar golf course. So that's exactly what he did.

While the golf course was being built, the contractors had found one of Alan Shepard's original golf balls. We had it carefully mounted in a lucite slab and these days it sits proudly in a display case just inside the entrance to the club house. The second golf ball has never been found.

In 2071, to commemorate the centenary of the Apollo 14 landing, we decided to hold a prestigious tournament. People would come from all over the solar system to play or to watch. The final round of the match was due to be played on the 6th of February, exactly one hundred years to the day since Alan Shepard first turned Fra Mauro into a driving range.

I was nominated to be the caddy for Peter Nicklaus, one of the players from the Martian colony. Peter's great-grandfather had been a famous professional golfer back on Earth in the twentieth century and I was keen to see if Peter had inherited the golfing gene. We met in the club house just before Peter was due to play his first round. I found him admiring Alan Shepard's golf ball and I hurried over to introduce myself. "Hello, Peter," I said. "I'm your caddy, John Tennant."

He turned round and smiled at me and we shook hands. "Hello John," he said. "It's good to meet you. What can you

tell me about the playing conditions? This is my first time playing at Fra Mauro.”

“You might find things a bit awkward at first,” I said. “You’ll be dressed in a pressure suit, of course, and that will put a bit of a damper on your swing. But the suit is a lot more flexible than Alan Shepard’s was so you will find it a lot easier to hit the ball than he did.”

“I’ve worn pressure suits on some of the Martian courses,” he said. “So I don’t expect that will be a problem. Actually, it might give me a bit of an advantage over some of the players from Earth. I imagine a lot of them will never have worn a pressure suit before.”

“You’d be surprised how many of them have,” I said. “A lot of them have played at Fra Mauro before.”

“Oh well,” he said. “Never mind. Let’s go and play our first round so I can get a feel for the course.”

We suited up and tested our radios to make sure that we would be able to speak to each other as we went from hole to hole. I loaded the golf clubs into a caddy cart. We climbed into the front seats and I drove out of the airlock and headed towards the first fairway. Peter set his ball firmly in the tee and I handed him a suitable club. He looked at it suspiciously. “This isn’t what I’d normally use to tee off,” he said. “Are you sure it’s the right one?”

“Trust me,” I said. “This is the moon. Conditions are very different here. This club will be fine.”

He gave me the benefit of the doubt and took the club. He swished it back and forth a couple of times to get the feel of it, then he addressed the ball. He hit it cleanly and it soared high into the black sky. All the golf balls being used in the tournament had a built in GPS tracker so that we’d always be able to find them no matter how awkwardly the player sliced the ball. After all, there’s no point in littering the moon with lost golf balls. Alan Shepard did quite enough of that, thank you very much.

But we didn't need the tracker this time. The ball flew straight down the middle and plopped itself onto the green just a few metres from the hole. Green is a euphemism of course. There isn't any grass on the moon. All that the greenkeepers do is remove the rocks and brush the surface smooth. A small puff of moon dust flew up as the ball landed, but it quickly fell back. "Good shot," I said. "Nicely played."

"Thank you." said Peter. He sounded astonished. "I've never hit a ball that distance before. It's gone three times as far as it would have gone on Earth and twice as far as it would go on Mars."

"That's the benefit of the really low gravity here," I said. "Because of it, the par for each hole is ridiculously tiny compared to similar holes elsewhere. This one is only a par two."

"Goodness," said Peter, impressed. "I'd better putt the ball very carefully then. I don't want a bogey on my very first hole!"

Peter turned out to be a very good player. I'm sure his great-grandfather would have approved. He finished the round one under par, which was very respectable indeed. I was looking forward to the next few days.

* * * *

Finally the 6th February arrived, the last day of the tournament. By this time I was starting to worry. Peter had played such perfect rounds that I hadn't had any chance to set up the surprise I had planned for him. But today, on the fifth hole, he sliced the ball very badly and it soared off the course, heading into the wild black yonder to land who knew where. For the first time since the tournament began, I had to use the GPS tracker to find it. "Stay here," I said to Peter. "I'll call you over when I've pin pointed exactly where it is."

"OK," he said agreeably.

I shuffled off into the lunar desolation being careful not to trip over the slippery rocks that jutted out of the regolith. The ball wasn't hard to find. Fortunately it was lying on a relatively flat and smooth patch of ground. Peter should have no difficulty reaching the hole from here. I took another golf ball out of a pouch on my suit and I put it in the shadow cast by a nearby rock. The ball had been carefully aged, the surface darkened, cracked and pitted as if from a century of exposure to radiation and micrometeorite impacts. "I've found it," I called to Peter. "And you'll never guess what else I've found as well!"

Curious, Peter came loping over to see what I meant. I pointed out the old golf ball. "Look at that," I said. "I'm pretty sure that's Alan Shepard's second golf ball. The one that was never found. What an amazing souvenir for you to take back home!"

Peter bent down and picked it up. He examined it carefully. "It certainly looks like it might be the second ball," he said. "But I can't keep it. It really should be put on display with the other one."

Silently I cursed his honesty. "No," I said, "put it in your pouch and take it with you when you leave. Imagine how good it will feel to own such a piece of golfing history. Of course you won't be able to tell anyone you've got it. You'll have to keep it secret or they'll take it away from you to show it to the world."

We argued the point back and forth for a while, but eventually I managed to persuade him that he really should keep the golf ball, if only for the sense of history. He put it in his suit pouch and we carried on with the game. The rest of the tournament was uneventful and Peter finished the day, and the tournament, in second place. His great-grandfather would have been proud of him.

We had a huge party in the club house afterwards and the next day all the hungover caddies said goodbye to all the hungover players as they went back to wherever it was

that they had come from. Every single one of the players had Alan Shepard's second golf ball packed securely and secretly away in their luggage. Sometimes I think that there might be more second Alan Shepard golf balls in the world than there are fragments of the true cross.

The caddies had all been carefully coached and rehearsed in their role. They had successfully guided each player to their golf ball discovery, and made sure that everyone knew how important it was to keep that discovery secret. "Do you think the word will ever get out?" someone asked me as we watched the players trudge into the cart that would take them to the space port.

"Of course it will," I said. "Three people can keep a secret only if two of them are dead. We'll be hearing all about it in the news feeds very soon, I would imagine."

"Quite the cynic, aren't you?" he said.

We'd spent a lot of time preparing the golf balls to make them look convincing. I thought we'd done a very good job. They looked exactly like the real second golf ball, the one I had stowed away in my room, the one I'd found shortly after I'd started working at Fra Mauro, the one I'd never told anybody about.

I'm certain it's the real one...

The Birthday Present

One Sunday evening, round about 11.00pm, after a particularly strenuous and difficult flush, the toilet decided that enough was enough and so it gave up the ghost and sulked. At first it was hard to tell that anything out of the ordinary had happened. The cistern made the usual swishing and refilling noises. But Robin felt that they were going on for far too long, and they were showing no signs at all of stopping. She listened suspiciously for a while. Then she noticed that water was puddling on the floor around her feet. That's unusual, she thought.

Jake the Dog came wandering in. "The floor's wet," he pointed out in case Robin hadn't noticed.

"I know," said Robin. "It's all leaked out of the toilet."

"Really?" said Jake in an excited tone of voice. "What a red letter day this has turned out to be!" He slurped all the water up, leaving the floor as dry as a bone. "Yum," he said, licking his lips. "Tasty! Did someone say something about a dry bone?"

"Dry as a bone is just a saying," Robin warned him.

"Don't take it literally and don't try to eat the floor. We like it the way it is." Jake's tail drooped in disappointment.

"Spoilsport," he said, but he did as he was told.

Robin took the top off the cistern and peered inside. A thin layer of scummy water swirled around the bottom of it. A pipe was gushing madly, trying its very best to fill the cistern up. Sullen bubbles floated out of the pipe and as fast as the water flowed in to the cistern, it flowed out again through the bubbling hole and dripped on to the floor. Robin turned off the water supply to the toilet. The noise and the flow of water stopped. She came and told me what had happened.

“Fortunately we live in a house with two toilets,” I said as I headed determinedly for the other one.

“I wouldn’t if I were you,” advised Robin. “I think that one’s bugged as well.”

“What’s wrong with it?” I asked.

“It appears to have broken away from whatever was fastening it to the floor,” she said. “It wobbles rather alarmingly.”

“At least it still flushes,” I said. “If we’re careful, we should be able to use it safely until the plumber arrives.”

“That’s a relief,” said Robin.

“No, that’s not a relief,” I said, as I unzipped and took careful aim, “this is a relief.”

She threw a toilet brush at me.

Bright and early on Monday morning I rang the plumber and explained the situation. “Hmmm,” said the plumber, thoughtfully. “Sounds like you need a plumber.”

“That’s a good idea,” I said. “Do you think that you could arrange such a thing?”

“Well,” he said, “I can definitely promise to have someone there at 8.00am on Friday.”

“But that’s five days away,” I pointed out.

“I might be able to get someone there before then,” he said. “It depends how well the jobs we’ve currently got scheduled go. I can absolutely guarantee Friday, but it might be sooner. With luck...”

“OK,” I said and I settled down to wait with anticipation and crossed legs.

“You can borrow my lawn, if you like,” said Jake, the ever generous Dog. “There’s a really good bit just over there in front of the fence where the neighbours have the best possible view. Let me show you how it works.” He demonstrated copiously.

“No thank you,” I said. “The ground is too squishy.”

By Wednesday, Robin and I were both well practised at using the wobbly toilet. Fortunately neither of us are prone

to sea sickness, so it wasn't too unpleasant an experience. That morning Robin woke me with a kiss. "Happy birthday," she said, for it was indeed my birthday. I was a whole decade older than I had been the day before and everything around me had changed dramatically overnight. The country was clearly going down hill fast. It was full of rude, humourless and ignorant young whipper-snappers who lacked all respect for custom and tradition. One and all, they listened to terrible music performed by screeching people who were too stupid to remember their own surnames. I hoped that all their toilets would break. That would teach them a lesson they wouldn't soon forget!

At precisely 8.00am on my birthday morning the plumber arrived, eager to start plumbing. I showed him the flushless toilet and the wobbly toilet and he frowned. "Well, I can easily replace the broken pipe that is preventing the cistern from filling up," he said. "But I can pretty much promise you that I'll be back again in three months or so to replace whatever it is that breaks next. The toilet is about a quarter of a century old and it's on its last legs. Repairing it is just throwing good money after bad. I recommend that you get a whole new cistern rather than trying to repair the old one piecemeal. It will be a lot cheaper in the long run."

Because I was myself extraordinarily old, I felt that I fully understood what he was telling me. The parallels between me and the ancient toilet were all too obvious. Bits of both of us kept breaking down, and sometimes they fell off. I could easily appreciate how the toilet must be feeling at the moment. It must be very frustrating to be completely unable to flush. I hate it when that happens to me. Perhaps I should have a new cistern fitted as well... "Good idea," I said to the plumber. "Let's do it. What about the wobbly one?"

"Back in the day," said the plumber informatively, "they used brass screws to attach the toilet to the floor. After twenty five years of soaking in unnameable fluids the screws start to dissolve and disintegrate. I doubt there's

anything except the head of the screw left down there. These days we use stainless steel screws. They last for ever.”

I contemplated the positive benefits of a stainless steel screw. Perhaps that was just what I needed to make me feel young again...

“I’ll go and get a replacement cistern for the dead one,” said the plumber and off he went. A few minutes later the phone rang. I answered it. “Good news!” said the plumber. “They’ve got a sale on. For only an extra \$13 you can get a whole new toilet bowl as well as a new cistern! It’s a bargain.”

I discussed it with Robin. “The toilet bowl is rather chipped and grubby,” she said thoughtfully. “And that makes it a bit hard to clean. Scrubbing really doesn’t seem to have very much effect at all, and the toilet duck just quacks in frustration every time I put him in there because, no matter how hard he tries, he never manages to peck much of the grime away.”

“I think whoever lived here before us used to clean the toilet with wire wool and an industrial sand blaster,” I said. “I’ve noticed that the porcelain is covered in fine cracks. They are a perfect place for bacteria to hide in and breed. Eldritch horrors lurk unseen down there. Sometimes I hear eerie music in the night when their mad, passionate parties get out of control. And in the morning the toilet is often green and sprouting wavy tendrils of bacterial fur.”

