

40 YEARS - WRITE ON!

SLOUGH

writers

RUBY ANTHOLOGY

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THE STORY OF SLOUGH WRITERS GROUP.

Once upon a time, during the 1960s, Slough Council started an evening class devoted to Creative Writing. Initially it was popular but, as can happen with evening classes, the would-be writers gradually fell away. Week by week the numbers dropped until there were just four left – two men and two women – and the class was discontinued.

Rather than disappear into the ether these four decided to meet in each other's homes, once a week. This started in July 1967 and the Slough and District Writers' Group was formed.

To the best of my memory the four were Alan Taylor, Arthur Nicklin, Marjorie Shoebridge and Frances Crowne. Alan, who worked for ICI, had had one book on various types of paint written and was keen to get it published; Arthur was a journalist; Marjorie wrote short stories but hadn't then managed to sell any and Frances was just breaking into the lucrative Mills & Boon doctor/nurse romances.

By 1968 membership had increased to seven and they decided to advertise a short story competition in the Slough Evening News. Entries filled two large boxes and so many would-be writers wrote asking to join the Group that a room was booked in the old Slough Library for Monday evenings. A programme was drawn up for three terms of about 15 meetings each and the low annual subscription was geared to paying the library rent and any professional Speakers – editors, publishers, authors, journalists – we engaged.

Members were mostly keen but a few seemed to join simply to find somewhere to go on a Monday evening. One persisted in reading magazines, noisily turning the pages throughout each meeting – even when we had a Speaker. Another elderly woman picked furious arguments with whoever was sitting next to her and so upset the members that several said they would leave the Group unless the Committee terminated her membership. So spooky was that lady that our then secretary crept round to her house at midnight with the Committee's letter. At the next meeting everyone was nervous but she did not turn up – instead, half way through the evening a large mouse appeared on the long library table and, while stopping several times to stare at certain members, ran the whole length of the table before leaping onto a shelf and disappearing behind the books!

Over the first few years our membership fluctuated but there was always enough to pay the rent until the Robert Taylor library was built. With the old library closed we soon found the new rent was beyond us.

One member worked in Upton Hospital in Slough and managed to borrow a very small room there – for free! We expanded again and after several more moves we rented the Skittle Alley at the Greyhound Pub in Eton Wick where the Group flourishes and appears to be all set for at least the next forty years – in fact, you could say happily ever after!

Gillian Shephard – Life Vice President

TRY THE WAFFLES

by James Corrin

"Do you know who I am?"

It was one of those days. The man sitting next to me at the counter was watching intently as I finished my House Special. I reflected that I had broken the first rule of diners – my rule, I must add, that "Thou shalt not sit next to other people in case they turn out to be weirdos" – and here I was, about to pay for it with inane conversation. I waited a moment, hoping he might lose interest if I didn't answer, but then he asked me again, "Do you know who I am?"

I swallowed slowly, and carefully ventured that I did not.

"Damn it!" exclaimed the little man, and only many years of experience dealing with weirdos stopped me from jumping out of my chair. I suppressed interest as best I could, and thankfully the man turned away without seeking a response. "Why does no-one recognise me anymore?"

Maybe it was his lack of intent to discuss the subject further, or maybe it was my surprise that the House Special didn't, in fact, taste of beef as advertised, but I found myself suddenly off-guard, and lacking another response I asked him who he was.

"Why, I'm God, of course." I immediately regretted my actions, but before I could eject from conversation, he continued, "Haven't you seen the pictures?"

Brief images from the Children's Sunday School Bible flickered in my mind. They were, pretty unanimously, all of a tall old man with big hair and a beard you could lose kids in. The person sitting next to me was clean shaven, bald, and only in his late forties. A tattered brown suit rested on his short and round body.

I enquired politely whether, perhaps, he had changed his hairstyle since the pictures.

The man shook his round head and said, "Damn it" again. "You know, kiddo," he said, looking sidelong at me, "Never trust an artist. One minute they'll be offering to paint your portrait for fifty bucks, next they'll be making you look like a goat in a thunder cloud."

I nodded insincere agreement, all the while calculating how much money I would have to leave on the counter to make a quick getaway without under paying. However, my window of opportunity disappeared quickly.

"Time was, you said to people, 'Yo! I'm God!' and it meant something. Nowadays, those kids are as likely to pop a cap in your ass as anything else." He winced and rubbed his backside. "I mean, hey, I wasn't asking for the trembling and bowing before me, but it sure beats a slug from a 9mm, know what I mean?"

I professed a lack of personal experience and started hurriedly counting notes.

"And hey, kiddo, don't get me started on what the fire department do if you're caught with a burning bush these days."

I threw notes at the counter, waved to make sure the waitress had seen them, then stood up quickly, expressing sympathy to the man and making apologies for having to run out. And, because I felt it paid not to leave people on a bad note (godly or not), I wished him better luck the next day.

I left before he had a chance to reply.

A couple of days passed in which I religiously followed the second rule of diners, which is to say, never return to the scene of the weirdo soon enough that he might remember you. However, on the third day I was caught in rain and, lacking anywhere else to take cover, I headed into the diner again.

It was quiet thanks to the bad weather, so I seated myself at the far end of the counter (half the chance of a weirdo sitting next to you, or rule three as I call it) where I could drip on the formica surface in peace. It was only after ordering that I realised that the same bald guy sat at the opposite end of the bar, drinking coffee.

I ate quickly and without looking up for fear of accidental eye contact (rule four), mercifully distracted from my soggy salad that seemed to have been brought in from the rain at the same time I arrived. When I had eaten all that I could and the last remaining lettuce leaves floated forlornly at the bottom of the bowl, I threw some notes of approximately the right value at my coffee cup and made to leave.

It was then I caught sight of the bald man again, still staring into his coffee, and for reasons unknown (probably some failing inherited from my parents) thought I should enquire if he was alright. I figured I could always make a quick exit again, should the rain appear to be easing up.

I stood next to the man and said hello. He turned to me, looked me up and down, then after some thought said, "I guess it's raining again then." I nodded confirmation and he turned away, muttering, "Never could get those clouds under control for long."

I dripped quietly for a moment, unsure if it was technically tricky to control clouds and whether it was appropriate to reassure him of success

in the future. He slurped his coffee noisily as I stood there, and I noticed that he was the only customer who showed no signs of being rained on. I thought to mention it, but he carried on before I got the chance.

"Rain wasn't my idea, you know? It was all that Gabriel's doing. 'An easy way to get water around,' he said."

I gave the most sensible response I could, which was to say, nothing, and idly considered adding special subclauses for this type of conversation to the rules of diners. The man seemed unconcerned at my silence though, and just shrugged instead. The same tired brown suit and the same shirt as before flopped about his shoulders.

"Thunderbolts now – they're easy." He looked around conspiratorially then, and leaned in close to me. "You want to know what's really impressive though?"

I shook my head, fearing I was going to find out regardless, and wishing I hadn't started the whole thing. I considered feigning death to escape, but then thought the waitress might stop to count the money I left before I was taken away.

The man leaned in even closer and whispered, "You get a balloon, you blow it up nice and big, rub it on your jumper, then blow me! The damn thing sticks to the wall!"

I looked around subtly, hoping for an obvious escape route, but none presented themselves. Instead, the man nodded approvingly, apparently pleased that I considered this such a hush-hush matter as to check for eavesdroppers. "Damn right, kiddo! Now that's a miracle, straight up."

The distant drumming of rain slowed at this point, and I took the opportunity that divine intervention offered to make my excuses and leave. I thanked the man for the information and bolted towards the door amidst statements about a gap in the weather.

The man just called after me, so the whole diner could hear, "Sure thing, kiddo. And I'm working on the clouds."

I let a few more days pass, eating lunch at various places and honing the wording of rule five ("Run if someone claims to be God"), before a downpour forced me back into the same old diner again. I was prepared this time though, as I was taking a late lunch break and there was no risk of encountering the same people in the diner.

Or so I thought.

Even as the door shut behind me, the bald guy turned around on his stool, gave me a cheery wave and called, "Hey, kiddo, come and pull up a pew."

Resigned to my fate, I sat at the indicated seat and mumbled pre-emptive excuses about being busy and short on time. The man nodded

and smiled, saying, "Sure thing, kiddo. Me too. I'm on the next bus out of here." He gestured towards a holdall by his feet.

Surprised and slightly relieved, I almost forgot to order coffee, but instead offered my now-short-term companion another cup to be going on with. He declined it politely, then when the waitress left he leaned in closer and whispered, "Actually, I only come here for the company. The coffee sucks."

I gave a forced smile, but not wanting to jeopardise his leaving or my quiet lunch, said nothing. It was unnecessary anyway, it seemed.

"I tell you," said the man, "you never want to go down to that church on Sycamore Street. Oh sure, they say they want to listen, but you just try correcting them when they're quoting scripture. It sure doesn't go down well." I looked aghast as best I could, and the man nodded. "That's why I'm getting out of here."

My coffee arrived and I stirred it slowly, wondering if I could out-wait him, or whether I was better finishing it off quickly and writing the day off. Hope for the next day filled me, but I figured the waiting game wouldn't hurt for one day. I enquired politely where he was planning to go next.

"Oh, I don't know," he said, and again there was the suggestion of a shrug in the rise and fall of his suit jacket. "I was thinking somewhere nice and small, Pluto maybe. You know, somewhere easy to control and with none of those damn clouds!"

I said that sounded nice as the rainwater dripped from my coat into my coffee. The barely black liquid rippled almost imperceptibly, and I made a mental note not to order the coffee again.

The man pulled out a worn leather wallet and counted out coins onto the counter. "Yeah, Pluto sure is nice this time of year. And you know, a view of the stars that you just wouldn't believe. You ever really watched the stars, kiddo?" I evaded the question by suggesting that they were probably undervalued by most of the human race, a response which seemed to be well accepted. "Damn right. Me, I went up to Hollywood just last month, and you know they've got stars in the damn pavement? I mean, hello? Did I waste my time on the sky or what?"

A few of the other nearby clientele turned and gave us strange looks, and I suggested quietly that it was indeed a shame and didn't he have a bus to catch.

The man checked his watch and nodded. "Yeah. Oh, hey – I almost forgot! I've got something for you. You're so late I thought I was going to miss giving it to you." He rummaged in his bag as a sinking feeling started in my stomach and images of a variety of hard-to-dispose-of items

entered my head. Then, with a final call of, "Got it!" he yanked his hand out of the bag and dropped something on the counter next to me.

I realised, with a moment's consideration, that it was a small, yellow, uninflated balloon.

The man pointed at the balloon and gave me a conspiratorial wink. "There you go, kiddo. Your very own miracle."

I thanked him for the balloon as he stood up and made ready to go. "Nice meeting you. If you're ever passing by the pearly gates, drop in and tell 'em God sent ya. And hey, kiddo – try the waffles." And with that he patted me on the shoulder and walked across the diner to accost the waitress on the way out.

I paused from my coffee and looked at the balloon a moment, and then feeling slightly silly picked it up and blew into it. A small yellow sphere formed in my hands. I rubbed it on the driest part of my jumper and then waved it across the back of my hand, watching the hairs stand up as it passed. Sure, I knew about static electricity and electrons, but how did *they* all work anyway?

I turned in time to see the bald man wave goodbye to the waitress and then squeeze out the door with his brown suit flapping around his limbs. He stepped into the rain, amongst the soggy afternoon shoppers, and even as I let the air out of the balloon I thought I could see the falling droplets parting as he walked away.

PHOTO OF AN EDWARDIAN LADY CYCLIST

by Tony Matthews

She poses in the studio with her shiny Humber Roadster
Set against a drape with Roman columns and a tomb;
Blanched by the flash, she stands stiffly by her steed,
Like a bride at a wedding, with a cycle for a groom.

In her modest braided jacket and her ribboned straw hat,
No one could protest that she's improperly clothed:
No controversial breeches but a full-length skirt -
Lead-weighted hems ensure nothing is exposed.

She holds the bike beside her like a partner in a dance;
It wears an oilskin chaincase, fat pneumatic tyres,
Shapely leather saddle, skirt-protecting wires -
A genteel patent steed with all she could desire.

Small sepia woman, break out from your frame!
Thrilled by speed and motion, eyes all aflame,
Freewheel down the road to freedom,
A suffragette unchained!

FORTY YEARS ON, DO YOU REMEMBER 1967?

by Tony Rossiter

Remember 1967? The Beatles released *Sergeant Pepper*. *The Graduate* made stars of Dustin Hoffman and Anne Bancroft. Elvis married his childhood sweetheart, Priscilla. More importantly, perhaps, the war in Vietnam intensified and anti-war protests in the United States reached new heights. In South Africa a hitherto unknown doctor performed the world's first heart transplant. And Israel's Six Days' War changed the geography of the Middle East, with results that we can see today.

What do *you* remember about 1967? That's the question I put to some of my friends and fellow-scribblers. I drew up a list of events – a mix of politics, popular culture, sport and foreign affairs – and asked two simple questions: which of these made the strongest impression on you at the time; and which of them do you now consider most important? For both questions I allocated points out of ten. Adding up the points, I was able to compile a statistical analysis of the responses.