“I don’t like the fur,” said Robin thoughtfully. “It tickles.”

“New toilet bowl?” I asked.

“New toilet bowl,” she agreed.

“New toilet bowl,” I said to the plumber.

“What about the wobbly one?” he asked. “I’ll have to take the toilet off the floor anyway so that I can drill holes for the new stainless steel screws. Why not put a new one there as well instead of replacing the original? It’s just as old as the first one and in just as poor a condition.”

Robin and I repeated our previous conversation word for word. We agreed that the plumber made a very persuasive case. "Two new toilets," I confirmed.

So that was my birthday present to myself. Two new toilets delivered and installed. Best birthday present ever.

The Inheritance

“I don’t usually do a formal reading of the will,” said Jack Danby. “It’s a completely unnecessary and rather melodramatic movie cliché. But your father insisted on it, so I don’t really have any choice in the matter.”

Donald Atkinson nodded to indicate that he understood. “Dad was like that,” he said. “He always did love his melodrama.”

They were both sitting in Jack’s office. It was a very modern, expensive looking office, all glass and chrome, furnished with uncomfortable Scandinavian furniture that scattered dazzling reflections from the sunshine that poured in through the enormous floor to ceiling windows. Even Jack’s desk was made of glass and Donald could see that beneath the desk Jack’s left leg was bouncing up and down even though the rest of his body was sitting perfectly still. Clearly he was feeling the tension of the moment.

There was a very sleek computer on Jack’s desk. He tapped a few keys on the keyboard and then swivelled the screen round so that Donald could see it. “Take a look at this,” he said. “I hope it doesn’t upset you too much.”

The screen cleared and then Donald saw an image of his father appear. His dad beamed a huge smile. “Well,” he said, “if this is being played for you Donald, I suppose I must be dead.” He paused for a moment. “Funny,” he said reflectively, “I don’t feel very dead. But then I wouldn’t, would I? Not yet.”

“No, dad,” said Donald. He knew his father couldn’t hear him, but somehow he couldn’t help himself.

On the screen, his dad reached out and picked up a mug of something steamy and sipped from it. Probably coffee, thought Donald. His dad had always liked coffee. He drank

at least eight large mugs of it every day. Probably that habit was one of the contributing factors to the heart attack that had killed him.

His dad put the mug down and then carried on speaking. "This is my will," he said. "Since I'm still alive while I'm making this video I'd like to call it a living will. But Jack won't let me call it that. Apparently there is a very strict legal definition of that phrase which this recording doesn't match. So it's just a will, albeit a rather unorthodox one. But it seems that there's no actual law against it, so here we go.

"Donald, I always promised to remember you in my will and I pride myself on being a man of my word." He rubbed his chin and stared at the ceiling, his face twisted up in an exaggerated parody of a man who was thinking deeply. "Donald," he murmured. "Donald. Now let me see. Donald..." His voice trailed away. He brooded for a couple of seconds then his face brightened. "Ah, yes! Donald!" he said. "I remember Donald. He's my son. There you are lad. I've remembered you in my will, just like I promised I would." He began to shake with laughter.

Despite himself, Donald gave a quiet chuckle. He and his father had always shared a rather eccentric sense of humour, and Donald appreciated the joke that had just been played on him. Over on the other side of the desk, he saw Jack Danby relax slightly. Jack's left leg stopped bouncing and he sat back in his chair. Probably he's relieved that I didn't get angry or upset, thought Donald.

On the screen, Donald saw his father calm down from his laughing fit. "Now we get to the serious part," he said. "Don't worry, Jack has all of this written down in a formal legalistic way. His dry as dust, solicitor's brain insisted on it. But I prefer to do it this way. It's a lot more fun."

"OK, dad," said Donald, pleased that now they were going to deal with the important stuff. Donald's whole future depended on what came next. He wasn't all that worried

though – he was fairly certain that he knew what his father’s plans were. But it would be nice to have some confirmation.

“Right,” said his father. “In essence it’s very simple. Everything I have is yours. Your mother walked out on me when you were just a toddler, and I haven’t spoken to any of my relatives in years. Everybody hates me, so I don’t have any friends, and I don’t have any pets because I can’t stand animals. So by a process of elimination, you are the only person I can leave anything to. Of course, the devil is in the details. I’m not at all sure that even I know exactly what I own. Jack is certainly going to earn his money sorting it all out for you. But that’s his job, of course. He’s had lots of practice and I’m sure he’ll do it well.”

“Thank you,” said Donald, pleased that his expectations had been met. Now it was just a matter of dotting i’s and crossing t’s.

“Don’t thank me,” said his father, and for a moment Donald wondered again if his father could actually hear him.

“Sorry,” said Donald. “I won’t interrupt again.”

Donald’s father took another sip of coffee and then, rather wistfully, he said, “You know, I wish I could take it with me when I go. Jack’s looking for loopholes, but I doubt that he’ll find any.” The picture slowly faded away and just before it disappeared, Donald saw his father wink and grin at him. Somehow he did not find that reassuring.

“Well,” said Donald, “what now?”

Jack’s left leg started bouncing beneath his desk again as he said, “Tracing your fathers assets and holdings has been quite a difficult and rather expensive, chore. But I think I’ve got them all tracked down now. Unfortunately though, he really did manage to find a way to take most of what he owned with him when he went, just like he said he wanted to at the end of that video. For the last six months of his life he was a rather enthusiastic member of a coffin club and...”

“What’s a coffin club?” interrupted Donald.

“A club that is made up of people who want to build their own coffins,” said Jack. “It sounds very morbid, but apparently such clubs are quite the rage these days. Some of the coffins they build are very imaginative. One huge *Star Wars* fan was cremated in replica of the *Millennium Falcon* and an enthusiastic bridge player had a coffin disguised as the ace of spades.”

Donald chuckled. “Yes,” he said. “that does sound like something that dad would have enjoyed. But I don’t recall his coffin looking anything but normal at his funeral.”

“Oh it looked perfectly normal from the outside,” said Jack. “But inside it seems that it was lined with confidential papers, bank statements and share certificates. And of course they all went up in smoke at his cremation. Without that paperwork, transferring legal ownership to you is proving to be very difficult, if not impossible. There are enormous gaps in the paper trail.”

“That doesn’t sound good,” said Donald. He felt quite worried. Jack’s left leg was bouncing faster now and Donald couldn’t help thinking that he was about to hear some very bad news.

“It isn’t,” said Jack. “I have managed to get hold of some things though. Ignoring the ins and outs of the legal rigmarole for the moment, here’s everything that remains from the liquidation of your father’s estate. I’m happy to transfer it over to you now.” He reached into the pocket of his jacket and took out a 50 cent coin. He slid it across the table to Donald. “That really is all that’s left,” he said. “Don’t spend it all at once.”

Donald picked up the coin and looked at it. It was very shiny, almost as if it had been newly minted. He wondered if Jack had arranged to have it specially polished for the occasion. Donald put the coin in his pocket and stood up to go. He needed to think about this. It had all come as rather a shock.

“There’s one more thing,” said Jack. He slid a piece of paper across the desk.

“What’s that?” asked Donald.

“My bill,” said Jack, refusing to look Donald in the eye. “The estate can’t settle it, so you owe me \$8,000.” He paused. “And 50 cents,” he added.

Trash

These days I live in the North-East of New Zealand, near to a city called Hastings. The local council have plans in place to supply us all with wheelie bins for our rubbish collection. Presumably these plans are currently on hold, given the current covid-19 lockdown situation. But doubtless wheels will start turning again once things get back to normal.

Auckland, where I used to live, did something similar a few years ago. The implementation was not without its hiccups. This was my experience of it. I promise, every word of this "story" is true...

Eerie music and wavy lines...

* * * *

Every week I bundle up my rubbish and place it carefully in a big green plastic wheelie bin. The bin is positioned precisely on a special spot on the pavement and in the small hours of the next morning I am awoken from blissful slumber as a roaring behemoth of the night picks up the bin and empties the contents into its grinding maw. This is the way the world has always been, but it is not the way the world will be in the future.

Everyone in Auckland is talking about rubbish. Commuters from Waiheke Island have come out from behind their morning papers to discuss it on the ferry. Buses full of complete strangers hum with conversation as the merits of recycling are debated.

All over the city, residents are waking to find that a new wheelie bin has entered their lives. This one is smaller than that previously used, and it has a pretty red lid. The council, in their wisdom, have decided that the older, larger bins are

aesthetically unpleasing (for they are green all over) and, more importantly, they are much too big thereby encouraging people to produce far too much waste. Auckland, the Council claims, is drowning in rubbish. The new, sleek, slimline, half-size bins with the pretty red lids will address this problem directly by forcing people cut down on their rubbish production.

No more the secret midnight thrill of heaving your extra trash into somebody else's wheelie bin. Now theirs too will be crammed full of their own junk. Recycle it, compost it, is the encouraging cry. This is all well and good, but much of the rubbish I generate is neither biodegradable nor recyclable for it is the wrong grade of plastic and therefore it won't be collected. Bugger.

All Auckland houses can now use up to three recycling bins. Previously only one was allowed. These cute blue bins are enormously popular. People use them to equip the family picnic in the park. Fisherman find them wonderful, for the bins have a hole in the bottom making it particularly easy to drain the daily catch when it comes time to take the little fishies home to eat for dinner. Sometimes people even use the recycling bins for holding goods to be recycled. How extraordinarily unimaginative of them.

It is instructive to wander the street and make deductions about the lifestyles of the inhabitants from the contents of the recycling bins and the cardboard boxes and papers that are dumped beside the bins for the Paper Tiger to collect. This household lives on pizza and coke, that one on beer. This house has cats, that one dogs, the other one small children. These people have just bought an expensive sound system, those have taken delivery of a computer. Burglars walk the streets taking notes and have been seen, on occasion, to run away with wheelie bins and paper piles in order to go through them at their leisure hunting for credit card numbers and bank account details. People are

often very careless with their discards. It may be rubbish to you, but it is treasure to someone else.

One new red-topped wheelie bin is allowed per property title holder. At first glance that sounds like quite a sensible scheme, but in practice it does lead to some anomalies. A very large, luxurious multi-hundred-bedroomed hotel in the city is owned by a single person. This enormous building must therefore now dispose of the rubbish generated by its staff and its hundreds of guests in a single 120-litre wheelie bin. Meanwhile, in another part of the city, a much smaller, much less luxurious hotel with only a dozen or so bedrooms has, through some curious quirk of tax-fiddling corporate ownership, 389 names on its title deed. Its manager is now faced with the problem of finding storage space for the 389 wheelie bins that were delivered to him last week. Perhaps he needs another, larger bin in which he can toss the surplus red-topped bins - a meta-rubbish bin as it were.

Court cases are pending against Auckland City Council because of the new, small wheelie bin policy. A lady from Epsom believes that the introduction of the bins is a breach of the Human Rights Act and she has lodged a complaint with the Human Rights Commission. "It struck me as so unfair," she is quoted as saying. "There are six units next door and each will have the same size bin as we have for a family of five!" She claims that the uniform reduction in bin size across the board will put unfair pressure on larger households. A council spokesman does not agree with her.

"We have 'waste doctors' who will be able to assist those who have any difficulty."

Waste doctors?

"Put two aspirin in the rubbish bin twice a day for a week. If it doesn't get better come back and see me again and we'll arrange for a trasectomy operation."

It has been suggested that the rubbish collection vehicles be fitted with video cameras. Each bin will be videotaped as it is emptied. Anyone found disposing of inappropriate

rubbish will be visited at dead of night by the rubbish police. The waste doctors will prepare psychiatric reports and the rubbish criminals will have to attend waste management workshops. Repeat offences will carry a mandatory sentence of biodegradation.

Each bin has been delivered with a leaflet sellotaped to it which says in big, bold, friendly letters that the new bin cannot be used until the week beginning July 2nd. Despite this, for the three weeks prior to July 2nd, red lidded wheelie bins full of rubbish have lined the streets. When the rubbish was not collected, aggrieved residents inundated the Council with complaints. A man on the radio said through gritted teeth:

"We are very pleased that people are embracing the new collection system so enthusiastically, but we would encourage them to restrain their enthusiasm until after July 2nd."

He didn't specifically say that the rubbish police had been informed, but the implication was clear.

The actual delivery of the bins to each city household has not been without its problems. A monster road train (multiply articulated vehicle) shuffles and roars down the street. Every so often, men hop off and wheel the bins to the front of each house. This is generally the most exciting (and noisiest) thing that has happened on the street all day. Those who are at home to witness it usually pop out and join in the fun. Impromptu street parties eventuate. Cups of tea and gossip are swapped. Multitudes of mobile phones take videos of the spectacle.

One such street party was astonished to observe one of the bin delivery men steal a pedigree dog from the house to which he was delivering his bin. The dog, not unnaturally, strongly objected to being stolen and added his voice to the general din. The street party, and the bin man's colleagues, were collectively gobsmacked as the man ran the gauntlet between the video takers and his delivery work mates.

It wasn't long before a police car turned up. Two large policeman got out and arrested him. It remains unclear as to whether or not they were officers of the rubbish police.

The man himself was utterly astonished! Who could have seen him? How had the police managed to find out who he was and what he'd done so quickly? "Just taking the dog for a walk, Officer. Honest!"

He really must have left his gorm at home that morning...

The Gambler and the Lady

Sheila watched her fourteen year old son David squint at the screen of his mobile phone as he read a text message. She wondered vaguely if he might need glasses. Perhaps she ought to arrange to get his eyes tested? "Mum", said David, "can you give me a lift to Jennifer's?" He gestured at his phone. "She says she's got a new card game that she wants to teach me."

David and Jennifer had known each other since they were both five years old. They'd started school together on the same day and initially they had bonded out of a sense of self preservation, an attempt to protect themselves from the scary new environment they found themselves in. But very soon that casual contact had turned into a deep and genuine friendship. They were inseparable, and lately Sheila had found herself thinking about weddings and grandchildren. Somehow it all seemed quite inevitable. "Yes of course," said Sheila. "Get your stuff together and I'll meet you at the car."

Jennifer lived about a fifteen minute drive away. They made the journey mostly in silence. David was busy poking frantically at the screen of his phone. Sheila had no idea what he was up to. Once, in a moment of weakness, she had asked him what he spent so much time doing with his phone and she had failed to understand a single word of his reply. So now she just left him to himself and concentrated on negotiating her way through the rather heavy traffic.

When they got to Jennifer's house she pulled over to the kerb and let David out. She watched as he walked up the driveway and rang the front door bell. Jennifer opened the door, smiled at David and stood aside to let him in. He walked past her into the house and Jennifer turned to look at

Sheila. She waved at Sheila, smiled a funny little smile and winked before following David into the house and closing the door.

Sheila pulled back out into the traffic and drove home. There had been something rather worrying about Jennifer's reaction to David's presence. Sheila had seen that expression on Jennifer's face before. Generally it meant trouble for someone and all too often that someone turned out to be David. Sheila still remembered the time when Jennifer had developed an interest in art and had invited David round to her house so that she could paint him. Unfortunately, Jennifer had interpreted that phrase far too literally for Sheila's peace of mind. David had come home covered in blue paint. It had taken a lot of painful scrubbing and several bottles of turpentine to get him clean again.

Sheila had confronted Jennifer about that episode, but Jennifer had just smiled sweetly and said, "That's what close friendships are all about. Only a really good friend would stand still long enough to let someone paint them blue. They simply aren't capable of saying no to any request their friend makes." Sheila had to agree. Jennifer's logic was faultless.

So she spent the day doing housework and in between her chores, she worried about what might be going on between David and Jennifer this time...

* * * *

At about 4.30 in the afternoon, Sheila's phone rang. The caller ID told her it was David, so she answered straight away. "Hi there," she said. "Do you want me to come round and pick you up?"

"Yes, please," said David. He sounded a bit hesitant and immediately Sheila realised that her worries had been well founded. She wondered if she was ready to hear the details. Perhaps she ought to sit down. "When you come," David

continued, “can you bring me a set of clothes? Socks, underpants, a shirt and a pair of jeans. Stuff like that.”

“Clothes?” Sheila was puzzled. “Why do you need clothes? What’s wrong with the clothes that you’re wearing?”

“I’m not wearing any clothes,” said David, and there was a long, embarrassed silence while Sheila wondered just why he’d taken all his clothes off in front of Jennifer. The obvious explanation made her start mentally adding nine to the current month. Christmas, she thought. It will make a lovely present... But how had Jennifer managed to persuade him to strip? He was a very shy and modest boy. Even when she had painted him blue, he’d only allowed her to colour his face, his arms and his chest.

Eventually Sheila couldn’t stand the silence any longer so she asked, “Why aren’t you wearing any clothes?” She wasn’t at all sure that she wanted to hear the answer.

“Jennifer was teaching me to play pontoon,” said David. “But pontoon is a very simple minded game. It’s no fun at all if you don’t have something to gamble with, so she suggested that we play strip pontoon.” He paused, then he said, “I lost rather badly.”

Sheila didn’t know whether to be angry or amused. Eventually she settled for amused. It would probably be a more productive emotion. She laughed and said, “Why don’t you just get your clothes back from Jennifer? It seems a bit silly for me to have to hunt out more clothes for you when you’ve already got a perfectly good set with you.”

“She won’t give them back to me,” explained David. “She says it’s not proper gambling if you give back what was lost when the game is over. She says that when you lose, you lose for ever and you just have to learn to live with it.”

“Normally that’s true,” said Sheila. “But I think this is rather a special case. Can’t you get anything to wear from her?”

“Well, I think I could, sort of,” said David. “But I’m not sure if that’s a good idea.”

“Why not?” asked Sheila.

“Jennifer lost quite badly as well,” said David. “So I suppose that I could wear her bra and panties if I really had to.” He paused for a moment and then he said, “But they don’t fit me very well...”

Smiley Face

I was babysitting David, my four year old nephew. His parents were out celebrating their wedding anniversary and they'd asked me to keep an eye on David for them. It was no great hardship. I like David.

We'd been watching some mindless drivel on the television and he'd been staring at it entranced, with his forefinger jammed so far up his right nostril that I'd swear he was tickling the inside of his skull. When the programme finished, I turned the television off and said, "OK, that's it for the evening. Time for bed young man."

He blinked up at me and then he asked the question that everyone always asks, sooner or later. "Uncle John," he said, his voice a bit distorted because his nostril was still full of finger, "what are those funny marks on your face?"

"They are scars," I told him. "I got them a long, long time ago."

"How did you get them?" he persisted.

I ran my fingers along the rough scar tissue, remembering...

* * * *

I was sixteen years old in 1957. Elvis Presley was scandalising England with his lascivious hips and a call to revolution entitled *Jailhouse Rock*. My friends and I hung out in a coffee bar in Soho called the 2 i's. They had the best juke box in London and sometimes they had live music as well. Their most popular singer was called Tommy Steele and the place was always crowded on the nights when he played his guitar and tried to make himself heard over the steamy hiss of espresso machines and the chatter of conversation. The 2 i's was where I first developed my taste

for cold coffee. We didn't have much money to spend in those austere post war years, and so we soon learned how to make a coffee last for ages and ages while we listened to the music and told each other that we were the face of the future.

One particular night I was there with Jennifer. We'd come because there were rumours of a new rock and roll sensation called Cliff Richard, and we wanted to see what made people think that he was so special. As it turned out, in my opinion he didn't have much to offer. It seemed to me that he was nothing more than a pale imitation of Elvis. He curled his lip in true Elvis style and thrust his thin, shapeless hips in time to a song called *Move It*. Without Elvis to steal from he'd be nothing at all. He had no talent of his own, and I knew that he'd never amount to anything. Jennifer liked him though. While he sang, she jiggled back and forth in her chair as she did an enthusiastic hand jive in time to the music. When Cliff finished singing she said, "That was fab!"

"I prefer Tommy Steele," I said. "He's got a lot more talent and *Rock With the Caveman* is a much better song."

The door opened, admitting a blast of cold winter air and four teddy boys. Everybody in Soho knew Colin Jeffries and his gang. They were vicious thugs and most people tried to steer clear of them. Their crepe soled shoes, drainpipe trousers, knee-length jackets, bolo ties and hair styled in ridiculously large quiffs that were held in place with their own bodyweight of brylcreem made them stand out in any crowd, so generally it was quite easy to avoid them. But the 2 i's was a very small and very crowded place, which meant that there wasn't much Jennifer and I could do to get away from them when they swaggered over to our table. "Clear off," said Colin. "We want to sit here."

"There isn't anywhere for us to go," said Jennifer. "The place is full."

"Then you'd better leave," said Colin. "That's our table now."

“No it isn’t,” I said, gaining courage from the crowds of people that surrounded us. What could Colin and his thugs do in full view of everyone? “It’s not your table, it’s ours. We’re staying.”

Colin cocked his head to one side and examined me closely. “Smile when you talk to me,” he said, his voice soft with menace. “That’s the friendly thing to do. If you don’t smile when you speak I’ll think you don’t respect me. Maybe I’ll think you’re threatening me. I don’t respond well to threats.” His hands clenched themselves into fists and then relaxed again. His three companions nudged each other and grinned.

“I’m not threatening you,” I said. “But I’m not leaving either.”

Colin nodded to his three thugs and they held me down in my chair. I struggled, but they were stronger than me and I couldn’t break their grip. Colin wrapped his fingers in my hair, holding my head immobile. With his other hand he pulled a cut throat razor out of his pocket. That razor was famous throughout Soho. Everybody knew that Colin used it for slashing cinema seats. But there were dark rumours that he had other uses for it as well. It seemed that I was about to confirm the truth of those rumours.

“Smile for me, pretty boy,” said Colin. “Smile broadly. I want to see a happy face.”

The glittering razor opened up a smooth sweeping curve from the corner of my mouth, across my cheek to the top of my ear. Pain like fire and ice raced through my head. I heard myself whimpering and dimly, from far away I heard Jennifer shouting, “No, no. Stop it. Don’t hurt him.”

Colin wielded his razor again and a fresh pain raced across my other cheek as another huge gash curved across the other side of my face.

“Now you’ll smile forever,” said Colin “You’ve got the biggest smiling face in the world, stretching all the way from ear to ear. Even when you’re feeling sad that new mouth of

yours will never stop smiling.” He unwound his hand from my hair and his thugs let go their vice like grips. I slumped forward, feeling blood run down my face and drip off my chin. All I could see in front of me was the foam on my coffee gradually turning pink...

* * * *

“Uncle John!”

David’s voice called me out of my reveries. I touched the scars on my face again. Colin’s smiling legacy to me. “Uncle John,” said David again. “Tell me about your scars.” He examined the treasure trove on the end of his finger for a moment and then started to excavate his other nostril.

“I was about your age when it happened,” I said to him. “I was picking my nose one day when my finger slipped, and my fingernails tore my face apart. I’ve looked like this ever since.”

He turned white and jerked his finger out of his nostril. He looked at it suspiciously and then he looked up at me. “Really?” he asked.

“Really,” I confirmed. “Now come on, off to bed with you.”

He trotted off to bed looking thoughtful.

After that, he never picked his nose again.

The Waiting Room

It was David's habit to go to the shopping mall every Saturday afternoon. He liked to do his weekly grocery shopping at the supermarket. When he finished shopping he would put the food away in his car and go for a coffee. That was his weekly treat and he always looked forward to it.

One particular Saturday, he was walking through the shopping mall on his way to the coffee shop when he saw something that he'd never noticed before. Tucked away in a corner, behind the information kiosk, was an inconspicuous door. A sign on the door said WAITING ROOM. Another sign, just below the first one, said CLOSED. David went up to the information kiosk. The man behind the counter was wearing a smart uniform and a badge which proclaimed that his name was Peter Gledhill and he was in charge of both information and security. "What do people wait for in the waiting room?" David asked him. "And when does it open?"

Peter looked puzzled. "What waiting room?" he asked.