However, statistics rarely tell the whole story. As Disraeli put it, "There are lies, damned lies and statistics." To find out what people really felt – and what they feel now – about 1967, I needed to get beyond the statistics. I needed to tap into people's personal experiences and feelings. I decided to follow-up my questions with some one-to-one interviews.

I began with Tony Turner, a well-known local poet. He remembered 1967 as "a time of great optimism. Man had been put into space. Britain was no longer a major player in the world. Society had relaxed its mores and liberal values were in the ascendant. People were awash in a sea of uncertainty."

Donald Campbell's dramatic death, while attempting to break the world water speed record on Coniston Water, made a strong impression on Pauline Halford, because her father was an eye-witness. Sue Benwell remembered watching it on television: "The thing that struck me most was the fact that Donald Campbell had drawn an ace in a card game the night before, which he took to be a bad omen."

In 1967 Christine Williams was living in Singapore as a Royal Navy dependent. Escalation of the Vietnam War, she recalled, "affected our lives in a way impossible for those in the UK to imagine. Europeans and members of foreign armed services were fair game on the streets. Several demonstrations degenerated into riots and British servicemen were beaten, stabbed and kicked."

Julia Bolden was only nine in 1967, but she remembered Francis Chichester sailing around the world "because his name was Chichester and we used to have family holidays near Chichester in Sussex." Celtic's European Cup triumph (the first by a British team) was the event which made the strongest impression on Dave Sivers, a lifelong football fan. But for Catherine Jones it was the outbreak of foot and mouth disease, because she "lived in an area that had it and we could smell the carcasses burning."

These quotes probably tell us rather more about 1967 than the statistics, but let's look at the statistics anyway. These put Dr Christiaan Barnard into first place. The world's first heart transplant operation is the event which both made the strongest impression on people at the time and which they now consider most important. Second is the Vietnam War, which scored very highly both for the impression it made at the time (second place) and its perceived importance now (third place).

After that, the responses to my two questions diverge quite markedly. The Beatles' *Sergeant Pepper* album, Francis Chichester's circumnavigation of the world and Donald Campbell's death all made strong impressions on people at the time. Forty years on, these have been supplanted by Israel's Six Days' War, the legalisation of abortion and de Gaulle's "non" to Britain's European Community aspirations.

But don't take any of this too seriously. I questioned just a couple of dozen people, and interviewed only a handful of these.

Nevertheless, it was a compelling exercise. I'll let Alison Beck have the last word. "You don't always realise at the time how long a shadow some world events will cast," she said. "Trivia about personalities really isn't very important."

ICE BABE

by Sally East

Jim Miller stood at the bar of the *Palais Royale* and lit a cigarette. He inhaled deeply and exhaled a ring of smoke, watching it float upwards until it disappeared.

"Watch it, you stupid old man."

He'd burnt a hole in a woman's dress – a speck of flesh showed through the red spandex.

"Sorry, love. Can I buy you a drink?"

"Yeah, vodka and tonic."

"*Garcon*, one vodka and tonic, one tequila sunrise."

The barman placed the glasses on a damp bar towel.

"Eight fifty," he said.

"Bloody robbery," said Jim.

He turned to speak to the woman in red but she and the vodka and tonic had disappeared into the darkness of the nightclub.

"Bloody robbery," he repeated.

"Tell that to the boss, Rex King," the barman said.

"Yeah, I'll do that."

"Here's your chance. Good luck."

At that moment the gyrating multicoloured mass on the dance floor parted. A group of muscular men in suits and scantily clad girls followed a tall, black man to the bar.

"Champoo for the chicks," he announced.

"Be right with you Rex," the barman said.

Tiny beads of sweat sparkled on his dark skin but he looked cool, dressed in a beige linen suit, the jacket unbuttoned to reveal a smooth ebony chest. The gold chain around his throat was worth more than anything Jim owned, including his Ford Capri with vinyl roof.

Jim glanced down. His purple nylon shirt had a button missing and was open almost to the waistband of his white flared trousers. A few grey, wiry hairs sprouted from his pale skin.

Rex King's gold bangles jangled as he raised the magnum of champagne. The cork popped from the neck, spraying Jim with foam.

"Watch it you flashy git," he said, brushing down his shirt.

Immediately four strong arms lifted Jim off his feet and Rex's minders frogmarched him to the exit, placing him on the ground without spilling a

drop of his cocktail. As soon as he was free of their grip Jim threw the colourful drink to the back of his throat and hurled the glass across the foyer. It sliced right through the top of an ice sculpture and the Statue of Liberty's torch crashed into the base of the display, shattering into thousands of pieces. Tiny diamond-like ice crystals scattered across the marble floor.

"You'll pay for that," the doorman said.

Jim was locked in a small, dark room until four in the morning when the music stopped and the clubbers flowed into the lamp lit streets. A key turned in the lock and the door opened. Jim blinked as light flooded the room. Rex King filled the doorway.

"You ruined my Statue of Liberty," he said.

"I can get you a better one. How about the Eiffel Tower?"

"By tomorrow night?"

"Yes. My daughter makes them. I'll bring her over in the morning."

"If you don't you'll be tinned dog food by nightfall."

Jim was released and left the club feeling pleased with himself.

"You've found me a job?"

"Yes, in a nightclub. I'll take you there now."

Jim sat in his Capri and turned the key in the ignition. His daughter, Monet, sat beside him. She was dressed in typical student attire – jeans, t-shirt, pumps.

Arriving at *Palais Royale* they were met by Rex King's secretary.

"Please come with me," she said to Monet. To Jim she said, "You wait here."

Monet was ushered into Rex King's office.

"I want the Eiffel Tower to be twice the size of the Statue of Liberty," King said.

"Are you on drugs or something?" Monet asked.

"My new ice sculpture," King replied. "Your father said that you can make it for me."

"Ice sculpture? I could make a snowman, if we had any snow."

"If you haven't made the Eiffel Tower by seven tonight your father will be on his way to the Meaty Treaty Dog Food Company. Next time you see him he'll be canned."

Monet had no choice. She was locked into a room containing a large cube of ice and a variety of tools. She picked up a chisel and started chipping away at the ice. It was hopeless. She'd no idea how to make an ice sculpture, never mind one that looked like the Eiffel Tower. She started to cry.

Suddenly the door flew open. A scrawny little man with a hunched back appeared before Monet brandishing a mop and bucket.

"Wha's the matter?" he asked.

"I've got about nine hours to make this block of ice into the Eiffel Tower," she replied.

"Easy," he said, grabbing a hacksaw.

After a few hours the little janitor put the finishing touches to a perfect replica of the Eiffel Tower.

"What are you going to give me then?" he asked.

She unfastened her gold necklace and pressed it into his hand.

"It belonged to my granny," she said. "It's the most valuable thing I've got."

Rex King was thrilled. It was the most exquisite ice sculpture he'd ever seen.

"Can you let my dad go now?" Monet asked.

"Hmmm," King said. "That does really depend on whether you can make the Acropolis."

"What?"

"Come back tomorrow morning if you want your dad to remain whole."

Monet kept her word and arrived at *Palais Royale* early the following morning. She was presented with an even larger cube of ice.

"The Acropolis by seven o'clock," King said closing the door behind him.

In no time the skinny, little janitor appeared.

"Need some help?"

"The Acropolis."

"Piece of piss."

Monet watched, fascinated, as he sawed and chiselled, chipping away at the frozen lump. Before long a glistening model of the Acropolis stood before them.

"What've you got for me?" the janitor enquired.

"My mum's diamond ring."

Monet dropped the ring into his palm.

"Groovy, man," said King, thrilled once again.

The Eiffel Tower ice sculpture was the talk of the city. This new one was even more stunning. If only King could find a way of keeping Monet at the club he'd soon be making a fortune.

"I need to talk to you," he said to Monet.

"Yes?"

"Not here. Come with me."

He led Monet through doors at the far end of his office into his private apartment. Dozens of candles cast a warm glow over the plump, brown leather couch covered with leopard print throws. The floor was littered with sheepskin rugs and silk cushions. King took Monet by the hand and led her to the couch.

"C'mon child," he said, drawing her to him.

Mesmerised by his dazzling smile, his diamond set eye teeth glinting in the candlelight, Monet allowed herself to be pulled on to his supine body. His pectoral muscles were taut and she felt his firm member against her thigh.

"Be my queen, babe."

"What about my dad?"

"I don't fancy your dad: he's a bit old for me. And I prefer my dates to have mammoth breasts, not hairy chests."

"Is he out of danger?"

"Right at this moment he is sitting by his pool, surrounded by nubile young chicks."

"Pool? We haven't got a pool."

"You have now, babe. It's only an inflatable one but he thinks he's the dog's bollocks."

"Well, I'm relieved he's not the dog's dinner."

Monet melted into King's warm dark chocolate arms. He pushed his hot, wet tongue between her lips. Her weak body and will gave in to his seductive forcefulness. Afterwards they lay side by side, basking in post-orgasmic pleasure.

"Taj Mahal," King said.

"Mmmm," sighed Monet, rolling on to her side and stroking King's soft skin with her fingertips. "What did you say?"

"Make the Taj Mahal for me. I'll give you the earth."

"Okay," said Monet, confident that the funny little janitor would help her out again.

And he did. No sooner had she picked up a hacksaw than the little man appeared.

"What is it this time?"

"The Taj Mahal."

"I'll need something a bit special to make that."

"You can have anything you want; a Merc., cash, anything."

She was sure that King would give her whatever she asked for now that she was his girl. So the janitor worked on the block of ice until a sparkling frozen Indian palace stood before their eyes.

"What do you want?" Monet asked the janitor.

"You. Or to be more precise I want to have sex with you. I want you to have my baby."

Monet laughed, nervously.

"What do you really want?"

"I want you to have my kid. I have a bit of a problem down there at the moment but it's nothing a little op. won't sort out. I'll get in touch when the wound has healed."

Monet was certain that King would be able to deal with this scrawny little bloke so she agreed.

Indeed she did feel like a queen, living the high life as King's girl.

A few months later, as she lay on the beach at St Tropez she heard a familiar voice.

"I've come to claim my reward."

There before her stood the skinny little janitor in a pair of red Speedo trunks.

"Rex will kill me if I have sex with you. I'll do anything except that."

"I'll give you one chance to guess my name but if you're wrong I'll let you have this," he said, whipping down his trunks to reveal an erect, but very deformed, penis.

"I'm not having that thing inside me. It'll tear me to pieces. Look at it. All those lumps and bumps and that... that crumpled foreskin."

The janitor screamed and stamped his feet.

"No one's ever guessed my name before," he shrieked.

UNKNOWN POET

by Gillian Shephard

I was always a poet.

Through skipping years sounds sang in rhythms,
rhyme jingles plucked my sun-spun hair
like fairies tuning violettes.
Alas, I could not write! I could not catch the songs
To trap them with my crayons.

School days and day dreams.
Homework done and errands run,
time to play and waste away.
Poetry's for school - and swots -
and my locked heart.

College! English Lang. and Lit. -
Analyse and parody. Exercise in prosody.
Memorising. Discipline.
Final year - debating - dating!
Poems overflowed my soul - fieldfare free -
adrift on kiss-sweet lips - half thought,
A quarter said. The rest? Not now. Another time. .

Fool's gold? The marriage a cheap ploy.
The wedding ring the only, tarnished, gold
and I the trusting fool. A toy
to toss aside as youth replaced the old.
No poem could expunge that bitterness,
No platitudes assuage such raw distress.

And now? Alone with memories
Frustration shatters all serenity.
My heart resists the analgesic years
Though joys are rare, still overflow the tears;
I'm wearyful, and too depressed today -
Tomorrow I will write a poem.

SWEET PEAS

by Tony Matthews

There's a spider on the flowers beside my hospital bed. I call him Mort. He's one of those spiders that look like a large full stop cradled in the middle of eight long legs. I noticed him some time ago when he was weaving a web between two of the lilies (lilies, I ask you! My grandson brought them, and I didn't have the heart to tell him that lilies are not the done thing). Mort thinks I can't see him, but I know where he hides. Sometimes he sidles out to the centre of the web and gives it a good shake. He caught a fly in it the other day and I watched him spin a cocoon round his prey until it was bound up tightly by tiny threads. Then he went back to the middle, and I think he was watching me and waiting.

Apart from Mort I haven't had much else to distract me during the weeks I've been here. There's a day room up the corridor where there's a TV, but it was too far for me to go in my condition – even with the help of my faithful Zimmer frame, Fritz. (I call it Fritz because I imagine it was invented by a German called Fritz Zimmer, and I like giving things names). I didn't want to read books or papers because I found it hard to turn the pages and my eyes got tired. When I wasn't snoozing I just wanted to lie in bed or sit in the chair beside it and watch life – and death – go on around me.

There are eight of us in Mortimore ward, which, like all the wards in this hospital, is named after a local village. The nurses call us the morties. Pearl, in the bed next to me, thinks that's because the next stop for a lot of the old women in this ward is the mortuary. In the time I've been here four of us morties have died. Some of the others look as though they won't be long joining them. I'm probably, at 89, the oldest in the ward. That's why Mort has had his beady little eye on me.

My neighbour, Pearl, is black, born in Trinidad. She's always cheerful even though she's just had a heart bypass operation. I was a bit stand offish at first when she was put next to me. But you can't shut yourself off from someone who's always chuckling and smiling, can you? She's the first black person I've ever got to know, and she came and held my hand when I was in a bad way. Pearl laughed when I told her about my spider, Mort. She said that in Trinidad they tell children stories about a spider with magical powers called Anancy who gets up to all sorts of tricks with humans.

There's quite a lot of what the powers-that-be call bedblocking going on in this ward. Some of the occupants no longer need medical attention.

It's just that they have nowhere to go from here – except to eternity. They can't go home because there's no one to look after them. And they can't go into a home because there are no places on offer. So they've now become a political problem, stopping the government from cutting the waiting lists. Anyway, I reckon this hospital has taken out a privatised contract with the Grim Reaper to achieve a quota of deaths. If you're an elderly bedblocker and your ailments don't get you, then hospital infections will. And did you read about that case of the killer nurse who liked to free up beds by drugging their ancient occupants to death? Since then I've been sizing up all the nurses to see who looks like a serial killer. There's one nurse who, every time she attends me, sends Mort into a feverish bout of bungee jumping on the end of one of his threads. Perhaps she's the one.

Apart from death, the other way of unblocking beds is, of course, to shunt elderly folk like me into a nursing home. Speaking for myself, I wouldn't be seen dead in one of those places. A few years ago I had a friend who went into one, and the smell of pee put me off so much the only way I could go and see her was if I'd dosed my handkerchief with lavender water. There's one old dear a few beds down from mine who keeps on crying and screaming that she doesn't want to go in a home. I thought to myself I thought – that's right, love, you're a bit of a pain, but you tell 'em.

In the past few weeks I nearly died, twice. The first time was back in my little bungalow when I had a funny turn in the bathroom in the middle of the night and collapsed on the floor. Trust me not to be wearing my lifeline button at the time. If it hadn't been for the towel rail being warm, I would have died of cold. As I lay in a heap on the floor, I noticed a spider on the skirting board just a few inches away from my nose. It was my first meeting with Mort. Of course, I couldn't get up, so I just had to lay there watching the spider watching me until my regular carer Sally came in the morning. And then she couldn't get in as the door was locked. I tried to call out that the key was in the shed, but she couldn't hear. She realised something was wrong, so she fetched an ambulance and they broke in to rescue me and take me to hospital. I'd been on the floor for six hours.

Then I nearly died here in hospital. Soon after I'd been admitted I got a chest infection, which felt like a dagger in my lungs. I lost my appetite, couldn't eat anything – not even my usual bar of Cadbury's. So they had to put me on a drip and gave me another huge purple bruise on my arm where the needle went in. I bruise like an over-ripe pear these days. Not quite what the poet meant when she wrote "When I am old I will wear purple". On top of that I was badly constipated, and this was the thing

that worried me most. My bowels had simply stopped working. And there was Mort again, nestling in my bedside flowers, watching me become weaker, thinner, deathlier. I just wanted to sleep. Even when I had visitors I kept drifting off.

All I wanted was to unblock my bed here, unblock my bowels and go back home to my bungalow. My two sons and my daughter knew that, and, bless them, they weren't going to push me into a home. Funny, by the way, isn't it, that the word home can have such different meanings. Home for me means being in my own armchair in front of my own telly with my cat on my lap and the patio door open so I can smell the roses outside. The only help I want is a carer to get me up in the morning and one to put me to bed. I wanted to die in my own home, too, just like my mother did.

One night during my bad spell I had a dream about Mort. I was caught up in his web and he came out and said to me in a whispery spider voice: "Old woman, what have you got to look forward to at your age? Surely you've done it all. Won't you just be an even heavier burden to your children? You're bound to have another fall at home, aren't you? And then you'll be back in hospital again. And there's all those drugs and the pain and the sleepless nights and the worrying. Come on. Give up struggling. It's time to go. You know it."

That night I think I must have almost slipped away. But just when I was about to say yes to Mort I woke up and smelt a whiff of something sweet. Sweet peas. The smell was coming from a bunch that Pearl had beside her bed. And I remembered why that smell is special for me. Back in the early Thirties I had a boyfriend who took me for a ride on the back of his motorbike. He was showing off a bit, and we had an accident on a country lane. He wasn't seriously hurt, but I was badly injured and had to go to hospital. Next day he brought me a bunch of sweet peas to say sorry. They revived me then just as their scent revived me this time round.

"So," I said to Mort, "Sorry, I must refuse your invitation. If the Queen Mother can live to be 100, so can I. I'm not going to let you bind me up in your death cocoon just yet. Anyway," I said, "I do have something to look forward to. See that card hanging up over my bed? It's an invitation to my youngest grand-daughter's wedding next month in Paris. I'm going to be there if it's the last thing I do'. Matter of fact, I thought, I don't care if it is. Passing on in Paris would be a nice way to go.

After the sweet pea revival my chest got better and my bowels, like Mafeking, were relieved. I can't tell you what a blessing that was. So it was now up to me to get back to life. I asked my son to bring me a mirror. I looked like I was wearing my death mask, with a nightmare topping of lifeless white hair.

I got to work. In spite of the hospital's protests that they had their own hairdressing service, I sent for my own hairdresser, Maureen, to come and do my hair, and she gave me my favourite shampoo and set with a blow dry. You should have seen the faces of the other women in the ward. One of them asked Maureen if she would do her hair too.

I began to look and feel like a person again. I went for a walk – well it was more of a shuffle – down the ward with Fritz and Julie the physio, and Pearl cheered me on and clapped her hands. I got my appetite back and sent out a call for visitors to bring me nice things to eat. "You've got some colour in your cheeks, Mum. Have you been drinking?" said my son. Cheeky monkey. He said he liked my hairdo, but it reminded him of Mrs Thatcher.

Cheerio, then, Mort. You won't catch me in your web. Not just yet. I'm going home today. See you in Paris, perhaps.

A SEA OF WORDS

by Ursula van Noort

Waking at dawn, ideas came in like a crashing wave.
A torrent of magic words tumbling out onto the paper.
Impatient to capture that moment, however brief;
Gathering speed, urging my pen to move faster.

Now, fully awake, the writing frenzy did not cease.
It was inspiring, intoxicating, undiminishing, powerful.
Then, blurring images appeared falling into each other.
Gradually floating and ebbing away with the tide.

THE SNOW WHITE KITTEN

by Rosemary Conry

When Mammy said the kittens had to go, it was all done very quickly and never mentioned again. One day they were all there, five little furry creatures of mixed markings, creeping all over each other in a cardboard carton under the stairs. The next morning they had disappeared, all but the white one, which was my favourite.

It was Mrs Bower next door who had to be thanked for saving its life. She said the poor little mother ought to be left with one of the litter, at least for a few weeks. 'You can always find a good home for it later,' she said, and Mammy reluctantly agreed.

After losing most of her babies, Snookums looked all skinny and desperate for a while and Mammy said I was not to keep handling the kitten, until it had its eyes open, or Snookums might abandon it and it would die. I tried to do as I was told but the temptation was great and whenever I got the chance, when Mammy slipped up to Miss Mac's shop to get her cigarettes, or stood chatting to Mrs Bower over the garden wall, I would lift the little scrap onto the hall runner and putting my face down beside it, watch its feeble confusion guiding it this way and that, to keep it from straying off the edge of the rug onto the linoleum.

The day I saw its beautiful blue eyes for the first time, I sneaked it out of the house under my jumper and took it around to show Miss Mac. Miss Mac took me into the dark, old fashioned room behind the shop, to pay a visit to blind Aunt Bertha. I was nervous of the sightless old woman, as I put the kitten carefully into her cupped hands and told her all the news I could think of.

'Daddy says all cats should be called Snookums. That's a cat's name. He wanted me to call this one Snookums the second but I said that was silly. I call her snowball because she is pure, pure white! Snookums is not a very good mother, you know – she goes out every night and leaves Snowball on her own. Daddy says Snookums is the Belle of the Ball!'

'Ah, the voice,' said Aunt Bertha. 'Hasn't she the beautiful speaking voice, Molly?' Her white-ish eyes moved from side to side as she lightly fingered my face.

'She is so vy-vacious! said Miss Mac, giving me a poke of conversation lozenges.

At the sound of a bell she ushered me back into the shop and her face lit up at the sight of a fine big commercial traveller, who stood there smiling, with his pencil poised over his order book.

'Is he your boyfriend?' I asked, seeing her so pleased.

Miss Mac nearly choked herself with laughing and ran out to the back again, spluttering that she could hear Aunt Bertha calling. She soon returned with a large cup of tea for the caller and a businesslike look on her face.

While they discussed what was needed, I put the kitten on the counter, where it worried a stray sweet with its tiny paw and picked its way around tall jars of barley sugar and peggy's leg. Then it upset the cup of milky tea all over a tin of Scots Clan toffees, on display with the lid taken off.

That was the first and only time Miss Mac was ever annoyed with me. 'It would have to be the dearest sweets in the shop,' she tut-tutted as she mopped up the mess. 'Seven pence a quarter!'

Full of misery, I picked up the kitten and ran out of the shop, thinking that I would never be able to go in there again. I would have to run past on the other side of the road, or go right around the block and not pass the shop at all, in case Miss Mac should rap on the window, calling me over so she could give out to me all over again.

A tinker girl stood at the top of my avenue. She was not too clean and had holes in her cardigan.

'Have ye any ole clothes?' she asked in a soft, sad voice.

Afraid to say no, I said I wasn't sure but would ask my mother and let her know later.

'Gimme a few coppers an' I'll say a prayer for you,' said the girl.

'I haven't any money.'

'Would ye gimme that cat then?' She stroked Snowball's head with a grimy finger. 'I'd love that little cat!'

I backed away from her, clutching the kitten so tightly that it squeaked and dug its claws into my neck.

'I'll have to ask,' I said, starting to run.

'Which is your house?' she called after me.

'Down there!' I waved my hand vaguely.

'I'll be back for the cat at twelve o'clock tomorra', when the Angelus bell is ringin.'"

I was so frightened I ran past my own gate and hid behind Mrs Bower's garden wall, in the hope that she would never find me.

I did not tell Mammy about the terrible thing that had happened in Miss Mac's, nor did I mention the tinker. I had enough misery to bear without getting a telling off at home. I was afraid too, that Mammy might think it quite a good idea to give the kitten away, for it was plain to see that she was not very fond of it. So I nursed my fear in silence and said a prayer of thanksgiving the next day, when the Angelus bell had finished ringing and there was no sign of a tinker on the avenue for the rest of the day.

Snowball grew more beautiful and playful by the day and her name suited her to perfection, for her coat was as pure as the snow that piles up in a sheltered place where no one walks. But she would keep doing her business on the hall rug and Mammy rubbed her nose in the mess to punish her. I pleaded with her not to be so cruel but she said that was the right way to train a cat.

Not long afterwards, Snowball went missing and I thought it best to tell Mammy that she had probably been stolen by the tinkers.

'You'll find that's the answer,' she said, 'but it's all for the best. The kitten was dirty but the tinkers won't mind that. Snowball will have a lovely time in the country. That's the right place for cats,'

After I had stopped crying and at Mammy's bidding, cheered up and found other things to do, I only hoped that the tinkers would be kind to Snowball and not make fur gloves out of her, as my brother said they would and I began to feel happy again when Mammy took me by the hand to make it up with Miss Mac. I said I was very sorry about the toffees and Miss Mac said I was not to give it another thought as no great harm had been done. The sweets were well wrapped and she had managed to save most of them. She said she was sad to hear I had lost my kitten and gave me a big bag of dolly mixture.

On the next early closing day, Miss Mac took me up to town on the tram. She was wearing her musquash fur coat and had a lot of rouge on her cheeks. We saw a musical film, starring Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers.

FIRST FROST

by Tony Matthews

Sun sent warm rays through October days,
Grass was still growing as though it was Spring;
But now in the night sky Orion stands guard
As gardens endure the iced air's deep sting.

Frost thrusts cold fingers where flowers still linger,
Stiffens the soil and benumbs the late bud,
Shrivels green shoots and bites off the petals,
And turns the wall creeper the colour of blood.

The garden by dawn is a morgue where the frost
Shrouds little corpses of late blooms and fruits;
Hoar-covered beech trees, like surpliced high priests,
Mourn the dead flowers that lie round their roots.

Then, sudden as sunshine, a mistle thrush sings,
Thawing the air with his sonnet to Spring.

WHAT IS ENTROPY?

by Roy Cecil

Thirty seven ...

He is not aware of the change.

In the opening seconds there is a stillness, a nothingness, a blank page. But as the seconds accumulate and coagulate into minutes the first questions form. They are cautious, closed questions to which he already has answers.

Are two plus two equal to four?

Is a poppy red in colour?

Are tigers fierce striped mammals belonging to the cat family?

Warm-up questions, testing the system. He gains nothing new from the answers save for the belief that he is on the right track, that the basic system is functioning.

..thirty six ...

As the minutes become hours the questions become bolder – though still closed.

What are nine times seven?

How high is Everest – to the nearest one thousand feet?

In which year was John F Kennedy shot?

How many symphonies did Mozart write?

These questions likewise do not draw deeply from his vast cerebral reserves. Nor does he yet gain any satisfaction from knowing the right answers – and indeed the Everest question momentarily disrupts the process flow. Perhaps because of that barely perceptible hiatus he accepts that the warm up session is entirely necessary and justified. He knows intuitively that this is a once in a lifetime opportunity.