"The one over there," said David, pointing at the inconspicuous door. "Just behind your kiosk."

Peter craned his neck and looked over to where David was pointing. He seemed puzzled. "I don't know," he said. "I've never seen it before."

"Neither have I," admitted David. "But it's there now."

David walked over to the waiting room and tried the door. It was locked, of course.

"What's the point of a closed waiting room?" David asked rhetorically, and Peter shrugged.

Two teenagers pushed their way through the milling crowds of people. They wore baggy trousers and T-shirts that were four sizes too large for them. They were carrying skateboards. One of them jostled David as he rushed past

and the skateboard hit David in the stomach. "Ooof!" said David, winded by the collision.

"Watch it, grandad," grunted the teenager as he raced to catch up with his friend.

"You two," yelled Peter, "come back here." The teenagers took no notice. They hurried away and were soon out of sight.

"If this was America," said David, "you'd have a gun and you could yell 'Stop! Or I'll shoot!'"

"Unfortunately," said Peter, "we're in New Zealand and all I can do is yell 'Stop! Or I'll shout Stop again!' Somehow that doesn't have quite the same authoritative ring to it."

"But you have admit, it's just as effective," said David. "Teenagers never do what they are told to do. Gun or no gun."

Peter nodded his agreement. "I'll keep an eye on the waiting room," he said as David continued his interrupted journey towards coffee. "Come and see me next time you're here and I'll tell you what I've found out."

* * * *

The next Saturday, David went to the shopping mall as usual. The information kiosk had been turned round, and now it was facing the waiting room, which still proclaimed that it was closed. Peter was standing in the kiosk staring blankly at nothing in particular. "So have you got any more information about the waiting room?" David asked him.

"I've been watching it carefully ever since you pointed it out to me," said Peter. "Strangely, it's only ever here during the day. It's my job to close the mall down in the evening and lock the main doors. The waiting room has always gone away by then. But when I open the mall up in the morning, there it is again."

"That's odd," said David. "I wonder where it goes."

“Probably it goes home,” said Peter. “Everybody else in the mall goes home at the end of the day. Why shouldn’t the waiting room do the same? The mall is empty by then. There isn’t anybody who might need to do some waiting. So there’s nothing for the room to do until the mall opens up again the next morning. Why should it bother to stay?”

“Does the room ever open?” asked David. “Every time I’ve come here the sign on the door says that it’s closed.”

“Yes,” said Peter. “It’s always open first thing in the morning. But it’s usually closed by lunchtime. Sometimes it opens up again in the middle of the afternoon.”

The same two teenagers who had caused trouble the previous week came racing through the crowded mall on their hurried way from somewhere to somewhere else, pushing and shoving if anyone got in their way. As they passed the waiting room, David noticed that the sign on it said OPEN in big friendly letters. But the teenagers took no notice, and once they’d got lost in the crowd the sign said CLOSED again.

“Did you see that?” David asked.

Peter paid no attention. He was staring angrily in the direction the teenagers had gone. “I wish I could do something about them,” he said. “They’re a damn nuisance, always racing around upsetting people. They come through here almost every day.”

David strolled off to do his shopping and drink his coffee, leaving Peter alone with his furious, frustrated anger.

* * * *

The following Saturday David went to the mall again. As usual, the waiting room said it was closed and Peter was standing in his information kiosk. He had a big smile on his face. “Hello David,” he said. “Guess what?”

“What?” asked David.

“Those teenagers won’t be bothering us again,” said Peter.

“That’s good news,” said David. “What happened?”

“I’ve been keeping a very careful eye on the waiting room,” said Peter, “and I noticed that if anybody went in, the room immediately closed. Also, while I saw plenty of people go into the room, I never, ever saw anybody come out of it again.”

“Odd,” said David. “I wonder what’s going on?”

“I think I’ve worked it out,” said Peter. “We’ve got the emphasis all wrong. We’ve been thinking of it as a WAITING room, a place for people to go and wait. Perhaps a place where they can sit down and have a little bit of a rest in between shopping stops.”

“Is that not what it is?” asked David, puzzled.

“No,” said Peter. “It’s a waiting ROOM, a room that is waiting for people to come in to it. It’s only open when it’s trying to attract people and it’s closed when it doesn’t want people to come in.”

“Let me guess,” said David. “The teenagers went in to the room?”

“Yes,” said Peter gleefully. “They went in yesterday. We’ll never have to deal with them again.”

“So what does the room do with the people who go in to it?” asked David.

Peter shrugged. “I think it eats them,” he said. “I think it’s a predator that has adopted the shopping mall as its hunting ground. Prey is plentiful here, and it’s very easy to catch.”

“So the room is only open when it’s hungry?” said David. “That makes sense. And, of course, that’s why it’s always open in the morning. It wants breakfast.”

“I suspect it opens when it’s angry as well,” said Peter. “After all, a lion that’s eaten its fill will still kill you if you disturb it. I think the room found those teenagers just as

annoying as everybody else found them. It was always open whenever they came past.”

David eyed the waiting room with a new respect. Perhaps it could feel his interest for the sign flickered a bit and then it said OPEN. “I think I’ll go and have a coffee,” David said to Peter, and he turned his back on the waiting room and walked away.

Bob

The neighbourhood watch group met in the pub on every second Friday. There they drank their drinks of choice and set the world to rights. Some of them ate peanuts.

“So tell me about the neighbourhood watch,” said Brand New Bob as he brought a round of drinks to the table.

“There’s not much to tell,” said Original Bob. He took a big gulp of beer and wiped the foam off his moustache with the back of his hand. “We keep an eye on each other’s houses. We report any suspicious activity to the police and every so often, when the weather permits, we have a barbecue.”

“I set the group up initially,” said One and Only Jake. “About ten years ago. “I’ve been administering it ever since.” He looked suspiciously at his gin and tonic before taking a small sip. He pulled a face and put the glass back on the table. “Too much tonic,” he said.

“But you’ll drink it anyway,” said Original Bob, “because if you don’t it will go to waste and you absolutely can’t abide waste.”

“I suppose that’s true,” said One and Only Jake, and he picked his glass up again and took another sip.

“There’s one thing that’s been puzzling me,” said Brand New Bob. “Why do you call me Brand New Bob?”

“Because you’ve only just moved into the street,” said Original Bob, “so you really are brand new.”

“I understand that,” said Brand New Bob, “but why can’t you just call me Bob?”

“We’ve already got someone called Bob,” said One and Only Jake, “and we can’t have two or more people in the group with the same name. I simply won’t allow it.”

“Why not?”

“Imagine how confusing it would be,” said One and Only Jake, “if we arranged a barbecue at Bob’s house or if Bob’s house got burgled. When I ring around and tell everyone to come to Bob’s house, how will they know which house to go to if there are two or more Bob houses to choose from? The complications don’t bear thinking about. But if every Bob has a unique name there is no possibility of confusion.” He sat back in his chair with the air of one who has just explained the more esoteric aspects of General Relativity to an uncomprehending audience.

“So now I become Original Bob because I was here first,” said Original Bob, “and you are Brand New Bob. Clear and simple, really.”

“The devil is in the details,” said One and Only Jake, “and it’s vitally important to get the details right.”

Original Bob nodded his agreement. “That’s One and Only Jake’s superpower,” he said. “I’ve never known anyone else who could focus so closely on the details. My round, I think.” He gathered up the glasses.

* * * *

It wasn’t very long before Brand New Bob saw the neighbourhood watch group in action. One and Only Jake telephoned him. “Come to a meeting at my house,” he said. “We’ve got a parcel thief on our hands.”

When Brand New Bob arrived, he found that One and Only Jake was playing a video. “He recorded it on his security camera,” explained Original Bob. “The camera is a top of the range model which is why the movie is so crisp and clear.”

Brand New Bob watched as the video showed a courier van drive up and stop outside One and Only Jake’s house. The courier driver hopped out and dropped a parcel outside One and Only Jake’s front door. Then he hopped back into

his van and drove away. "So far, so normal," said One and Only Jake. "But just watch what happens next."

For a few minutes nothing happened then a car drove up and parked where the courier van had been. A man wearing a face-obscuring hoodie got out, picked up the parcel, threw it onto the back seat of his car and drove away again. "See!" said One and Only Jake. "A parcel thief, and a very cunning one. I think he's following the courier van but staying a long way back so as not to arouse suspicions. Then he simply picks up the parcels that he finds on the van's route and takes them home with him."

"So he's actually a sort of reverse courier," said Brand New Bob. "That's quite a cunningly simple idea when you think about it."

"The number plate on the car was smeared with mud and was quite illegible," said One and Only Jake, "so we can't track him down that way. And of course he was wearing a hoodie so my state of the art facial recognition software isn't going to help."

"What was in the parcel?" asked Original Bob. "Has he got away with anything valuable?"

"It was fairly expensive," said One and Only Jake. "It was a birthday present for my wife. A very large bottle of her favourite perfume. It's called Obsession and it's by Calvin Klein."

"Very appropriate," murmured Original Bob drily.

"Have you reported the theft to the police?" asked Brand New Bob.

"Yes," said One and Only Jake, "but they refuse to hang around all day on the off chance that the thief might come back and steal another parcel. I'm afraid we're on our own on this one."

"So what are we going to do?" asked Original Bob.

"I have an idea," said Brand New Bob and as he explained his plan, the others started to laugh...

* * * *

The next day was a busy one for the members of the neighbourhood watch group. They spent it preparing several very special parcels which they hoped the thief would find irresistible. One and Only Jake produced ten empty boxes emblazoned with the distinctive logo of Huge-South-American-River-With-Only-One-Breast. "Don't you ever throw anything away?" asked Original Bob.

"Of course not," said One and Only Jake. He sounded shocked at the very idea. "And aren't we lucky that I never do? We'd be a bit stuck if I hadn't saved these."

They filled each box to the brim. Then they carefully sealed the boxes and attached custom declarations that made the contents sound attractive and valuable. All that remained was to wait for the courier van...

* * * *

Once the van had driven out of sight and before the parcel thief turned up to begin his pilfering, they stacked the boxes neatly outside One and Only Jake's front door. Then they retired to One and Only Jake's control room where they sniggered to each other as they watched the thief arrive and carry all ten parcels to his car. Then they watched him drive away.

"I wonder how he'll react when he opens the boxes?" said Original Bob. "I'd love to be a fly on the wall when he does."

"I imagine there'll be lots of flies on the wall when he unpacks his loot," said Brand New Bob. "Emptying all the dozens and dozens of plastic bags we got from the dog park into those boxes turned each one of them into an ideal holiday resort for flies."

One and Only Jake frowned. "I hope the thief doesn't decide to bring the boxes back to me," he said. "I'd hate to

have to return the smelly things to my store cupboard.”

Both the Bobs exchanged spot the loony looks with each other. Fortunately One and Only Jake didn't notice.

No Illusions

For many years Mandrell had made a comfortable living as a master of illusion. But now someone had disillusioned him and he was furious. For the last month, no matter how much he concentrated, his illusions had become feeble things that spluttered and went out within seconds of manifesting themselves. As a result of this, not only was his pride hurt but his business was suffering as well. His customers laughed at his invoices and refused to pay them. In his heart of hearts, Mandrell could not bring himself to blame them.

Gloomily he re-read the letter that had marked the start of his disillusionment. It had come from a client called Joondalup:

The illusion of grace that I purchased from you has failed me in embarrassing ways. At last week's grand ball the illusion ceased to work and as a result I spent every dance treading on my partners' toes. I am humiliated and must spend my money on sackcloth and ashes. I cannot pay your bill for that broken illusion.

Mandrell sighed. He had no choice now. He would have to take his case to a detective. He really needed to hunt down whoever was responsible for his plight. Remonstrations were in order. He cast an illusion and demanded that it tell him the name of the best detective in the city but, as always seemed to happen these days, the illusion faded away leaving inconclusive results in its wake. Only one course of action remained. Mandrell swallowed his pride and sought information from Wanneroo, a business rival who he suspected might well be the actual cause of his sorrows. He certainly had the necessary skills, and all is fair in love and

business. Mandrell did not enjoy the irony involved in his consultation..

“I am in need of a detective,” he said.