..thirty one ...

Hour after hour, day after day he probes more deeply. He exposes the process to open and hypothetical questions which test his ability to negotiate less precise, more equivocal answers. Personal and intimate questions mingle freely with those testing his schooling, his knowledge and intellect. He continues to hold himself safely within the bounds of his own knowledge and experience.

How did I feel when my son died?

Why do major and minor keys sound different?

What are strange attractors?

When did I stop loving my wife?

To each he gives a frank reply. He surprises himself with his candour and more than once feels the warm flow of blood to his cheeks or hot tears tingling, blurring his vision.

He offers a plausible explanation for the migration of birds, meticulously delineates the principal causes of the decline and fall of the Roman Empire and skilfully debates the issue of whether criminal behaviour results from genetic or environmental factors. The merest softening of the hard lines around his mouth hints at his growing confidence.

..nineteen ...

The day at last arrives when he is satisfied that the system and all its complex and intricate processes are well nigh tuned to perfection. A single hurdle remains before he can attend the supreme finale.

He forces himself to relax as the question forms and a wry smile flickers across his lips as realisation dawns.

What is entropy?

Many decades have passed since he last gave thought to the esoteric concepts of Thermodynamics. He can recall how painstakingly he memorised the laws and how even when fresh in his mind he never fully grasped their application or significance. It had been his wont whenever he lacked comprehension to skirt around such subjects or at least to leave them till last and settle for lower marks.

In contrast this day he is undaunted and self-assured as never before. Where once he shied away he now greets this challenge with enthusiasm and competence. Where once he stumbled over labyrinthine equations today his performance is flawless.

With unprecedented clarity he can make out structures within the disorder, he senses their rhythms, hears the purest music – and with that association in mind he consummates his finest response. He employs a long *andante* first movement to present the themes of work and heat, with an undercurrent of adiabatic change. Warming to the task he moves without a break into the complex middle movement and with a flourish introduces the third state variable – entropy – eventually returning to the themes of the earlier movement at the close. With amazing bravado he

chooses to make the third and final movement *allegro vivace*, a mood which practically mocks the unattainability of absolute zero. Laughing aloud and with tears of delight streaming down his face he rounds off with a coda ...

..ENTROPY IS CHAOS

He knows now that the goal is in sight. That the long and careful preparation has been worthwhile. That the rewards for which he has striven will be his.

..six ...

A further reconfiguring of the system takes place. So subtle is it that he is barely conscious of the change and he senses rather than sees a tiny spark. A spark so delicate that he dare not breathe for fear of extinguishing it.

He need have no fear. Fuelled by knowledge, by experience, by love, by honesty, by peace the spark waxes and glows. And the glow flickers and grows into a flame and the flame multiplies and a great fire crackles and roars into an inferno of insatiable curiosity. A huge torrent of ancient enigmas, medieval riddles, private problems, unsolved mysteries and cosmic conundrums pours forth.

Is man alone?

DOES GOD EXIST?

What was before the beginning?

WHY DID MY SON HAVE TO DIE SO YOUNG?

Is there life after death?

SHALL I EVER KNOW PEACE?

The questioning is now beyond his control and he is powerless to influence the exchanges. Yet he is content to assume the role of observer. He has prepared well. He will not be disappointed. His psyche gains the strength to receive supreme and universal wisdom. No longer shackled by the conventions of four dimensions he ascends higher and higher levels marvelling at what he learns.

Answer upon answer comes surging in. His brain throbs and swells and reverberates with the huge flow of information. His heart pounds, his spirit soars and he feels the radiance of pure understanding fill his body. A broad smile splits his face and a triumphant roar of laughter issues from his open mouth. The sounds in his head become deafening. He raises his hands to his temples ...

..one ...

... and falls.

..zero.

The first on the scene including the driver are stunned by what they see. Few can bear to look too closely at the mangled body, in particular at the face and head which had borne most of the impact. Those who did, though, remarked that his crushed visage appeared almost to carry a smile, to be laughing even.

Some, recognising that his death would have been almost immediate, give voice to old adages

“He wouldn’t have felt a thing,” and

“They say when you die your whole life flashes before you.”

Few of them would ever know the true cause of his death. Post-mortem reveals the ruptured blood vessel in his brain which, in the minutes before the incident, developed into a massive and fatal cerebral haemorrhage.

He was dead an instant before the lorry hit him.

THE INSOMNIACS

by Gillian Shepherd

We sleep an hour - then wake. It's plain
the edge has gone from tiredness.
We burn the night with busy brain
until it's time to rise and dress . .
.. and then we fall asleep again!

GERARD

by Sophia Holder

Gerard swaggered home at midday. The sun was shining, the birds were singing, the air was fresh, and he'd just got laid. Life couldn't be better. He swung his arms and whistled as he strolled through the suburban estate.

Gerard loved women. All women. Tall women and short women. Fat women and thin women. Merry women and depressed women. It made no odds to Gerard.

The stench of sizzling sausages hit him when he got home. He found his effervescent housemates, Barry and Jack, tucking into their breakfast.

"Someone got laid," they said when they saw Gerard's grin.

Gerard had just settled down to "Football Focus" when the phone rang.

"That's probably Kate," said Barry as baked beans spilled from his lips. "She's been calling all morning."

Gerard stumbled over piles of dirty dishes, dirty clothes and dirty magazines to reach the phone. Talking to his girlfriend made him realise just how hung over he was.

"I'm sorry baby. I was working late again last night. I know, I'm crap. I'll make it up to you. Tonight – I'll take you to some place nice."

Gerard sat back down to the game.

"Miss Reading's out tonight," commented Barry. "And all her mates."

"You could've told me that before I made plans with Kate."

"How could you forget Miss Reading?"

"I'll put Kate off for another time. Yes! What a goal."

After "Football Focus", Gerard stretched out on the sofa for a nap. He had no worries, and no problems. He always fell quickly into deep uninterrupted sleep, and now was no exception.

He awoke after only an hour with twinges in his stomach.

"You look rough, man," commented Barry.

"I feel like shit. I'm going to casualty."

"Come out for a game of footy you'll be all right."

"Nah, I'm going to casualty."

"You visit casualty more often than you visit your girlfriend."

"You leave Kate out of this."

As Gerard drove towards the hospital, the pain became stronger. By the time he arrived, he was almost crippled.

He staggered to reception.

"Gerard – what a pleasant surprise..." said Mandy. "He's always in here," Mandy murmured to the girl she was training. "Him and his mates. After a night out. Waiting time's about five hours, Gerard, sure it's serious enough?"

"Yes. Yes, it definitely is. I'm in a lot of pain."

To Gerard's surprise, the pains subsided. "I'm alright now," he said with a smile. "Must be your pretty face that done it, Mandy."

Mandy rolled her eyes.

Then Gerard collapsed to the ground, gripping to whatever he could. Mandy pressed the emergency button and knelt down beside him. He grabbed for her hand and crushed it in his. "Don't leave me, Mandy."

The nurses lifted him onto a trolley and wheeled him into the examining room. He lay curled in a ball, clutching his stomach, his head lolling back, and roaring obscenities. When the doctor came to his side, he suddenly felt no pain at all.

"Doctor, I keep having these really intense pains."

"Out drinking again last night, Gerard?"

"What d'you expect, Doctor, it was a Friday night."

Doctor Yarwood found nothing charming in Gerard's chattiness.

"Don't you think you're old enough to take responsibility for your health? Don't you think I'm sick of seeing you and your friends in here? Don't you think I'm sick of seeing the tax-payers' money and my expertise going to waste on an over-grown boy too fond of his drink?"

"Steady on, Doctor"

"How old are you now, Gerard? Twenty-five, twenty-six?"

"Twenny-seven."

"Twenty-seven? At twenty-seven, I was studying for my surgery exams. At twenty-seven, I was married with my first child." Doctor Yarwood raised his voice, "At twenty-seven, you should not be pestering me with your binge drinking."

Gerard doubled up again.

The doctor, whilst irritated, believed Gerard to be in genuine pain. "I'll get the nurse to run tests."

"Don't leave me, Doctor, please don't leave me."

"Surprising though it may seem, people other than yourself do visit casualty. Usually for a more just cause."

"But Doctor,"

The pains became more intense and more frequent. It was at least two hours before the nurses had finished their tests.

Doctor Yarwood returned once the tests were through, "Absolutely nothing wrong with you."

"Why am I in so much pain then?" asked Gerard, too exhausted even to flirt with the nurses.

"Compassion pain. It'll be gone in a couple of hours."

"What the hell's that?"

"Been sleeping around have you Gerard?"

"Well, yeah, but no more than normal."

"One of your flighting fancies is having a baby. And you are feeling her labour pains in compassion."

"What?"

"It's very rare, only happens to the most compassionate."

"But I'm an asshole."

"I would have said so too. But it appears that we have both misjudged you. Now, I have a whole waiting room full of people to see."

"Wait! You're telling me I'm having a baby?"

"Not you. The girl you made pregnant."

"But... Who?"

"Well. I do not know. Probably someone you slept with nine months ago, I would imagine. Here's a prescription for strong pain-killers. And some background reading about compassion pains. Now I have to get back to people with less frivolous illnesses."

Gerard drove home, terrified. Would she know it was his? Would she come and find him?

"Find out what was wrong with you?" asked Barry from the couch.

"Someone I shagged is having a baby."

"Who?"

"Dunno."

"How d'you know she's having it then?"

"I feel it every time she has a labour pain."

"Why?"

"Happens to compassionate people, apparently."

"But you're an asshole."

Gerard read the information the doctor gave him.

"Says here," said Gerard, reading from the print out, "The strongest pains come when you're close to the person. I don't even know who the hell she is. So I can't be that close to her, can I? Doctor Yarwood must have made a mistake."

"Maybe it means close as in distance," Dan suggested.

"The pains were stronger at the hospital," said Gerard.

There was a long silence.

"So," said Barry with a gleam in his eye. "She's having your kid in St. Marks – like right now."

"Yeah."

"Shit!" said Barry.

There was another long silence until Gerard got up to iron the lucky shirt he planned to impress Miss Reading with that evening. The more he focused on the iron, the more he thought about the baby.

He slammed down the iron and put on his coat.

"Where are you going?"

"Hospital."

"Are you mad? You get involved you can forget your life of no complications. It'll be money worries and kids at the weekend."

"I'm not gonna show my face. Just see the kid from a distance."

Gerard recognised the nurse leaving the maternity ward, "All right, Babes?"

"All right, Gerard?" she said. "Been a while. Who you visiting?"

"The girlfriend."

"Congratulations!" said the nurse, holding the door for Gerard.

Gerard wandered up and down the maternity ward. Minutes went by before he had the courage to glance over at the mothers. He recognised one of them.

"Her?" A panic overcame him. The hairy one. She had loads of hair. Everywhere. He cast his mind back to that night at Ritzy's.

She was on a hen night, he was out with the lads. They were both very drunk. In the morning, when she was still asleep, Gerard eased his arm from underneath her head, slipped into his clothes, and sneaked out of her house, hoping that the door wouldn't be double-locked and alarmed – something that had caused him an embarrassment in the past.

She was asleep now, so Gerard crept closer for a better look. There were two plastic cots beside her.

"Twins, bloody hell."

The babies were sleeping and their faces were scrunched up like old men. Gerard felt a wave of joy. He wanted to pick them up and hold them and squeeze them. Suddenly, his flirting, and sleeping around, held no importance whatsoever.

Gerard turned to their mother.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, taking her hand. "I'm here for you. Everything's gonna change. No more one night stands. I don't know

why I did it. For my ego, I suppose. Insecurity. I leave women before they have a chance to leave me. But I'm not a bad person. Doctor reckons I'm more compassionate than most. And I'm gonna do everything for those little kids."

He looked at the babies. They were wrapped in white blankets and looked like two little puffs of smoke.

"Thank you for giving me two beautiful children." Gerard felt a rush of love for this hairy lady and kissed her on the cheek. She woke up to his adoring smile.

"Who are you?"

"Their Dad," Gerard said, gently.

She sat bolt upright. "Get the hell out of here!"

That was not the reaction Gerard was expecting. "I'm here for you..." he realised then that he didn't know her name. "I'm going to do everything for those babies. Anything you want..."

"My husband will be back any minute and if you're not gone by then..."

"Your husband?"

Gerard looked more closely at her face. No. She wasn't the hairy woman. In fact, he had never seen her before. Ever.

"Sorry!"

Gerard ran up and down the ward, searching for a woman he recognised.

"Gerard!" said the nurse on duty. "What are you doing? Which one's your girlfriend?"

"I don't know..."

"I think you'd better leave now, Gerard."

Gerard was not prone to anxiety but he felt a sweat building up underneath his skin. He ran back to casualty, "I have to see Doctor Yarwood, Mandy. Tell him it's urgent."

Doctor Yarwood wasn't so irritable with Gerard this time. "Doctor. I don't recognise any of the women on the maternity ward... I..."

"You can't just wander into the maternity ward."

"I know the sister... Listen Doctor, I need a paternity test on every kid that's been born today."

"Gerard..."

"I wanna take responsibility for that kid. I don't care how much it costs or how much I have to change my life."

"Gerard. There's no such thing as compassion pain. You didn't get anyone pregnant."