Wanneroo nodded sagely. “I suggest you consult a fourth order illusion,” he said. “Such chimera are well known to have access to that level of knowledge.” He gave no hint of having heard about the difficulties that Mandrell was currently experiencing. Yet how could he not know? In Mandrell’s experience, Wanneroo had always been well connected to the gossip of the district. Again, he wondered if Wanneroo could be responsible for his plight. Perhaps his silence on the subject was a diplomatic one.

“I considered it,” said Mandrell, sidestepping the nature of his problem, “but it seemed to me that bias might be evinced if I took such an action on my own behalf.”

“The possibility exists,” admitted Wanneroo, raising a quizzical eyebrow. “Perhaps you will allow me to undertake the task for you? My fees are modest. My results are unequivocal.”

Mandrell hated being beholden to Wanneroo but he could see no other path of action. “Please do,” he said, “but be aware that I do not have a bottomless purse.”

“That will not be an issue,” said Wanneroo smoothly and he quickly moulded the essences necessary to manifest a fourth order illusion. Sourly, Mandrell noticed its sharp edges and bright colours. The illusion looked quizzically at Wanneroo who said, “We need a detective.”

“Of course,” said the illusion. “The Intercontinental Op is well known for his skill and discretion.”

“Thank you,” said Wanneroo, and the illusion faded smoothly away. Mandrell felt a pang of jealousy. “I will invoice you in due course,” said Wanneroo. Mandrell nodded glumly and took his leave.

* * * *

The Intercontinental Op was short and fat, though he was also vague and blurred. If Mandrell concentrated hard, he found that he could keep the Op in focus for brief periods but generally it was easier on his willpower not to make the effort. Consequently the Op stayed undefined throughout most of the interview. It seemed to Mandrell that the Op's talent for keeping himself so vague would be useful in his line of work. It would encourage indiscretions when the Op asked questions of a suspect. What possible harm could there be in talking to a vague blur? It was a genuinely clever illusion and Mandrell wondered who the Op had bought it from. Certainly Mandrell had not sold it to him. Perhaps this was another of Wanneroo's ubiquitous illusions.

"I have been disillusioned," Mandrell explained to The Intercontinental Op, "and therefore I can no longer make a living at my profession. I suspect that Wanneroo may have engineered my difficulties, but I have no direct evidence that he is involved."

"I see," said the Op. Even his voice was nondescript and unmemorable. "I notice," he continued drily, "that the information that brought you to me bears the hallmarks of one of Wanneroo's fourth order illusions. This suggests his innocence in the matter. Why would he send you to me if he bore you ill will? He knows that I am the very best at what I do. I always follow the trail to its conclusion. If he is plotting against you I will surely discover it. If such were the case, it would be in his own interests to keep both of us far apart."

Mandrell made a gesture of negation. "Perhaps you and he are working together," he said. "Did you purchase your vague illusion from him?"

"On the contrary," said the Op. "The illusion is contrived from my own essences. Not all illusionists sell themselves in the marketplace. Some utilise their skills to achieve other ends. I myself prefer to match my illusionary skills against those who do not conform to societal norms."

“I consider myself admonished,” said Mandrell. “Will you take my case?”

“I will,” said the Intercontinental Op.

* * * *

Several days passed and Mandrell’s illusions ceased to manifest themselves at all. Reluctantly he hung a sign on his door: CLOSED UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE. He considered it for a moment and then added a codicil: THIS IS NOT AN ILLUSION. The paradox pleased him. Small pleasures were all that remained to him now. A vague blur moved by the window and Mandrell opened the door to let the Intercontinental Op into his workroom.

“You have a client called Joondalup,” said the Intercontinental Op without preamble. “He is responsible for your recent problems.”

“How can this be?” asked Mandrell. “And how was it achieved?”

“Perhaps you overreached yourself when you sold him an illusion of grace,” said the Op. “He felt greatly discomfited when his grace deserted him at the ball, and so he determined to blacken your reputation. To that end, he purchased an illusion of failure from Wanneroo. Then he wrote you a letter of complaint and enclosed the illusion with it. Ever since you received his letter you have been under the illusion that you have been disillusioned, though of course you have not. Because of this you are no longer able to perceive your own successes. Each triumph manifests as tragedy, and every tragedy reinforces the original illusion of failure thereby making the situation spiral out of control as the failures multiply.”

“So this really *is* Wanneroo’s fault,” said Mandrell.

“Not at all, said the Op. “Wanneroo is involved only from a distance. His transaction with Joondalup was purely commercial. He himself feels no animosity towards you.

Indeed, I doubt that he even knew what Joondalup intended to do with the illusion.”

“What can I do to rescue the situation?” asked Mandrell.

“I suggest that you visit Wanneroo and purchase an illusion of success from him,” said the Op. “Such a negation of your illusion of failure will quickly restore your powers.”

“And Wanneroo gets paid by both parties involved in the transaction,” said Mandrell bitterly. “No wonder he grows so rich, so quickly.”

“That’s how business works,” said the Op.

“I am puzzled as to why my illusion of grace failed so badly,” pondered Mandrell. “It has always sold well in the past and it has saved many a social situation from temperamental extremes.”

“Joondalup is my cousin,” said the Intercontinental Op. He cleared his throat and his blurred edges grew even more indistinct. “He and I are rivals in love,” he continued hesitantly. “Because of this I took suitable remedial action against him, designed to prevent his seduction of my sweetheart at the ball.”

“So,” said Mandrell, “it seems that I must hold you responsible for my present difficulties. If you had not been blinded by love I would not have been disillusioned.”

“I had no knowledge of the action my cousin would take when I disabled his illusion of grace,” protested the Op. “I only discovered what he had done during the course of my investigations.”

“That does not lessen your culpability,” said Mandrell. “Tell me, are you happy with your sweetheart?”

“Yes I am,” said the Op and the vague blur sharpened again and turned a soft shade of blue.

“I am pleased for you,” Mandrell said musingly. “Are you aware that my best illusion is one of impotence?”

“I will gladly waive my fee for this case.” said the Intercontinental Op hastily.

Party Time

The address matched the one I'd been told, but I really wasn't sure that I'd got the right place. The house was quiet and still. There was nothing to suggest that a party might be happening inside. There was no music coming from it and no happy chattering. On the other hand, there were no arguments or fights either. That had to be a good sign. I walked up and down the street a couple of times to check the other houses but none of them showed any indications of a party, so I returned to the original house, pushed the door open and went inside.

The lounge was dimly lit and crowded with silent people. Nobody was talking to anyone else. A stereo burbled away very, very softly to itself in the corner of the room and the heady smell of incense didn't quite disguise the beguiling scent of marijuana coming from the several joints that were being passed around. Everyone turned to look at me as I walked in. "Ssssh!" someone whispered in admonishing tones. "Don't wake the baby." Well, I thought, that explains the silence...

I had brought a large bottle of home made gooseberry wine with me. I took it into the kitchen and hid it in the oven so as to keep it away from thirsty, thieving throats. It seemed unlikely that the oven would be getting much use tonight. Everyone was far too stoned to think coherently about cooking. When they got the munchies, which they inevitably would, they'd probably send someone out for takeaways. Some other people had obviously come to the same conclusion that I had because there were already four bottles of wine in the oven, along with a six pack of beer.

I'd brought the gooseberry wine because I needed a lot of help to drink it. Once you open a bottle of wine you have

to drink it all, otherwise it goes off and that's a terrible waste of a good wine. It's a terrible waste of a bad wine as well assuming that there is such a thing, which I doubt. Either way, the wine won't keep once you've taken the cork out, and you have to drink it in one session. Unfortunately this particular gooseberry wine was so strongly alcoholic that one person could not finish a bottle of it without falling asleep half way through. So I thought I'd share my wine with the party. I was sure that it would all vanish quite quickly. None of it would be wasted. Marijuana makes you very indiscriminating.

A three-legged dog joined me by the oven. He was a black labrador. One of his back legs was missing. Presumably it had been amputated after some sort of accident. The dog didn't seem to mind being a tripod. He was very friendly and I made a big fuss of him. He swished his tail backwards and forwards and he nuzzled my hand searching for treats. "Sorry," I said, "I haven't got anything for you." He didn't believe me and he searched me all over again.

Someone who looked like a bank clerk came into the kitchen. He was smartly dressed in a snappy suit with a neatly knotted tie. His shoes were polished to a high gloss. He made an amazing contrast with everybody else at the party. They were all wearing the standard party uniform of scruffy jeans and tie-died tee shirts.

"Hello," I said. "Would you like some home made gooseberry wine?"

"Home made?" He sounded surprised. "Did you make it yourself?"

"I did indeed," I said. I poured some wine into a plastic cup and handed it to him. He clasped it in the approved manner with his little finger stuck out at a pretentious right angle. He drank the entire cupful in one swig. Then he smiled.

“Not too sweet,” he said. “Not too dry. I like it.” He held his cup out for more. “I smoked some jimson weed before I came to the party,” he said. “Jimmy weed gets me wasted much faster than pot does. I’ve been practically living on it for the last three days. But I bet this home made wine is a lot better for that than the jimmy is. After all, you made it, that has to count for something. I just picked the jimmy weed from where I found it growing by the side of the road.”

I was surprised. “Haven’t the council sprayed it with weed killer?” I asked. “They are usually quite good at getting rid of the roadside weeds.”

He shrugged. “That just makes it tastier,” he said. I poured some more wine and the bank clerk became loquacious. “Interesting that we are both getting wasted on totally legal drugs,” he said. “Which do you prefer? Wine or jimmy? I have some jimmy left if you want it. Fair exchange for you sharing your wine with me.”

“No thanks,” I said. “Jimson weed is too scary. Too many side effects.”

He shook his head in disagreement. “Home made wine is much scarier,” he said. “It’s made by people. People make mistakes. Jimmy is made by God. God doesn’t make mistakes.”

I returned my attention to the dog. I had some mints in my pocket. They had been there for ages and they were covered in fluff. They looked quite disgusting. I had no desire to put them anywhere near my mouth so I offered one to the dog and he wolfed it down. You don’t realise how many edible things there are in the world until you’ve made friends with a labrador.

More people came in to the kitchen in search of alcohol. One and all, they were fascinated by the idea of home made wine and they asked me for details of how I’d made it. One thing led to another and it wasn’t long before we were all eagerly swapping recipes for this, that and the other thing, most of them perfectly legal and all of them wholesome and

tasty. The labrador begged for titbits and everyone fed him something. His tail wagged faster and faster. This was the most wonderful party he'd ever been to.

"Do you realise," said the bank clerk interrupting an intense discussion about which was the very best kind of chilli to cook a con carne with, "that we are all men, we are standing in the kitchen and we are all talking about cooking. Where are the women?"

"I imagine that they are in the lounge," I said, "talking about rugby."

The bank clerk nodded his agreement. The labrador asked him for a treat and the bank clerk glanced down. "I thought that dog only had three legs," he said.

I counted the dog's legs carefully. "That's right," I said. "Three of them."

The bank clerk shook his head. "I can see four legs," he said. He closed one eye and squinted. "I tell a lie," he said. "The dog's got six legs. And every one of them is blurred around the edges."

"I think the jimmy weed is kicking in," I said. "Have another drink."

"I've had lots to drink already," said the bank clerk. "Lots and lots and lots. But I haven't had a pee for a day and a half."

"Jimmy will do that to you," I said. "If you don't pee soon, guess what will happen to your bladder."

"What?" he asked.

I put a finger into my mouth. I dragged it across the inside of my cheek and out of my mouth again, making a loud popping sound. "It will explode," I said. "Just like that."

Somebody laughed and the bank clerk's face grew red with anger. "Don't laugh at me," he shouted. "Don't LAUGH!" His voice rose to a shriek and from the lounge came the sound of a baby crying.

"Which one of you bastards woke the baby?" demanded an angry voice.

The bank clerk slumped down on to the kitchen floor. He leaned back against the oven, closed his eyes and passed out. Presently he started to vomit, and the labrador started to feast. His party was getting better and better.

“Now that the baby’s awake, can we turn the music up and have a proper party?” asked another voice.

The bank clerk’s body was blocking the oven door. Since he was preventing me from getting any more to drink I decided it was time to go home.

Is One Place As Good As Another?

We were sitting in a coffee shop sipping our long blacks when David said, "My granddad was talking about the romance of travel last night. What do you suppose he meant by that?"

"Goodness knows," I said. "You go into a transportation booth, you select your destination and you click a button. A red light comes on. A few seconds later the light goes green. You open the door and step out at your destination. What's romantic about that?"

David nodded his agreement. "Perhaps he meant that you could have a romance with someone you meet on your journey," he said.

"That won't work," I said. "Transportation booth journeys only last for a few seconds. That doesn't give you much time to build a meaningful relationship with anyone who may be travelling with you."

David considered that. "It must be an old people's thing," he concluded at last.

"Yes," I said. "Probably it comes from a time before there were any transportation booths."

David looked horrified. "Was there ever really a time when they didn't have transportation booths?" he asked. "That's a very scary thought. It must have been terrible to have lived back then!"

"It doesn't bear thinking about," I agreed. "Are we going to the pub tonight?"

"Of course we are," said David. "I'll meet you at the booth about seven o'clock."

"Righto," I said.

We finished our coffee and I took a booth back to the office so that I could sit at my desk and pretend to work. I don't know where David went. Probably he didn't go anywhere.

* * * *

That evening I dressed in my drinking clothes and headed out to meet David at the booth. When I got there, he was hanging around outside it with his hands in his pockets. He looked worried. "I think we may have a problem," he said, gesturing at the booth. The screen on the door of the booth was displaying a message. It said:

OUT OF ORDER

NO ENTRY

"That doesn't look hopeful," I said. I tried to open the door, but of course it remained firmly shut. The booth had no intention of letting us in. Entry was forbidden and that was that. "There's another booth on Parkinson Road," I said. "Let's walk over there and try that one."

The booth on Parkinson Road was displaying the same sign as the first one. "It looks like the whole system might be down," I said. "I don't think we're going anywhere tonight."

"How are we going to get to the pub?" asked David thirstily.

"We could always walk," I said.

"Walk where?" asked David. "I don't actually know where the pub is. I've always gone to it through a transportation booth. I haven't the foggiest idea how to get to it any other way. For all I know, it might be on the other side of the country, or maybe even on the other side of the world. Do you know where it is?"

“No,” I admitted. “I don’t. But I know how to find out.” I dug into my pocket for my phone and I asked google to tell me where the Crown and Anchor pub was. Google told me that there were 58,437 pubs called the Crown and Anchor. Could I be a little bit more precise? No I couldn’t. I put my phone back in my pocket. “Actually,” I said, “perhaps I don’t know how to find out. But there must be a pub around here somewhere. Let’s just find the nearest one and walk to it.”

David shuddered delicately at the horrible thought. “Walk somewhere?” he said. “We can’t do that. Walking anywhere except to a transportation booth is against the laws of nature!”

I queried google again and eventually it admitted that there were three pubs within a couple of kilometres of where David and I were standing. None of them were called the Crown and Anchor but one was called the Lord Nelson. In keeping with our original nautical theme, we decided to head for that one. I checked the instructions from google one last time and then we set off down the road.

It soon became clear that we weren’t the only people who were feeling frustrated by the breakdown of the transportation booth system. Several groups of people were shuffling along the road. Many of them looked quite lost and some even looked a little bit scared. Presently David and I came close to two young women who were striding along purposefully as if they didn’t have a care in the world. “Hello ladies,” I said. I introduced myself and David. “Do you mind if we join you? Safety in numbers and all that.”

“Don’t worry,” said David, reassuringly. “We’re quite harmless.”

They looked at each other and had a whispered conversation, then one of them said, “That might be nice. My name is Christine.”

“And I’m Margaret,” said the other one. “We’re just heading for the Lord Nelson to have a drink. It’s our local. We go there all the time.”

“Well there’s a coincidence,” said David. “That’s where we’re going as well. Do you know where it is?”

“Of course we do,” said Christine. She sounded surprised to be asked such a question “We walk down there most days. It’s really close. It seems such a waste to use a booth to go such a short distance.”

“Gosh,” said David, seemingly impressed with the logic. “I’ve never walked anywhere before,” he admitted, looking a little bit ashamed. “I always take a transportation booth.”

“So I imagine you have no idea where anything is in the world,” said Margaret. “How very odd!” The two girls giggled to each other, quite overcome by our display of utter geographic ignorance.

“But the booths are so convenient,” I said.

“Until they aren’t,” Christine pointed out. “Like today.” And I had to admit that she was right.

* * * *

We spent a convivial evening in the Lord Nelson. The beer flowed like beer, the wine flowed like wine, and the gin flowed like gin. Margaret and Christine were chatty and friendly. Everybody enjoyed themselves and I was a little bit sad when closing time arrived and we had to leave. As we walked home with Margaret and Christine we passed a transportation booth. The screen on the door said:

WELCOME TO YOUR NEXT DESTINATION

PLEASE ENTER

David looked relieved and wistful at the same time. “They must have fixed the fault,” he said. “Why don’t we take the booth home?”

“I’ll carry on walking with Margaret and Christine,” I said. “I think I’ve just discovered the real romance of travel.” I

smiled at them and they smiled back at me.

I was enjoying being with Margaret and Christine. But more than that, I was enjoying the sensation of knowing exactly where the Lord Nelson was. It was the first time in my life that I'd known where anything other than a transport booth was actually located. Perhaps it would be fun if I could find out where some other places were. Maybe I could walk to them as well. There were so many endless possibilities opening up in front of me! I felt slightly giddy at the thought. This could be the start of a fascinating hobby.

"See you later," said David, stepping into the booth with a sigh of relief. He was clearly pleased that everything in his life was now back to normal.

"What a stick in the mud," said Margaret, taking my arm. Christine took my other arm. "Would you like to learn where our house is?" she asked.

The Last Trump

When David arrived at the Pearly Gates he found the Angel Gabriel emptying the spit out of his trumpet. Angel spit, David noticed with interest, was green. It hissed and bubbled when it landed on the white marble steps that led up to the Pearly Gates. David could see that the once pristine marble was now pockmarked with lots of little craters where gobbets of spit had splattered. Clearly Gabriel had been doing rather a lot of trumpet playing and as a result his trumpet had accumulated quite incredible amounts of spit.

“You’re the very last one to arrive,” said Gabriel, sounding a bit tetchy. “Everybody else got here ages ago, but I had to blow my trumpet six times before you condescended to turn up.”

“Sorry,” said David contritely. “I did my best.”

“Clearly your best wasn’t good enough,” growled Gabriel. “Most people set off as soon as my first trumpet call rang out. Everyone except a few stragglers had responded by the time I blew my second blast and I got them with the third one I played. Why did I have to play three more trumpet calls before I managed to attract your attention?”

“Ah,” said David, sounding a bit embarrassed, “that’s rather a long story.”

“We’ve got nothing but time up here,” said Gabriel. “Tell me all about it.”

“OK,” said David. “It all started when I went to a tupperware party...”

* * * *

David rang the front door bell. Christine answered so quickly that she might almost have been hovering just

behind it waiting for him to ring. "Come in," she said, opening the door wide.

"Thank you," said David. He could hear the hum of busy, excited conversation coming from somewhere deeper in the house. He followed his nose to the noise and found himself in a room full of chattering ladies. Tupperware containers were stacked in strategic places and every so often someone would pick one up, examine it carefully and then, equally carefully, put it back in its place.

Against the far wall stood a table which held empty wine glasses. A harried man who was standing behind the table kept pouring wine into them. As soon as a glass filled up one of the excited ladies would exchange her empty glass for the full one. Serving wine at a tupperware party was a never ending task, reflected David, rather like painting the Forth bridge. David helped himself to a glass and took a large swallow. It was very good wine, so he helped himself to another one.

The clang of a fork tapping on a wine glass echoed through the room and slowly silence descended. Everyone turned to face Christine who was standing by the largest of the tupperware piles. "Hello everybody," said Christine. "Welcome to my first ever tupperware party. I'm so excited to see such a good turnout and I'm sure you'll all find lots of bargains to buy here tonight."

There was a brief smattering of polite applause and then someone asked, "How can we find bargains? I can buy plastic containers at my local supermarket for half the price that you charge. Selling tupperware is really just a scam, isn't it?"

"No it isn't," said Christine. She sounded hurt. "It's a proper business. Just because I run it from my home rather from a shop doesn't make it a scam."

"It's a pyramid scheme," persisted the voice. It sounded rather hostile and David could sense the tension in the room starting to rise. He grabbed another glass of wine while the

grabbing was good. “You aren’t really here to sell us tupperware,” said the voice. “You just want to recruit us to sell it for you. And you’ll charge us a fee for doing that. The more people you recruit the more money you get because of all the fees you collect. And anyone you recruit will only be able to make money if they too spend all their time recruiting others. That’s how pyramid schemes work.”

“No,” insisted Christine. “It isn’t a pyramid scheme, it’s multi-level marketing. That’s quite a different thing. I admit that I will make money if some of you start selling under my management. But I really do want to sell tupperware. I strongly believe in the product. Only tupperware has the special, patented seal around the lid that keeps the contents fresh for longer than any other plastic container can manage to do.”

“I don’t like seals,” said David who was starting to feel the effect of the wine he had been drinking. “Can I have a walrus instead?”

Several people giggled and David felt the tension in the room relax a little bit. Christine reached behind the tupperware pile and picked up a container. “I filled this with ripe tomatoes three weeks ago,” she said. “Pass it around, examine it closely. Take the lid off and give the contents the sniff test. “You’ll find the tomatoes are just as fresh today as they were when I put them in.”

Christine handed the container to David. Through the semi-opaque plastic he could just make out several round, reddish looking things that he was perfectly willing to believe were tomatoes. He passed the container on to the person on his left. Soon it was circulating happily around the room.

“Ouch!” said a voice. David looked around. The lady holding the container of tomatoes was glaring at it as she sucked her finger. “I broke a fingernail when I tried to take the lid off,” she said indignantly.

“It’s the special walrus,” said Christine and David grinned at her. He was starting to like Christine more and more.

“Once the lid is fastened on to the container it’s an extraordinarily tight fit. That’s why everything inside it stays very fresh.”

“So how do you get the lid off?” asked the lady with the broken fingernail. “I don’t want to break any more nails trying to get the lid off. It hurts!”

“There is a knack to it,” admitted Christine.

“Unfortunately some people never quite manage to pick it up. Their tupperware lids have to stay on all the time.”

“Perhaps people who don’t have the knack shouldn’t buy tupperware,” said David. “They’ll just end up with cupboards and drawers full of multicoloured plastic containers that they will never be able to use.”

“Practice makes perfect,” said Christine, giving him a warm smile. “That’s what I always say.”

* * * *

“I don’t understand,” said the Angel Gabriel. “What does a tupperware party have to do with your tardy response to my trumpet call?”

“I got a bit carried away,” said David. “Probably I drank a bit too much wine. I bought quite a lot of tupperware that night. I spent about \$200 on ordinary containers. I thought they’d look good in my pantry while they kept my biscuits crisp and yummy. But eventually I went completely mad and I bought myself a tupperware coffin for only \$1,500. It was pink. I couldn’t resist it. I thought I’d got an absolute bargain!”

“And had you?” asked the Angel Gabriel.

“It was perfect to begin with,” said David. “And once they buried me in it I thought it was even better. I felt very comfortable, whiling away eternity and keeping fresh in my very own pink tupperware coffin. It was only a lot later that I realised I might have a bit of a problem with it.”

“And what was that?” asked the Angel.

David shuffled his feet and looked a bit embarrassed. "I heard your very first trump," he admitted. "And I wanted to respond to it straight away. I really did."

"So why didn't you?" asked the Angel. "Why did you make me wait until long after everybody else who had ever lived had passed through the Pearly Gates? What made you so very, very late?"

David blushed. "I couldn't get the lid off," he said.

The Rumour Mill

It was the first day back at school after the long summer break. David was fourteen years old now, and he was definitely starting to stoop from carrying the weight of all those years on his shoulders. He slouched through the school gate into the playground where he saw his friend Nathan playing with some kind of gadget. He hurried over to investigate. "What have you got there?" he asked.