"But..."

"You had a bit of alcohol poisoning. That's why you were so sick."

"Not half as sick as you, Doctor."

"You needed to grow up, Gerard."

Driving home, Gerard's feelings swung between relief and disappointment.

"You got ten minutes," said Barry when he got in.

"I'll give it a miss, mate."

"You not coming out?"

"Nah."

"But Miss Reading..."

"S'all right."

"Oh come on, mate. We pull more birds when you're around."

"No."

"Suit yourself."

When Barry and Dan had left, Gerard deleted all of the girls' numbers from his phone, and threw away as many beer mats with girls' numbers scribbled on them as he could find. He called Kate, "I'll cook tonight, if you want," he said. Then he tidied the house, and awaited her arrival.

POUNDING!

(Water – Tears – Wars)

by Sandy Lee-Guard

**Pounding solid, it did rain
Pounding both night and day
Pounding every second
Did the pain rein in life!**

**Hitting home it became a flood
Hitting hard against a face
Hitting creating fear beyond
Did the realisation rein in life!**

**Sitting wondering – why?
Sitting thinking – far too much!
Sitting – it lurks never far away!
Did the unmentionable seep beneath the surface!**

**Why did the pain rein in life?
Why and how did the realisation rein in life?
Why did the unmentionable seep beneath the
surface?**

**POUNDING, POUNDING, POUNDING
Listen to the bombs falling,
as they rein in another's life!**

SWEPT

A W A Y

(Tsunami 2004)

by Sandy Lee-Guard

**The day started well
Full of life, as known
Nothing unusual, just normal or so one thought
It was ...**

**Birds could be heard
A light breeze ruffled curtains at a window
Bed covers stirred
Voices began to be heard ...**

**A slight noise shattered the peace
It grew so quick
No time to think of what would happen
It was here – NOW!**

**This changed the course of life
For not so far away
A wall was rolling in
It swept away ...**

GUSHING AT THE END

(‘A MOUNTAIN STREAM’)

by Sandy Lee-Guard

**A trickle started its way down!
Down the sheer face of it!
To slide over the edge!**

**Smooth, clear, something seen by only a few!
It turns into condensed drops!
Leaving a wet trail behind!**

**Pushing forward it waits for no one!
Falling through the space provided!
It meanders to grow!**

**Thoughts have now built up!
Wishes, hopes and dreams now crushed!**

From a trickle it first appeared

To gush at the end,

As a flood of tears!

THAT OTHER COLD FEELING

by James Corrin

"You're early, aren't you?"

A chill wind blew around the hillside, picking up little drifts of snow and casting them across the path in front of Harold. He pulled his coat tighter around him and just stared at the woman as a few flakes of snow settled on his beard. The woman stared back, a good-natured smile on her face, a black suit of jacket and skirt her only protection from the elements.

Harold's breath clouded in front of him.

It was a bitterly cold day – the sky was clear and brilliant blue, but did nothing to stop the heat taking flight on the chill winter's wind. The distant sea thrashed with the turbulent winter currents. The landscape shone with reflected light, all the warmth of the sun thrown back by the snow.

Still, Harold had left the warmth of his house gladly. He hadn't dared look round as he hurried down the path, for he knew Annabelle would be watching from the front window, and seeing her would make him feel guilty for stepping out. She would stay there all day, of course, until Harold or his wife turned Annabelle's wheel chair away from the cold when night came.

Harold had set off down the road, thick snow crunching underfoot. Despite the cold, he took comfort in the stillness of the outdoors and the brief moments to himself. He knew Sarah wouldn't begrudge him the time, but he felt bad leaving her tend to Annabelle alone.

A short distance on led him to a narrow footpath, and the familiar trail up the hill to the rocky cliff tops. It was a barren walk, the snow bleaching the Scottish hills of colour, and flattening hills and rises into rolling white. But for all that, for a while Harold had enjoyed the moment.

Then, as he approached the simple wooden bench at the top of the hill, Harold realised that he was not alone.

The woman in the black suit looked up as he approached, her face forming a wide but puzzled smile. She raised an eyebrow.

"You're early, aren't you?" she said, looking at Harold.

Harold trudged further, snow crunching until he stopped just short of the bench. He surmised that the woman was talking to him, but didn't understand the question. Instead he thrust his hands deeper into his pockets and said to the woman, "Aren't you cold?"

"Oh no," said the woman. "I've got gloves." She held up one hand to reveal a woolly, black fingerless glove.

"But you must be cold," said Harold. He gestured through his pockets. "You don't have a coat or anything."

The woman frowned in contemplation, staring at the ground. When she looked back at Harold, the frown was replaced by a smile again. "I will be cold if you insist, but it's not very pleasant. Is that really what you want?"

Bemused, Harold shook his head, watching a cloud of his own breath pass his face again. "I wouldn't wish cold like this on anyone."

"Excellent! I just knew we'd get along famously!" The woman's smile beamed white like the snow, in sharp contrast to the darkness of her hair. She shuffled along the bench, gesturing to the empty spot beside her. "Won't you join me? The sea is wild today; incredible."

Harold considered for a moment, then sat gingerly on the bench. It felt as unstable as it looked, barely more than a plank of wood on two up-ended logs, but it accommodated his broad shape as readily as the woman's slender figure.

The view from the bench was familiar to Harold. Many times he had let his gaze slide down the hillside, past where the land dropped away into the cliff, to the swells and eddies of the sea. He had seen the view through sun, wind and rain, through good times and bad times. Sadly, he reflected, mostly bad.

He let the thought go, turning away from the sea and removing his hands from his pockets. One hand held a small cellophane-wrapped bar. He opened the wrapping clumsily, fingers awkward with the cold.

"What's that?" said the woman.

Harold glanced at her, breaking a piece off the bar. "It's Kendal Mint Cake." He popped the piece in his mouth and chewed it slowly.

"Is it good?"

Harold shrugged. "It's supposed to be good if you're climbing or walking. Try some."

Harold offered the bar across and the woman broke a piece off. She turned it around in her fingers slowly. "What's in it?"

"Mostly sugar." Harold paused, then added, "I'm Harold, by the way."

"Yeah, I know," said the woman, then bit down on the mint cake.

A frown formed above Harold's eyes. "You know? What do you mean, you know?"

The woman stopped mid-chew, looking at Harold. One hand went to her mouth in a faintly embarrassed gesture. "'m Dth," she mumbled. She chewed and swallowed quickly.

"You're who?" asked Harold.

"I'm Death," said the woman again. "How remiss of me. Here's my card." She suddenly produced a white business card from a concealed pocket in her jacket, and passed it to Harold.

He took the card slowly and glanced at it. Plain text proclaimed, *Death, Inc.*, and underneath that, *Leading Souls to the Next Life and Beyond*.

"You're joking, right?" said Harold. "Death isn't a business."

The woman stared at him earnestly. "Everything has its costs; everything's a business. I'm Death, Harold. The end of it all. The end of happiness, misery, laughter, tears, hope, and everything else that makes living special." She paused. "You mind if I have some more of that?" She pointed at the mint cake.

Harold looked at her dubiously, but held out the mint cake anyway. The woman reached out to break a piece off the bar, her hand brushing Harold's fingers as she did so.

Harold gasped. Ice seemed to flow up his hand and arm, scorching his fingertips with freezing cold. For a moment he couldn't move as the chill went into his chest, settling into aching and emptiness. He felt alone; so terribly alone. The world went dark.

Then suddenly the feeling passed. He found himself staring at the woman as she ate the new piece of mint cake.

"It's kind of odd," said the woman, "Dry and sweet, yet strangely moreish."

Harold put his hands back in his pockets, newly aware of the cold. He shivered. "You're really Death."

"Yes. And you're really Harold." Death smiled broadly at him.

"Am I dead?"

"Oh no. You're early, remember? I'm not expecting you to die for a while yet."

Harold didn't respond. Instead he gave his attention to the sea, watching it undulating.

Death laced her fingers together and leaned on them. She stared intently at Harold. "People are usually more pleased to not be dead."

Harold's eyes flicked sideways at Death, then away again. "I am. I'm pleased." Death continued to stare at him, a friendly smile set on her face. Harold sighed.

"It's difficult at home," he said, "with Sarah and Annabelle. I'm so very tired."

"Ah," said Death, suddenly disinterested. She looked out to sea as well. "I see tired people all the time. It's the step before dying, you know? When you really can't carry on any longer."

They sat in silence for a moment, then Harold looked at Death. He thought for a moment he was looking to address the woman, but then realised he was checking she was still there. He frowned grimly. "I thought about what it would be like to end it. On the rocks, you know? Down there."

Death shrugged. "Rocks do that to people."

"I couldn't do it of course. I couldn't leave the family. I just... wondered. What would it be like if it stopped?"

Death raised an eyebrow again. "But why, when you have so much to live for? There's so much great stuff around – snow, benches, sea..."

"Kendal mint cake," Harold interjected. He tried to make it sound funny, but failed.

"Exactly."

"They're just little things. I had dreams."

"Nothing's little in the course of a lifetime," said Death earnestly. "Nothing at all."

They sat in silence for a moment more, then Harold said, "My feet are cold." He got up slowly and started walking along the path, following a curve in the headland. Death swiftly dropped into step beside him.

"I could have been a musician, you know?" said Harold.

"I could have been a painter and decorator," said Death. Then she added, "I get to meet more people this way."

Harold chuckled once. "I got a family instead."

"Worthy things, families."

"Yeah. I just..." Harold went quiet, then shrugged. "I really thought I would be a musician. I was pretty good. I could have got somewhere. But I met Sarah and we wanted to settle down, have kids, buy a house. Somewhere money and a job came into it."

"Children!" Death skipped on a few paces ahead, then waited for Harold to catch up. "Ah, the joys of childhood. Swings and kites and snowballs..."

Harold sighed. "Yeah. I thought that. For a while I thought maybe I could be a musician by day and a father by night. All swings and violins. But you can't raise a family when you're touring." He snorted. "You can't pay to look after them either."

"So you gave up music for fatherhood."

"Yes. But I thought, maybe I'll go back to it, one day. When Anabelle's grown up."

They stopped walking while Harold did up his shoelace. He paused, still crouched, and said, "When you find out your child is handicapped,

you feel guilty at first. It must be your fault, right? Something you did. Then you realise it was nothing to do with you – it was just the luck of the draw. And the doctors tell you that you'll be looking after your child the rest of your life." Harold sighed and stood up. "I traded concerts and orchestras for kites and swings. And then this doctor says Annabelle will never play like normal children. She'll never be able to look after herself. Never be able to speak. It was the single most selfish moment of my life, but suddenly I felt like I'd given up everything for nothing."

"You must have been upset."

Harold nodded. "Aggravated brain damage, they said, before she was even born." He paused. "Sarah cried for days. We had always wanted the best for Annabelle, and she wouldn't have a chance. And looking after her was difficult. At first she was like any other baby, but later..." Harold swallowed awkwardly. "That was twenty years ago."

"You resent them, don't you?" said Death as they started walking again.

There was a moment's silence, then Harold said, "Yes. Yes, I do. I don't mean to. I know it's not their fault, but you can't give up on your family. And then you see your whole life before your eyes, going to work while your wife stays at home, both looking after Annabelle in the evening. It's a huge job. And..." He stopped, suddenly aware he was talking to a stranger. "Well, I had dreams," he finished clumsily.

Death nodded and removed one glove carefully. She scooped up a handful of snow, running her thumb across it. Small ice crystals fell from between her fingers.

"Everyone has dreams," she said. "Some people liken them to snowflakes. Hold them in your hand and they melt, change form, disappear. There's nothing you can do to hold onto them."

"What do you think?" asked Harold.

Death shrugged, replacing her glove. "I think dreams are rarely that cold and snow rarely hurts that much. Do you have any more Kendal Mint Cake?"

"Yeah." Harold pulled the mint cake out of his pocket. "It's strange. I imagined you diffe..." He stopped suddenly, tripping over a stone and falling onto the verge. His outstretched hand slid across the uneven surface and he felt himself tumble and slide. He grabbed for purchase but quickly slid down the slope, the path racing away into the distance. His scrabbling fingers found nothing but snow as he raced downwards, his feet disappearing into nothingness as he tipped over the edge, body starting to fall towards the rocks below.

And suddenly he caught himself. Suspended between a jagged rock and a stubby growth of vegetation, he willed his hands to hold on. The

waves below crashed louder into the rocks as the grey stone reached out to catch him.

Harold struggled to pull himself up, reaching out in a quick movement to the ledge he had just fallen from. His breathing was heavy, muscles straining, his chest cold from a tear in his coat. He pulled himself a little higher, then dropped back as his muscles failed him. He knew he would tire soon if he couldn't get up now.

A cold grip suddenly took Harold's wrist, and even as the feeling of ice ran up his arm he felt himself being pulled sharply upwards. He kicked with his feet against the rocks until he was standing at the bottom of the slope, arms aching, a great chill reaching through him. The rolling water hissed its disapproval below as Death, smiling, released his wrist.

Harold slowly nursed warmth back into his limbs.

"You saved my life," he said.

Death shook her head.

"I died?"

"You saved yourself," Death said, "I just saved you a bit of time." She bent down and picked something up. "Here, you dropped this."