Nathan looked up. "Oh, hello David," he said. "That's a fine crop of spots you've grown on your face over the summer. They look quite ripe. They must be about ready to harvest."

"Pustules," said David.

Nathan looked puzzled. "Pustules?" he asked.

"Technically that's what they are," explained David. "Spots are just discoloured bits of skin. Pustules are spots that are filled with stuff that looks like custard, though I don't think you'd want to squirt it over your sticky date pudding. What's that thing you're playing with?"

"That's my new rumour mill," said Nathan.

"What's a rumour mill?" asked David.

"This is," said Nathan. "It's just like a pepper mill except it grinds rumours rather than peppercorns."

"Wow, that sounds cool!" said David, impressed. "Where did you get it?"

"From that strange little shop under the railway bridge," said Nathan. "They've got all kinds of weird stuff for sale there that you never see anywhere else. It cost me a whole month's pocket money, but I'm sure it was worth it. Here, take a look."

He handed the rumour mill to David. It was a small, grey box with a handle on the top and what looked like a speaker

grille on the bottom. On one side of the box was a graduated scale. One end of the scale was labelled *Fine* and the other end was labelled *Coarse*. A lever could be moved up and down the scale. "How does it work?" asked David.

"You use the lever to select the grade of rumour you want to hear and then you twist the handle to grind out the rumour," explained Nathan. "Why don't you give it a go?"

David set the lever to the middle of the scale and turned the handle. "There's a rumour that Pauline fancies you." said the rumour mill. It sounded smug.

"Gosh," said David, "that's intriguing. Nobody has ever fancied me before. Who is Pauline anyway? I don't know anyone called Pauline."

"Yes you do," said Nathan. "She's the one who sits at the back of the class in French lessons because she's ashamed of her accent. She hopes she won't get picked on if she hides at the back out of sight. It's not a very successful tactic. She gets picked on quite a lot."

"Ah," said David. "I've got her now. She's the one who speaks French with a broad Yorkshire accent. *Eeh by gum, il y a des problèmes au moulin.*"

"Trouble at 't mill," said Nathan. "That's her."

"Well if she fancies me I'll definitely have to fancy her," said David.

"Of course you will," said Nathan. "You're fourteen years old. By definition you have to fancy anything that is warm and that moves and breathes. Like sheep, for example."

"Nonsense," said David. "You move and breathe and I don't fancy you at all." He gave the rumour mill back to Nathan.

"I'm warm as well," said Nathan. "So I've got all the right qualifications. I'm really rather hurt that you don't find me attractive enough to fancy." He selected a rumour down near the *Coarse* end of the choice scale and twisted the handle.

“David’s telling fibs,” said the rumour mill. “He fancies you something rotten.”

Nathan grinned. “I knew you did,” he said.

* * * *

When the next French lesson arrived, David made a point of moving to the back of the class and sitting next to Pauline. She looked at him suspiciously. “Why are you sitting there?” she asked. “That’s where Julie always sits.”

David felt that this was hardly an auspicious start to a relationship, but he persevered. “I wanted a change,” he said. “The front row gets rather boring after a while.”

Pauline shrugged. “I don’t suppose I can stop you,” she said. “It’s a free classroom.” She rummaged in her bag and took out a pencil case which she put on the desk in front of her. David noticed that her fingers were very long and elegant with well cared for nails that tapered to a point. The fingernails were painted with a surprisingly vivid red polish.

“How do you get away with such bright nail polish?” David asked her. “Isn’t it against the school rules?”

“Yes it is,” said Pauline. “Mostly I keep my hands in my pockets so that nobody notices.” She opened the pencil case and took out a felt tip pen. “Don’t move,” she said and she started drawing on David’s face with the pen. He jerked his head back in surprise.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“Hold still,” she said irritably. “I’m joining up your spots to see if they make a picture. I can’t do it properly if you keep moving your head around like that. The rumour mill says that if you do this and get a picture of Queen Elizabeth you’ll end up marrying the person whose spots you’ve joined together.”

“Oh!” said David, surprised. “Have you got a rumour mill as well?”

Pauline gave him a blank look. “Huh?” she said.

“Never mind,” said David and he held his head still as she wiped her felt tip pen back and forth across his face. When she’d finished she examined him critically.

“Looks more like Kermit the Frog than Queen Elizabeth,” she said. “I don’t think you and I are going to be compatible.”

“Let’s give it a try anyway,” said David and he put his hand on her leg, just above her knee.

Immediately she dropped her hand onto his and dug her sharp nails deep into his flesh. “Ow!” said David. “That hurt!” He tried to pull his hand away but she just dug her nails in deeper.

“Actually,” she said, “I’m not wearing any nail polish at all. That stuff on my fingernails is blood from the last person who put his hand on my leg without my permission. And now I need to touch it up a bit because the colour is starting to fade...”

* * * *

“I don’t think she really fancies me,” said David. “The rumour mill got it wrong.” His hand had a fresh, clean bandage wrapped around it. The bandage was spotted with red here and there where the blood had seeped through..

“Why have you got a picture of Kermit the Frog on your face?” asked Nathan.

“Because Pauline used a permanent marker pen,” said David, “and there isn’t any way of cleaning it off. The doctors said they could graft over it with skin from my thighs, but that seems a bit drastic. The drawing will fade away all by itself in six months or so as new skin grows to replace it.”

“That’s the price you pay for listening to rumours,” said Nathan. “Everyone knows that they are wrong more often than they are right.” He moved the rumour mill lever up to the *Fine* end of the scale and turned the handle.

“There’s a rumour that I’m not always reliable,” said the rumour mill, “but I’m sure that’s not true.”

“That’s a moronic thing to say,” said David.

“I think you mean oxymoronic,” said Nathan, and he put the rumour mill away in his pocket.

The Gift

“Do you suppose it will hurt?” asked David. He sounded anxious.

“Of course not,” said Nathan, scornfully. “It’s a gift, not a punishment. Why would it hurt?”

David still didn’t look convinced, but he didn’t ask any more questions. He just waited patiently as the queue sidled slowly forward. David and Nathan, along with everybody else in their year at school, were lining up to receive the gift that would define how they would live out the rest of their lives. People sometimes called it God’s Gift. It came in the form of a small injection which unlocked the potential for a superpower that everyone had hidden in their genes but which would lie completely dormant until such time as the injection activated it. In order to make sure that nobody missed out on getting their gift, the injection was routinely given to all children in their third year of secondary school.

Exactly what form a person’s gift would take depended to a large extent on the genetic make up they had inherited from their parents. But there was also a certain randomness built in to the process, so it was quite impossible to predict exactly what gift you would end up with. You just had to wait and see what happened to you after you’d had your injection. Consequently both David and Nathan were feeling a little bit apprehensive as they shuffled along in the slowly moving queue.

“What do you think you’ll get?” asked Nathan.

David shrugged. “I don’t think there’s any question about it,” he said. “Mum and dad can both turn themselves invisible, so I’m pretty sure I’ll have inherited the same gift. What about you?”

“No idea,” said Nathan. “Dad can see through walls and mum can read minds. So who knows what I’ll end up with. My sister’s gift was the ability to make her skin turn green on alternate Thursdays. Sometimes, if she’s having a good Thursday, she can turn it purple, but mostly she goes green. Where did that come from, and what possible use can it be?”

“She could always enter an Incredible Hulk look-alike contest,” suggested David.

“No,” said Nathan. “That won’t work. She’s far too skinny. They’d disqualify her in the first round.”

Time passed and eventually David and Nathan arrived at the injection station. The nurse who was loading the syringes smiled and said, “Just roll your shirt sleeve up a bit please.” They did so, and she injected each of them in turn. Then she winked at them with a dark brown eye that she opened in the middle of her forehead. “All done,” she said cheerfully, and they moved on feeling strangely comforted by her winking eye. Probably that was her gift, thought David. Maybe it was why she’d taken up nursing in the first place.

“Well that was fun,” he said, rubbing his arm. “For very small values of fun, of course.”

“I don’t feel any different,” said Nathan. “Perhaps I didn’t get a gift at all. Perhaps the things I inherited from my parents cancelled each other out and I ended up with nothing. What about you? I can still see you. You haven’t gone invisible yet.”

“I’m not sure how to,” said David. “Mum and dad seem to be able to turn their gift on and off at will, but I have no idea how they do it. I do know that they aren’t invisible all the time. Generally they only vanish from view when they want to keep an eye on me to make sure I’m not doing anything I shouldn’t be doing. It’s really annoying to settle down comfortably with a copy of dad’s *Playboy* magazine only to

have an invisible mother snatch it out of my hands when I reach the centrefold.”

“Yes,” said Nathan. “I can see how that might be quite frustrating.”

They wandered out into the school playground and a voice said, “Hey, dickheads! What did you get?”

“Bugger,” muttered Nathan under his breath. It was Roland Stott, the class psychopath, Nathan’s nemesis, and his constant persecutor.

“We’re not sure,” said David, trying to calm the situation down. “We’re still waiting for our gifts to kick in.”

“Huh!” said Roland scornfully. “I bet you got something really wimpy.” He poked Nathan in the chest, hard enough to make him stagger backwards a pace or two. “Come on,” sneered Roland. “Show me your superpower.” He poked Nathan again. “Can your gift rescue you from mine? If I concentrate hard, I can make your fingernails fall out. Like this!” His brow furrowed and he made low grunting noises.

Years of frustrated anger finally came home to roost. Nathan growled softly and lowered his head. David saw a horn start to grow out of the top of Nathan’s skull. It pushed his floppy hair to one side as it got larger and longer. Soon the horn had turned into a thin, vicious looking spear which David thought made Nathan look rather like a shaggy unicorn.

Nathan ran towards Roland and the momentum of his charge drove the horn deep into Roland’s chest. David could see several inches of horn protruding from Roland’s back. Gobbets of nameless flesh that had been dragged from somewhere deep inside Roland’s body were stuck to it. Blood gushed along the horn and dripped slowly from the end. Roland’s eyes widened with shock and his mouth opened closed as he screamed in silent agony.

Then Nathan slowly backed away from Roland, withdrawing his horn from the wound as he did so. There was a sickening, sucking sound as the horn pulled away

from the bloody, clinging flesh. Nathan smiled gleefully at the blood that stained Roland's shirt a deep, vivid red. "Yes, it can rescue me, you bastard," said Nathan. "I hope that hurts. I hope it hurts a lot."

As Nathan's anger subsided, so did his horn. David watched, astonished as it grew smaller and smaller. It retreated inside Nathan's skull, and as it did so Roland's wound began to close up in time with the disappearing horn. When Nathan's horn finally vanished from view, the wound had completely healed itself. All that remained of it was the big red stain on Roland's shirt, acting as a reminder to him that perhaps it would no longer be a good idea to pick on Nathan. Roland poked at his chest with an experimental finger. "Bloody hell," he said in astonishment, and he walked away a little unsteadily.

"That was fun," said Nathan.

"It's a much more useful gift than being able to turn your skin green on alternate Thursdays," agreed David.

"Meanwhile," said Nathan, "what about you? I can still see you."

"I tried to go invisible while you were dealing with Roland," said David, "so that he wouldn't turn his attention to me. But I don't think it worked."

"Try again," suggested Nathan. "Let me see if anything happens."

David started to concentrate, thinking invisible thoughts. I'm not here, he told himself firmly. You can't see me. Suddenly Nathan started to laugh. David looked up at him. "What?" he said.

"Your left leg went invisible," said Nathan, "but the rest of you just stayed there in plain sight."

"Only my left leg?" David asked, feeling rather disappointed.

"That's right," agreed Nathan. "Or perhaps I should say that's left."

“What good is having an invisible left leg?” asked David.
“How can I do anything useful with that?”

“You could try auditioning for the school play,” suggested Nathan. “They are doing *Treasure Island* this year. With an invisible left leg you’d be bound to get the part of Long John Silver.”

Water is Wet

“Gosh, it’s hot,” said David. Sweat glistened on his forehead and dripped off the point of his chin. He took a tissue out of his pocket and wiped his face with it.

“Didn’t you blow your nose on that tissue just a couple of minutes ago?” asked Nathan.