Harold looked at the offered mint cake and then waved it away. "It's alright. You keep it."

Death looked surprised. "Well, if you insist." She broke a piece off and ate it.

"I thought of them," said Harold. "When I fell I thought, I can't die. Who'd take care of Sarah and Annabelle? They're all I thought of." He paused, then added, "What happens now?"

Death shrugged non-committedly. "That's up to you, really. I fully intend to finish eating this."

Harold thought for a moment. "I think I'd better go home."

"Maybe you should." Death winked. "Try to be more careful on the way up."

Harold returned home carefully as the evening drew in.

The next day Harold returned to the bench. The bitter wind had gone but left grey clouds in the sky. The snow on the path up the hillside was forming into ice, and Harold struggled on the treacherous surface, but gradually he made it to the top of the hill.

Death was sitting on the bench again, looking at the gathering clouds.

Harold walked up and sat on the bench beside her. She looked round, smiled broadly, then looked at the sky again. "Impressive, no? I should think there'll be snow."

"You do weather forecasts too?" said Harold.

Death grinned. "You're surrounded by snow, it's freezing cold, and you need me to tell you if these clouds will bring more snow?" Death raised an eyebrow in soft humour. "Kendal Mint Cake?"

Harold considered the offered bar a moment, then took a piece. "Couldn't finish it then?"

"I figured that since you started it, you would want to finish it."

They ate in silence a moment, then Harold said, "It didn't make any difference."

"We can get more if you're hungry."

"I meant almost dying yesterday."

Death looked weary suddenly. She screwed up the now empty wrapper and secreted it in an unseen pocket. "I don't know what you expected."

"I thought I'd feel different when I got home. I said I thought about them when I went over the edge. I saw how important they are."

"But at the end of the day, you've still lost your dreams."

"Right."

Death sighed. "No-one ever gets it. Death isn't a life-changing event. Life-stopping, certainly. But change is *your* problem."

"I just thought it would mean more."

"I told you there's nothing little in a lifetime. It doesn't matter whether it's snowflakes, kites or swings. Conversely, there's nothing big either. Death is worth no more or less than anything else."

"But what about you? You *are* Death."

Death smiled again. "I know more than some people and less than others, *exactly* the same as everyone else." She paused. "I can't tell you how to find value in your life. I won't tell you to give up your dreams. But look at what you've got. Look at what's around you. Things change. Dreams change. Everyone has dreams."

"Everyone?"

Death made an expansive gesture with her arms. "Everyone. Even when you think they've nothing left to dream for."

"I suppose even Annabelle must have a dream. And Sarah."

"Exactly."

Harold stood up. "When I go back, can I make it better?"

Death shrugged. "You can make it different. Better requires more work."

"I guess that'll be dream enough."

"You'll be surprised how far that gets you."

Harold made to go, then stopped. "Why did you help me?"

“Why not?” said Death after a moment. “Mostly I admire the scenery and tend the dead. Sometimes it’s nice to live a little, with the living.” She paused, then added, “Mostly, the living have to help themselves.”

Harold nodded. “Yes, absolutely.” He walked gingerly down the path, treading carefully on the ice. Just as he was about to pass out of sight of the bench, he looked back over his shoulder.

A snowball caught him on the side of the face, sending ice falling down his collar. A cold feeling traced down his chest as the snow melted.

“You should watch where you’re going,” called Death, laughing. Then she stepped back, out of view, and the laughter faded.

Harold turned away again, looking down the hillside to his house. Yellow light shone at the windows and smoke came from the chimney. Between the grey clouds and the snow-covered landscape, it looked like the most inviting place on Earth.

A cold breeze started up, but Harold ignored it. He took a step forward, with hope.

ANORAK*

by Tony Rossiter

These days almost anything is “collectable”. I collect litter: I have a special implement, with jaws that open and close at the touch of a lever, and I wear (of course) an old anorak.

It’s a patch of National Trust land in the Chilterns. Every week-end scores of visitors come here, but on a Monday morning it’s a quiet place. You might hear the drumming of a woodpecker, or see a red kite flying high overhead. Or you may spot a portly chap with a grey beard and a balding head tilted towards the ground in front of his feet.

Spotting litter is not as simple as you might think. A scrap of paper on the hillside can easily be mistaken for chalk, and something invisible from one direction can become glaringly obvious when approached from another. There are just three requirements for the job: stout shoes, good eyesight and a strong stomach. Among the more unsavoury items are small plastic bags of dog excrement, often left hanging from the bushes as if they were Christmas tree decorations.

I begin by heading for the monument on top of the hill, a favourite place for picnics. Litter left here is often blown down the hill into the brambles and the gorse and hawthorn bushes, and retrieval can be difficult (and occasionally impossible). With my “litter-picker”, I can grip the tiniest cigarette end or scrap of paper, and I can salvage bottles and cans that would otherwise be out of reach.

Once the area around the monument has been cleared, I make for the car park, where there is always plenty of litter. I might exchange a word or two with one or other of the regulars who come to walk their dogs – nice people, most of them, surely not the kind to drop litter or leave dog stools on the ground?

Not long ago I used to begin my working week by grappling with the pile of paper in my office in-tray. Now my Monday mornings begin with bottles, cans and plastic packaging. But there is plenty of paper too: old shopping lists, newspapers, supermarket receipts, lottery tickets, used tissues, sweet wrappings, train tickets and cigarette packets. In November there are fireworks, and in the New Year coloured paper streamers. Tin cans and plastic bottles are crushed underfoot to reduce the amount of space they take up, and then separated out, along with the glass bottles, for recycling.

The work may be unpaid and mundane, but there is one little perk (free entry to National Trust properties) and one huge attraction: a routine

which compels me to take regular (and much needed) exercise in glorious countryside.

Collecting litter for a few hours a week has affected me in a way I did not expect. Now when I walk down the street I can't help scouring the pavement in front of my feet. When I spot a cigarette end or a scrap of paper, the urge to pick it up is almost irresistible.

* This piece was published in the *Anorak* column of *The Oldie* magazine, August, 2006.

PRAYER FOR OLD AGE

by Kathleen Adkins

Dear God, as you know, one day I will be old.
When that day comes,
though I may have many years experience of life,
help me to remember
not to give the benefit of it, unasked,
to younger generations.
They must learn for themselves.

Stop me from commenting with ever more regularity
on their antisocial behaviour
and thinking I know best how to put society to rights.
And do not let me dwell on my own character-forming childhood.

Allow me sufficient memory
to know when I am repeating myself.
If my audience assures me I have already told them something,
let me not be tempted to repeat it regardless.
The pleasure of listening is mine alone.

Remind me not to stop in busy doorways
to talk to friends or strangers - or simply to think.
Restrain me from talking to myself or breaking wind in public
or exhibiting more repulsive habits
such as spitting or removing my false teeth at mealtimes.

Keep me from wishing to compensate for my narrowing horizons
by reciting, with increasing relish, the minutiae of my days:
life's irritations; my thermal underwear;
my daily diet - and my bowels,
however riveting I may find them.

And hold me back from lamenting
the growing number of aids to boost my senses
and replace my other body parts.

Perhaps, in time, it will be possible
to regenerate the human memory too,
but in the meanwhile, when my recollections
are at odds with everyone else's,
lend me humility to acknowledge that I may be wrong
and the graciousness to tell them so.

Finally, to reach four score years and more
is the boon of modern medicine.
Therefore, as long as I have breath to moan,
grant me the grace to give thanks instead,
since without science I might not be here at all.

SKIN DEEP

by William Campbell

First performed at Progress Theatre, Reading.

Characters

JEREMY M Mature Hush Puppies and undistinguished brown clothes.

SUZIE F Teen/20s Grunge/Punk, Doc Martens, cropped hair.

All characters and their associated events are fictional.

*/ marks the point of interruption by next speech, followed by:
[in brackets, what the speaker would have said]
else without brackets, words that are talked over by the speech that follows.*

(The waiting room of a tattoo shop. SUZIE is impatient.)

(Enter JEREMY. He sits.)

SUZIE. What you doing 'ere? This's a tattoo shop not a Day Centre. Won't get your tea and custard cream 'ere. *(Pause.)* You selling 'im something? *(Pause.)*

Cat got ya tongue? Scared to talk?

JEREMY. Erm . . . no.

SUZIE. Mister Blob speaks. Ain't posh enough for you, am I?

JEREMY. Not at all.

SUZIE. Frightens ya do I, Mister Not-At-All? C' mon, tell us – why you 'ere?

JEREMY. I presume for the same reason as you.

SUZIE. "I presume." And the rest. Where are you having your butterfly tattooed? Won't be on your dick. Too small, right? *(Pause.)* I asked you a question.

(JEREMY signals agreement.)

SUZIE. Ankle, me. Butterfly, right there. See?

JEREMY. That is interesting.

SUZIE. It's more'n bollocks interesting. I saw it in Big Chris's mag. The mad bastard said I oughta get one. Sort of a badge.

JEREMY. I'm sure it will be very pretty.

SUZIE. The Vixens don't do pretty. You're asking to have your stupid face rearranged.

JEREMY. I gather the Vixens "float like a butterfly but sting like a bee."

SUZIE. You taking the piss? The last streak-of-shit who tried that got sliced, here to here. Right across her Barbie-doll grin. *(Pause.)* Why are you 'ere?

JEREMY. I am having a small tattoo.

SUZIE. On yer arse? "Please kick me."

JEREMY. That would be rather pointless unless I wore see-through trousers.

SUZIE. Clever 'll get you a knuckle supper. Understand? *(Pause.)* That "floating and stinging" – I heard that somewhere.

JEREMY. Muhammad Ali, the heavyweight boxer.

SUZIE. Yeah, the Old Git went on about him. On and on about how blacks were winning all the fights these days. "Not like in the old days," he goes, the bleedin' fossil.

JEREMY. You should have told him about Bill Richmond. He was black and won a notable prizefight back in 1805. Just before Trafalgar . . . the sea battle? . . . Admiral Nelson?

SUZIE. Fascinating. Cool boots, d'you reckon?

JEREMY. They will conceal your butterfly. But they are very nice.

SUZIE. Very nice for kickin' the shit outta tossers.

JEREMY. They appear unscuffed. Very clean and shiny.

SUZIE. Best DM's in the Vixens. I spent days polishing 'em for me wedding.

JEREMY. You were married in those boots? With jeans and a T-shirt?

SUZIE. Wedding dress! I do things proper. For all the good it did me. He was a right bruiser. Me veil was right down to here, red roses all down the edge.

JEREMY. And those boots under the petticoats.

SUZIE. Nah.

JEREMY. You said you polished them especially for / [your big day.]

SUZIE. / Bleedin' mother put her foot down.

JEREMY. Don't they always?

SUZIE. Stroppey cow. There was a God Almighty row.

JEREMY. I can imagine what you went through.

SUZIE. "My only kid" – all that crap. Sod it I says, the boots ain't that important.

JEREMY. Being a single child is a lifetime imprisonment.

SUZIE. So she had her way. It would've upset the Old Git too.

JEREMY. It took me a long time to see it was Mother / [who put-off . . .]

SUZIE. / I didn't want no bad feelings on me big day.

JEREMY. It was mother who put-off my lady friends.
 SUZIE. Didn't matter. Being hitched lasted as long as a dog's fart.
 JEREMY. My ladies never stayed long.
 SUZIE. Whole thing – a bleedin' waste of time
 JEREMY. Very true – a waste of my life.
 SUZIE. The reception ended in a ginormous punch-up.
 JEREMY. Mother bore me for the sole purpose of being her carer.
 SUZIE. You listening? I couldn't smile at a bloke without Bruiser going ape-shit. That day he picked the wrong bloke to mess with. Ended up with twelve stitches and a broken arm. I dumped him, right there, in front of the wedding cake.
 JEREMY. That is so brave. I wish . . . the things I could have done.
 SUZIE. He's best gone, soonest forgotten.
 JEREMY. How very true.

(Buzzer sounds)

SUZIE. Shit! That's him ready.
 JEREMY. Don't worry, he is very good.
 SUZIE. Sez who?
 JEREMY. But on the ankle, that's very . . . Don't worry, the soreness will soon pass.
 SUZIE. Like you know, Smart-arse. Ya knows nuffin' 'til you done it.
 JEREMY. I do already have a tattoo.
 SUZIE. Yeah?
 JEREMY. On my left arm.
 SUZIE. What?
 JEREMY. "Mother."
 SUZIE. I shoulda guessed.
 JEREMY. It's time you went through.
 SUZIE. I wanna look some more. You go.
 JEREMY. You were here first.
 SUZIE. I might see summat better.
 JEREMY. You know what you want: a butterfly. Putting things off things doesn't make them go away. Believe me, I know.
 SUZIE. Tell us what you're havin' then I'll go through.
 JEREMY. I am adding an inscription under my present tattoo. "In memoriam."
 SUZIE. Where's that?
 JEREMY. It's Latin. It means "in memory of." My mother has passed away.

SUZIE. Shit. Sorry.
JEREMY. You weren't to know.
SUZIE. When did she snuff it?
JEREMY. This morning.
SUZIE. Are you for real? *(Pause.)* That's cool.
JEREMY. Look, I'm not up on this sort of thing, you know, well, a young lady . . .
Indeed, it may be rather forward of me . . .
Would it help if I accompanied you through there?
SUZIE. It's up to you.
JEREMY. I could talk to you.
SUZIE. No shakes to me. If it makes you feel better.
JEREMY. Take your mind off the needle.
SUZIE. I ain't scared of nothing, got it? But if you wanna talk. It don't bother me either way. *(Pause.)* Shift your arse then.

(Exit SUZIE and JEREMY.)
Curtain.

DOUBLE HONOURS

by Dave Smith

The tourists walked Indian file. Either side of the slippery duckboards, along which they placed their cautious steps, methane bubbled from the marsh mud. The party was headed towards an iron pillar set on a granite plinth. Atop the pillar, cast in bronze, two gilded frogs sat side by side staring out across the watery acres.

"This place," announced the guide from the foot of the pillar, "is a SHIT."

"Then why doesn't some ass-hole do something about it?" The real-estate broker from Brooklyn's idea of a good holiday was not one on which your newly purchased, suede shoes got splattered with reeking slime.

"Now, as I am sure you are all aware," the guide continued, "a SHIT is a Site of Historic Interest and Tourism."

Here in the Republic, land can be protected in one of three ways. Sites of historic interest are protected until such time as they are requisitioned for industrial or commercial development. Tourist sites, preserved either for their natural beauty or ecological significance, are protected until required for motorway construction or parking lots. SHITs, on the other hand, are, due to some slipshod legislation, preserved for all time and thus protected from serving any useful purpose whatsoever."

The guide scanned the faces of his charges for sign of a smile. There was none.

"That," he continued after a calculated pause, "is why no ass-hole can do a damned thing about it."

The laughter was immediate. The guide made a mental note to use the word ass-hole whenever he had Americans amongst his group in the future.

"It doesn't require intensive reasoning to appreciate that where we stand has not been protected for its natural beauty. It is, however, a site of great ecological importance. This marsh is the sole, remaining breeding ground of *Rana Regius*. The Royal Frog, as you may know, is a species endemic to the Republic.

As a site of historic interest this place has no equal. Every citizen of the Republic is required, by law, to make pilgrimage here at least once in his or her lifetime. For this is the birthplace of the Republic itself. The monument beneath which we stand celebrates the end of monarchic rule. You could call it our Statue of Liberty."

“So what the hell’s it doing stuck in the middle of a stinking bog?” The real-estate broker, if he had to suffer monuments, much preferred those which could be viewed from a hotel window.

“Because this is where it all happened,” said the guide.

“Picture a time many centuries ago. The marsh then was an even less hospitable place than it is today. In the swirling mist two figures stand alone. With a sweeping gesture the man indicates the vast expanse of mire. His other hand he places upon the shoulder of a boy.

‘One day, soon and for a while, my son all this will be yours.’

‘Why father? Why do I have to become a frog? Why can’t I go to university and be educated like normal boys?’

‘Because you are not normal boys. You are the prince. You are the king-to-be.’

‘I know I am the prince, Your Majesty, but times are changing. The monarchy must change also, or be rejected. Our people are no longer superstitious peasants. They have no respect for a monarch who spends his youth in the bog. They want an educated king; a man of intellect.’

‘Balderdash, my boy! Intellect is not a requirement. Presence is what commands respect in a monarch. Presence and character. And they are not to be found in a namby-pamby university. They are to be won through triumph over adversity. This marsh before you is adversity, my lad, and this is where you will triumph over it. You will triumph as I and all of your ancestors have triumphed before you. If not, then my name is not King Amphibus.’”

“Which King Amphibus would that be?” enquired a schoolteacher from Des Moines. She was perusing a guidebook through intimidating spectacles and spoke as if invigilating a history examination.

“At the time he would have been known as Amphibus the Current, as were all kings during their reigns. It was only retrospectively,” explained the tour leader, “that a monarch acquired a title reflective of his reign’s achievements. His son would have been known as Amphibus the Future, as were all first sons of the reigning monarchs.”

“So which King Amphibus are we talking about?” demanded Miss Des Moines, who recognised a fudged answer when she heard one.

“The people of the day believed that the monarch never actually died. They thought of the King and the Prince as one being; a single soul occupying twin bodies. As one body aged and went into rest, the younger body of the prince assumed the role of king. Then a new body would emerge in the shape of a baby prince and the reign would continue indefinitely.”

“So which King Amphibus are we talking about?” insisted the teacher who had paid good money to hear facts. She didn’t give a damn what the ignorant peasants believed or didn’t believe.

"The king, or to be precise the phase of the king, in the marsh that day would later be referred to as Amphibus the Thwarted."

With the point of her pencil, the teacher from Des Moines etched the name 'Thwarted' into her notebook with the passion of a lepidopterist adding a treasured specimen to her collection.

"So what did these guys do next?" she demanded. The tour guide would have a lot more talking to do before he'd earned his money.

"Your time as a frog is a necessary preparation for your reign as a king," Amphibus told his son. 'It will not be wasted and it will not seem long. After a few years, a princess will come and kiss you. You will become a prince again, marry and live happily ever after.'

'No, father! I will not be happy. I cannot not marry a princess I do not know. I must marry the girl of my choice. I will marry Ephemerelda.'

'Who the hell,' demanded the King, 'is Ephemerelda?'

It was a question he asked again that evening when he had called the Lord Chancellor to his chambers.

'Ephemerelda, Your Majesty, is the daughter of the Crone.'

'The boy must be mad!' roared the king. 'Not only does he say he will not marry the princess of my choice, he says he wants to marry a commoner. And not just any commoner! He wants to marry the daughter of the ugliest old hag in the kingdom.'

'The daughter is quite a pretty little thing, Your Majesty.'

'She is the child of the Crone, Lord Chancellor, and my boy is the son of the King. It will not do! How long has this been going on?'

'The prince has taken to playing with the young girl whilst you have been enjoying your afternoon siesta, Your Majesty.'

'Why hasn't the Queen done anything to put a stop to it?'

'The Queen, God rest her sole, was beheaded at the request of Your Majesty a year ago.'

'Well what about the boy's nurse? What has she been doing whilst all this has been going on?'

'The nurse has been obeying your command to join you for your siesta each afternoon, Your Majesty.'

'In which case, *you* should have done something about it, Lord Chancellor.'

'Your Majesty specifically instructed me to occupy the nurse's husband over a game of chess each afternoon, Sire.'

'Then something must be done about it now. The wench must be locked away. The boy must become a frog without delay. A few extra years in the swamp won't do the young brat any harm. Send, at once, for the Crone.'

It was a troubled party that made its way to the marsh at dawn. Ahead went the hump-backed Crone, mumbling her incantations. She scurried crab-wise, one eye on the swamp and one on the desperate trio struggling behind her. The protesting prince screeched like a rabbit in a gin-trap as the king, holding him by one arm, and the Lord Chancellor, holding him by the other, dragged the wretched boy backwards and kicking towards his amphibious fate.

"It was at this time," said the guide, "that the expression 'frog-marched' first came into the language. It was a phrase coined by Ephemerelda who was watching the whole sorry spectacle from her prison tower."

"Son of a bitch!" said the real-estate broker from Brooklyn, who had always believed that 'frog-marched', like most expressions in the English language, had originated in America.

"Are there no women's' rights in this goddamned country?" demanded a feminist from Seattle. She didn't give a shit what became of the prince but cared deeply about what happened to Ephemerelda.

"This guy Amphibus the Thwarted! He was a loser. Right? He got his comeuppance. Right? Elsewise they'd have called him something different. Right?"

"Right," agreed the guide in response to the impressive logic of a gum-chewing ten-year-old in a New York Yankees baseball cap and a Harvard University Business School sweatshirt.

"Something like Amphibus the Achiever. Right?"

"Right," said the guide.

"So what went wrong?" demanded the ten-year-old.

"Ephemerelda languished in her prison tower. The people clamored for her release but the king ignored their calls for mercy. Time passed. The frog-prince's eighteenth birthday approached and the Lord Chancellor was detailed to search far and wide for a compliant princess. The day for the re-conversion was arranged and decreed a national holiday. Huge crowds gathered on the edge of the marsh to witness the return of the prince to royal life. The king, draped in ceremonial robes, stepped forth to call the traditional bidding.

'My son, my son. Amphibus my son.'

A frog hopped from the marsh to the feet of the king. The Lord Chancellor picked it up and placed it onto the upturned palm of the princess who, with closed eyes, and only the slightest of shudders, leaned forward and kissed it hesitantly upon its reptilian lips. The crowd jeered. Then, when nothing happened, it began to laugh.

A second frog hopped forward.

'Try this one,' the king commanded.

The Lord Chancellor replaced the first frog with the new arrival and the princess placed a yet more hesitant kiss. The baying of the crowd again turned to laughter when nothing happened and a third frog hopped to the king's feet

After five frogs the crowd was hooting with derision. The king's features had turned an apoplectic crimson, the Lord Chancellor's a cadaverous grey and that of the princess a putrid green. The faces of the rebellious frogs looked rosy by comparison.

'That's your lot, Your Majesty. The deal's off. I was asked to kiss one frog. Not the whole bloody marsh full. You want any more of the filthy creatures kissed you do it yourself.' With that the nauseated princess lifted her skirts and cut a path through the cheering crowds like a bull through a daisy patch.

'Do something' ordered the king.

'Certainly,' said the Lord Chancellor but could think of nothing.

'Call for the Crone,' commanded the king.

'With all due respects, Your Majesty, the Crone can be of no further use to you. The power to convert is a once in a lifetime gift. Once used, the power passes from mother to the daughter. Only Ephemerelda can help you now.'

The king looked over the heads of the crowd towards the prison tower.

'Release Ephemerelda,' he commanded.

As the crowds cheered and guards were dispatched to carry out his orders the king leaned to whisper into the Lord Chancellor's ear.

'This is what you must do. Instruct the wench to use her power to reconvert the prince. Then, when the job is done, march her back to the prison and have her head chopped off. She's had her day.'

'If you will forgive me, Your Majesty, it would not be wise. Ephemerelda has no child. If she is put to death now there will be no daughter to inherit her power. There will be no Crone to change your grandson into a frog. The continuation of the monarchy would be at risk.'

'Well put the wench to stud, you idiot. Wait until she whelps, and then have the wretch beheaded.'

Ephemerelda arrived to great acclaim from the crowd. The king, ignoring her, stepped to the edge of the marsh.

'My son, my son. Amphibus my son.'

The Lord Chancellor picked up the frog as it hopped from the marsh and handed it to Ephemerelda.

'Convert him,' commanded the king.

Ephemerelda smiled at the frog and, with her eyes wide open, kissed it full upon the lips. The frog remained a frog. No sound came from the crowd.

'Kill it,' hissed the king.

'Your Majesty?'

'Kill it, Lord Chancellor. Then try another frog. If that doesn't change, into the prince, kill it and try the next.'

'Stay your hand, Father.' Another frog had leaped from the swamp. 'I am your son, Your Majesty. Release my good friend. Free him and allow Ephemerelda to kiss me.'

'Is it really you Amphibus?' whispered Ephemerelda as she leaned towards the frog now placed upon her palm.

'It is I, my love. But think before you kiss me. The king will never allow us to marry. Once I am restored to a prince, he will lock you in the tower again. Or, even worse, sentence you to death. You have seen how merciless he can be.'

'Fear not, Prince,' said Ephemerelda, 'for I am now the Crone-to-be. I have inherited the power.' So saying, she kissed him with more passion than was ever bestowed upon a frog before or since.

The transformation was awesome. Lightning bolted across the skies. Thunder drowned the gasps of the crowd. The king and the Lord Chancellor embraced in terror. Ephemerelda's body contorted hideously and her eyes bulged. To Prince Amphibus it seemed as if the whole world was coming to an end. He felt himself falling and the breath was knocked from his body as he crashed against the boots of the king.

'Ephemerelda,' he called weakly.

'Over here, Prince. In the marsh. Jump quickly, we must swim for our lives.'

When it became clear what had happened, and as soon as it was realised that there would be no succession, the crowd revolted. The monarchy was overthrown and, it is said, the waters of the marsh turned red with the blood of the dying king.

Seeing which way the wind was blowing, it had been the Lord Chancellor who had unsheathed his knife and struck the fatal blow. His first act, as President of the Republic, was to declare the marsh a sanctuary for all time. He ordered the construction of a mighty iron pillar to be topped with statues of Amphibus and Ephemerelda and proclaimed them 'The first People's Heroes of the Republic.'

"And this is the pillar we are looking at. Right?" said the ten-year-old.

"Right," said the guide, "And now we must return to the coach whilst there is still light to see by."

As the party stepped off the duckboards and back onto dry land, the tour guide put his hand to his ear.

"Listen," he said. "Rana Regius!"

From back in the swamp came a chorus of croaks. Thousands of frogs had formed themselves into a great circle around the iron pillar. As the waters of the marsh turned red with the blood of the dying sun, Amphibus and Ephemerelda the Current lead their subjects in a hymn of thanksgiving for their ancient namesakes who had secured, for all time, the preservation of this wonderful, watery world. High above them the statue of the double-honoured frogs, 'Heroes of the Republic' and 'Saviors of the Marsh', silently witnessed the dying of another day.

"Are you asking us to believe that this guy Ephemerelda voluntarily turned herself into a frog for the sake of some jumped up prick of a prince?" asked the feminist from Seattle.