“Yes,” said David, “but it’s so hot that the snot dried to a crisp almost instantly. That’s the only good thing about this weather – tissues become reusable rather than disposable!”

“Why don’t we go down to the river and cool off by having a swim,” suggested Nathan.

“Good idea,” said David. “I’ll get my togs and meet you there.”

* * * *

The river flowed sluggishly as if the heat had sapped its energy and it simply couldn’t be bothered to make the effort any more. “It looks a lot shallower than normal,” said David.

“Yes,” agreed Nathan. “I think at least half the river must have evaporated over the last couple of days.”

“Never mind,” said David. “It’s still deep enough to swim and splash around in. I’ll race you to the other side.”

“I’m not racing,” said Nathan. “That takes far too much energy. I’ll swim slowly across and I’ll meet you under the willow tree.”

“OK.” agreed David. He breathed in deeply and then dived down and swam underwater in the vague direction of the willow tree. The water was murky and he couldn’t see very far, but the river was not particularly wide and he was confident that he wouldn’t veer too far off his course. Because the river was so much shallower than normal, he could actually see the bottom of it. He’d never been able to

do that before. He saw clumps of weed wrapped around some spiky looking rocks. Here and there he caught glimpses of rubbish that people had discarded – broken plates from a long forgotten picnic, several umbrellas, a single, lonely shoe, the inevitable supermarket trolley. And over there, not far from the willow tree, something that looked like a very old and curiously shaped bottle. How fascinating!

He surfaced, took a quick gulp of air and then dived down and grabbed hold of the bottle. Holding it tightly in one hand, he swam rather lopsidedly over to the willow tree where Nathan was waiting for him.

“What have you got there?” asked Nathan.

“It’s a bottle,” said David. “Or perhaps it’s a jar. Take a look.” He handed it to Nathan.

“What’s the difference between a bottle and a jar?” asked Nathan.

“Bottles have narrow tops,” said David, “and you store liquids in them. A narrow top makes it easier to pour the liquid out without spilling it. Jars have much wider tops and you put solid stuff in them, stuff that you can scoop out.”

“Can’t you keep liquid in a jar?” asked Nathan.

“Yes, you can,” said David, “but you might splash your shoes when you decant it. Wide tops don’t pour very well.”

“Where does a bottle end and a jar begin?” asked Nathan, intrigued.

David shrugged. “It changes, depending on how solid your liquid happens to be,” he said.

“That’s a dumb thing to say,” said Nathan.

“No it isn’t,” said David. “Today is so hot that pretty much anything that can melt will have turned into a liquid. Therefore today a lot of jars will be bottles because they are full of liquid. Tomorrow it might be really, really cold and so tomorrow many of today’s bottles will turn into jars because the stuff in them will have frozen solid.”

“Oh,” said Nathan, “I see. That makes sense.”

The bottle David had found was obviously very old. It lacked the elegant lines and rounded edges of more modern containers. It was probably a jar because it had a very wide top with a huge cork in it. At some time in its life the cork had been sealed in place with wax, but over the years the wax had cracked and broken away and now very little trace of it remained. The glass was translucent rather than transparent. It had a pale green tinge and while both David and Nathan could definitely see that there was something inside it, they couldn't make out any details.

"I wonder what that thing in there is," said Nathan. "Do you think it might be valuable?"

David gave Nathan a scornful look. "I doubt it," he said. "This bottle looks like a pickle jar to me, so it's probably got a one hundred year old pickled cucumber in it, or maybe an egg."

"Well, take the cork out and let's see what we've got," said Nathan.

"OK," said David. He wiggled the cork back and forth and eventually it popped out. He peered down into the jar. "Well, well," he said. "I think this is a bottle with a message in it. I can see something yellow that looks as if it might be a note."

"Well take it out and read it," said Nathan impatiently.

David reached into the jar and took the note out. It was folded in half so he unfolded it and read it. Then he showed it to Nathan. "Hmmm," he said. "I think someone might have been living in here."

The note said, *Gone for lunch. Back in an hour*

"That doesn't tell us anything," said Nathan. "Since we don't know when this person actually went to lunch, we have no idea at all when the hour will be up. So goodness only knows when he'll be back!"

The words on the note blurred and faded away. Other words floated into view. *I don't know when he'll be back*

either, said the note. He went for lunch ten years ago and I haven't seen him since.

"A lot of hours have gone by since then," said Nathan. "You must be quite worried about him."

I think he's having an affair with another bottle, said the note. A rather elegant one came floating by. It had a long, narrow and very sexy neck. It's body had curves in all the right places. Not chunky like this one is. As soon as he saw it, he went for lunch. I hope he's not been eating lunch all this time. If he has, he'll be far too fat to get back in here when he returns.

"If he returns at all," said David. "Who is he anyway?"

He's a genie, said the note. If he'd been here when you opened the bottle he would have tried to give you three wishes.

"What do you mean by tried?" asked Nathan.

He had a bit of a crisis about fifteen years ago, said the note. He kept all his wishes in the fridge but we had a power cut and they went bad. We had to throw them all away.

"Well that's no good to anyone," said David. "This really is a pretty useless bottle, isn't it?" He didn't wait for an answer, he just dropped the note back into the jar and tossed the jar into the river.

"Perhaps you should have put the cork back in before you did that," said Nathan.

"Why?" asked David.

Water started to flow into the jar. *Oh no!*, said the note. *The roof is leaking.* The jar filled up with water and sank down to the bottom of the river. The note wriggled frantically for a few seconds. Then it went limp and still. An errant current washed it out of the jar. The note rose to the surface and floated away downstream. It was completely blank. It said nothing at all.

"That's why," said Nathan.

The Show Must Go On

It was late in the afternoon on a hot spring day. David and Nathan were in the paddock trying to teach the cows to walk on a tightrope. The rope swayed gently some three feet above the paddock. Each end of it was firmly attached to a ramp. All the cows had to do was walk up a ramp, amble across the rope to the other side and then go down the other ramp back to the paddock. What could be simpler? But the cows seemed to be finding it very difficult and David was starting to have second thoughts about what he was trying to achieve.

At her umpteenth attempt, Daisy the Frisian cow fell off the tightrope when she was half way across. She landed on top of Buttercup the Hereford cow who had been watching Daisy's progress with interest. Annoyed, Buttercup gave a loud moo of disgust and butted Daisy in the ribs. Daisy hung her head in shame and looked embarrassed. She had failed again, just like she seemed to fail every time she tried to walk across the tightrope. "We've only got a week before the Agricultural Show," said David in despair. "If we can't get these cows trained up soon we may as well cancel our spot because we'll have nothing to display."

"I know," agreed Nathan. "What's so hard about walking in a straight line? That's all they've got to do. Just because the line is very narrow and three feet up in the air shouldn't really make any difference. But the stupid animals just won't do it. They keep wandering away to the left or the right and then they fall off. It's very frustrating."

"Peter Hargreaves is probably laughing his socks off at us," said David. "His sheep juggling will win best of show again. You mark my words."

“I’ve never seen his act,” said Nathan. “I’ve always been too involved in preparing for my own. How does he get sheep to juggle? That’s pretty impressive!”

“He doesn’t,” said David. “Sheep can’t juggle. They are far too dumb to do anything as clever as that. Peter just comes on stage with three sheep clutched in his hands. Then he bows to the audience and starts to juggle the sheep. The audience love it. The sheep make really funny bleating noises as he tosses them around. Sometimes he fails to catch one on its way down. The thump and squeal as the sheep hits the ground is absolutely hilarious. I’ll swear that sometimes he misses the catch deliberately just to give the audience a laugh!”

“I see,” said Nathan. “But he might have some serious competition this year. Someone in the pub told me that Nicola Green has been teaching her old dogs some new tricks. She’s putting a magic show together. She’s going to get the dogs to tear a duck in half. One dog takes the head, one dog takes the tail and then they both pull very hard.”

“That should be worth watching,” said David, brightening up a bit. “Since it’s a magic show, I presume she gets the dogs to put the duck back together again at the end?”

“The dogs haven’t quite got the hang of that bit yet,” said Nathan. “And as a result, the pond at the bottom of her garden is rather too full of fractional ducks at the moment.”

And that’s when the Martian spaceship swooped in silently and landed in the far corner of the paddock. David, Nathan and the cows watched it with open mouthed amazement.

It was coloured forty shades of green and it blended in easily with the grass that covered the paddock. If David and Nathan hadn’t actually seen it coming in to land they would never have even noticed that it was there, so perfect was its camouflage.

Presently a hatch opened in the side of the ship and a ramp slid out. Six blue Martian cows walked down the ramp

and started to crop the grass. They seemed to be perfectly at home despite their odd colouring.

A Martian cow herder followed the cows down the ramp. He seemed rather taken aback when he noticed David and Nathan staring at him. "Sorry," he said. "I didn't know there was anybody here otherwise I wouldn't have landed. I just dropped in to fill the cows up. Your grass is so much richer than ours so I thought I'd take advantage of it. What are you two doing out so late in the afternoon?"

David explained that they were trying to teach the cows to walk on a tightrope and the Martian laughed. "Are you having any success?" he asked.

"Not much," admitted David and the Martian cow herder laughed again.

"Let me show you how it's done," said the cow herder and he took his blue cows over to where the tightrope swayed between its two ramps. The cows followed him obediently in a nice straight line and in single file. David raised a hopeful eyebrow to Nathan. Already the Martian cows were doing more than he'd ever been able to persuade Daisy and Buttercup to do. The cow herder put the tip of a tentacle in his mouth and whistled. He gestured at the first ramp. The Martian cows ambled up the ramp and walked nonchalantly across the rope. When they reached the far end of the rope, they climbed down the other ramp and started to crop the grass again as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

David looked at Nathan and Nathan looked at David and they were both of one mind. All their problems were solved. They had found the perfect cow. "Hey mister," said David, "can we borrow your cows for the Agricultural Show next week?"

The Martian cow herder looked dubious. "I'm not sure about that," he said. "I've entered them in a line dancing competition back home."

"Line dancing?" asked Nathan.

“Martian Line Dancers for Jesus,” said the cow herder. “Surely you’ve heard of it. It’s very big among cow cockies.”

“No,” said David. “That’s a new one on me. But I presume it’s the line dancing discipline that makes your cows so good at walking the tightrope?”

“That’s right,” said the Martian. “Line dancing judges are very strict. I’ve been working really hard to bring this herd to the peak of perfection. ”

“We only need two cows,” said Nathan. “How about we swap Daisy and Buttercup for two of yours?”

“OK,” said the cow herder. “That might work. Frisians and Herefords are really exotic breeds on Mars. I’ll get a lot of brownie points in the competition when Daisy and Buttercup start dancing even if they turn out to be useless!”

“Which they probably will,” muttered David to himself. “They are useless at everything.”

The six blue Martian cows had eaten almost all the grass in the paddock and they were now just chewing the cud, their jaws working rhythmically from side to side. “I think they are full,” said the Martian. “It’s probably time to take them home.” Four of the blue cows ambled up the ramp into the spaceship. The cow herder whistled at Daisy and Buttercup and after a short hesitation they too walked into the spaceship. The ramp withdrew, the hatch closed and the spaceship flew off into the wild blue yonder. David and Nathan looked at the two blue cows and the two blue cows looked at David and Nathan.

“We’ve only got one problem to solve now,” said David.

“What’s that?” asked Nathan.

“The cows are blue,” said David. “People might get suspicious when they see blue cows walking across a tightrope. We might get accused of cheating.”

“There are some cans of white and black paint in the barn,” said Nathan. “We can easily turn the Martian cows into Frisians.”

Epilogue

Winnie the Pooh,
And Tigger too,
Went for a walk in the park.

Jack the Ripper was there,
He was hunting for bear
And he needed to kill before dark.

Jack the Ripper said, "Pooh,
I am coming for you!"
But Winnie the Pooh wasn't scared.

He faced up to Jack
And threatened him back.
"You're dead!" Jack the Ripper declared.

"Oh no," said the Pooh,
"That really won't do.
I won't play at your silly game.

You cannot kill me.
We're related, you see.
We've both got the same middle name!"