"So the legend goes," replied the guide.

"Asshole," said the real-estate broker from Brooklyn.

NEW YEAR

by Gillian Shepherd

We locked the warmly steaming car
And, linking through the stinging streets
Towards the festive end,
We vowed we'd leave it all behind
And start again to live and love
With this, the brave new year.

We ate and drank and danced and sang
Until the magic stroke of twelve
And then we drank again.
Entwined we sang For Auld Lang Syne
And every face was happiness
In moonshine paper hats.

We left that bright euphoric place
And clacked back through the revellers
And bickered all the way.
We climbed into the old, cold car
And then, like cheerful, shiny drape,
My party face fell off.

For this would be another year
Just like the ones endured before
Despite our fine resolve.
No matter how we try to change
You'll still be you - and I'll be me,
For that's the way we are.

METICULOUSLY PLANNED

by Terry Adlam

The giant doors slammed shut and the room was plunged into a silent semi-darkness. Four night-lights glowed a dull smoky yellow, high on each of the four walls. Beneath their subdued luminance, a small red eye of light blinked to indicate that the camera was active. The ceiling was vaulted and included three raised opulent skylights. It was at the middle skylight that the figure appeared, back-lit by a mid-winter moon.

It was January and it was cold and although the figure was well insulated against the chill, a shiver ran through him as he placed the canvas bag down on one of the roofs of The British Museum. As the straps were released and the bag settled, the contents within emitted an insignificant jangle. From a side pocket, the figure retrieved a roll of material that unfurled along the ground to reveal an identical bag, devoid of content. He opened it and placed it next to its twin.

It wasn't the first time the figure had been here; there had been other nights. Warmer nights, wetter nights, nights when he had just watched, timed and planned, but tonight, tonight, observation turned to application. The figure blew into gloved hands and reached into the bag and took out exactly what he wanted. There was no need to look, no need to fumble, everything had been planned, meticulously planned. It was something the figure prided himself on. Meticulousness, preciseness, exactness, it was a virtue far beyond others.

Plan ahead and beyond, eliminate the variables, foresee the complications, expect the unexpected. Cover all these permutations and nothing can go wrong. There is no such thing as an accident, just poor planning and lack of foresight. Hindsight is just an excuse for the lazy.

First out of the bag was a glass disc cutter. A thin length of metal with a small suction cup at one end and a diamond tipped stylus at the other. Even above the nocturnal timbre of Bloomsbury below, the displaced air liberated an audible gasp as rubber sucked against glass. The first rotation left a thin etched circle in the glass. On the second rotation, the figure applied a minimal amount of pressure, enough to hear and feel the stylus gouge at the already mapped line. The figure knew that the third rotation would be enough. The tiny toffee hammer taken from the bag and lightly tapped against the bolt, that connected the suction cup to the bar, proved conclusive.

A perfect glass disc left an equally perfect hole, 16 inches in diameter, just exactly as he had expected. Practice and planning made sure of that.

There was no 'what if?' No doubt, just a reassuring confidence that curled the corners of his mouth upwards as the glass was released from the rubber cup. The cutter and hammer was placed gently into the empty bag and then the figure reached into the original bag.

The alarm was sudden and piercing and receded into the night as some where down in the twist and turns of the London streets, the ambulance weaved it's way hopefully and slowly to Brompton Hospital.

As the figure slid the glass disc into a padded envelope, sealed it and placed it in the second bag, he remembered another hospital, another night. It was a night that would change his life.

Seven minutes past ten, Monday the sixteenth of August, nineteen ninety-nine. A time and a date indelibly locked within. Recalled as clearly as a birth date and now ineradicable. From that moment in time, nothing would be the same again. Nothing would be left to chance, no turn unplanned and no surprises. At eight minutes past ten on that warm Summer's night there would be nothing hiding around the corner or waiting in the wings again. Preparation had become an obsession.

The next piece of equipment plucked from the bag, the figure had designed, built and of course tested to and beyond limitations. Resembling a small tabletop camera tripod, the delicate piece of apparatus straddled the newly created opening in the skylight. Like the glass-cutter before, it was secured by means of suction cups. This time, three tiny black cups on each of the telescopic legs gripped the smooth surface of the glass. The pencil thin legs converged into a Y-shaped bracket, a meter above and directly over the centre of the hole. They, the legs, looked too spindly and weak to carry the small motor that the figure attached to the bracket, but looks, like life can be deceptive.

He had received the call about the accident round about eight. It was unexpected and he was unprepared. The voice on the other end of the line was theatrically apologetic. His father had been knocked down by a car and was seriously injured. The phone in his hand began to shake and an ice-cold numbness had enveloped him. A merry-go-round of questions spun in his head, revolving so fast and out of control that none could dismount. All he could manage was monosyllabic When? Where? and How? The person on the phone although unable to answer any questions, was more coherent, detached from the tragedy and with instructions that where chillingly explicit. Get to the hospital as soon a possible, his father was in a critical condition.

The hospital was a twenty to twenty five minute drive away. A familiar route that traversed the concrete and glass monoliths that made up most of the City of London. He and his father had done it many times

before when he was younger. His mother was in a mental ward in a run down institution that thankfully no longer existed. He had hated going there, the building alone frightened him. It was semi-gothic in appearance with looming towers and bars at every sinister window. The main entrance haunted his nightmares, a yawning chasm, ready to swallow him up, forever. Like the minds of the patients within, this Victorian edifice was decaying and crumbling with little hope of salvaging. His mother had died there, surrounded by family, but alone and without her memories. The hospital in which his father now lay was a few streets beyond. Where the institution had once lifelessly slumbered, office blocks of solicitors, lawyers and law firms played their own kind of mind games.

An adapted reel of fishing line slipped over the spindle of the motor. A miniature caribina was attached to one end of the thin, clear line. A line strong enough to pull a thrashing fully-grown Marlin from the warm azure waters of the Caribbean. Something the figure would be doing in less than twenty-four hours. The flight, the hotel, the boat already booked and confirmed.

From the bag the figure took a collection of small linked spindles of aluminium, which, with the slightest flick of his wrist, formed themselves into a small cradle. The transformation looked magical, the tinkle of metal sounded magical, but there was nothing magical about it. Magic is what others turn to when applied physics and precision engineering go beyond their comprehension. The figure attached the cradle to the line and as it swayed above the room, once again reached into the bag.

Had he been prepared, the journey to his father's bedside would have been quicker. Had he replaced the flat tyre on his car when he first discovered it slumped in the kerb, instead of leaving it for weeks and walking to work, it would have been quicker. Had he not waited for the taxi, which couldn't get to him for at least another fifteen minutes, he would have been quicker. Had he taken time to read the underground map before he stood on the wrong platform and got on the first tube that glided nosily to a halt before him, he would have been quicker. If only the buses ran on time. If only he had been prepared. If only he had planned.

In the end, the journey took over an hour and a half and as he raced through the white walled labyrinth of hospital corridors, his father died and the figure was never late or unprepared for anything again.

The matchbox sized cadmium battery clipped to the Y-shaped bracket and two wires, their ends already bared, connected to the pair of terminals at the back end of the motor. The final piece retrieved from the bag was a plastic transparent wallet. Inside was a proof wood engraving by George and Edward Dalziel. It was of Sir John Tenniel's *Alice's*

Evidence, an illustration used in the first edition of *Alice In Wonderland*. Tenniel's artwork is as famous as Carroll's words and the wood engravings they came from, even more revered. Only two of these intricate pieces of craftsmanship existed and up to a few years ago the British Museum had them both. One was '*Alice and the Cheshire Cat*' which rested in the glass topped desk below the skylight and the aforementioned *Alice's Evidence*, missing from the display, but which was now placed gently in to the cradle. The figure's father had stolen it.

The discovery of the engraving happened while clearing out his father flat. The pokey kitchenette come bedroom was a far cry from the detached splendour of the Pinner family home the figure grew up in. Those were happy days when mother was well and father was a senior manager in a pharmaceuticals company just off the Chiswick Flyover. The figure had left home to go to Newcastle University to study engineering and robotics. He brought home a degree with honours, but it wasn't the home he'd left. His mother's mind had gone and taken with it, his father's resilience. When she died, his father moved into the flat and shut himself away from everyone. He had raised the drawbridge and locked the portcullis allowing no one in to his castle of despond. All who knew him and all whom he shunned, believed him to be vegetating in that tiny flat waiting for the broken heart he carried to claim him. The engraving in the hatbox along with newspaper clippings of the theft, told a different story. The ways and wherefores of the misdemeanour, he took to the grave.

What to do with it, was now the figure's responsibility. It had to be returned. The easiest thing would be to give back, but there would be too many unplanned questions requiring spontaneous answers. No, the figure would return it his way. He had an idea that needed his new found accuracy and forethought. Preparation was to take over two years and there would be no doubt as to the outcome.

The motor whirred and the cradle descended slowly through the hole in the glass and into the room. The security sensors picked up the movement immediately. The room exploded into light and the monotonous two-tone alarm began its banshee-like wail as the cradle and its contents continued its descent.

A few rooms away, behind a locked door, a small red light flashed on a panel. Switches were flicked, remote controlled joysticks moved and images on two of the many wall-mounted monitors changed. On one screen, the cradle passed through from top to bottom. On the other, a wider view of the room, the camera followed it as it came to a delicate rest on top of desk. The line followed, falling through shot and draping over the package and cradle like poured treacle.

The giant doors were pushed open and three guards entered. While two of them looked in amazement at the returned exhibit, one pointed to the hole in the skylight. Communication was swift and guards were up on the roof within minutes. Beams of light from torches criss-crossed the walkways and parapets, but apart from the damaged skylight, they illuminated nothing of interest.

Somewhere in the deep Caribbean Ocean, a Marlin glided effortlessly through the warm and vivid underwater landscape, unaware that its capture and eventual death had been meticulously planned.

THE COLD WAR – FORTY YEARS ON

by Ray Essen

At 90, Joan knew she would have to move into somewhere smaller and now faced the painful decision of what to keep and what would have to go. We had reached the study, still full of memories for her, and paused by Louis's desk to gaze at the glass-topped display cabinet where I could just make out the medal in the failing evening light. It was an OBE – a suitable honour for a civil servant of his grade.

Our attention returned to the well-worn desk dignified only by the large, heavily stained ink-blotter with its curled edges. I opened a drawer and pulled out a handful of papers. "He used them for shopping lists," explained Joan on seeing me look quizzically at the top few sheets which had been neatly torn into quarters. How like him; nothing was ever wasted. I squinted at the faded ink through the bottom of my varifocals. Forty years on, I had difficulty in reading the truncated sentences: "new Polaris submarines had space ... ndoned. During the period of ... this subject there is no evidence ..."

"If you want to know more, ask Bonanomi." None of her mental faculties had been blunted with the passing years. "The others are dead," Joan added helpfully in case I had not realised the significance of her earlier remark.

Louis and Bonanomi had been members of the aptly named Committee for the Definition of the Second. In 1967 thirty-six nations accepted their recommendations and the world's observatories adjusted their clocks from astronomical to atomic time from that moment on. But atomic time needed atomic clocks, which was why Louis became involved. He built the first clock to be based upon the time of an atomic vibration and spent the next twelve years trying to persuade the Committee that it was a better timekeeper than anything else – including the earth.

I knew that Bonanomi lived in Switzerland and after a few Google searches I had an address and phone number. I wrote first but he found the telephone easier and was eager to talk about the work of the Committee; about time; but mainly about "The Idea".

"Nowadays it sounds very normal to speak with people from any country but at that time it was during the Cold War and the Americans wouldn't speak to the Russians except in formal meetings and they would never meet and go out to dinner with them. But Louis and I would, and I think that got him into trouble. The people with the atomic clocks were some of the first to get out of Russia in the 1950's and they

were some of the first who could talk freely without a commissar looking over their shoulder.”

This was around the time of a conference in Nova Scotia in response to a manifesto issued by Albert Einstein and Bertrand Russell. Bonanomi picked up the story again, “This was the Pugwash Conference about the danger of re-armament and the dangers of the Cold War. It had no direct effect on the course of the Cold War which lasted until the great communicator, Ronald Reagan, so the Cold War didn’t stop but at Pugwash they gathered together some big-shots in science and delivered a strong warning about the dangers of nuclear armament. They were not against atomic weapons but they urged the politicians to get together and find a *modus operandi*. That was an important point because from that moment on, highly placed Soviet scientists were able to travel outside the Soviet Union.”

“And Pugwash happened not long after the invasion of Hungary,” I added unthinkingly. Bonanomi cut in, “Yes, I told you that I got on a black-list around that time. I didn’t like the Cold War, of course, and I didn’t like the Russians marching into Hungary – but I liked less the idea of another war in Europe. We had a scandal here in Switzerland about fifteen years ago when it came to light that our secret services had amassed an immense amount of rubbish about people like me. We had a parliamentary commission which looked into the matter and it was decided to publish the whole black-list. Every citizen in Switzerland could write to Berne and see if he was on the list. I simply got my name. I have no idea how they handled it in Britain but I guess that Louis must have been on such a list because he was – not exactly friendly with the Russians – but he saw no other way to get more contact with the Russians. Science was the only way and it proved to be very, very positive.”

“But, but ...” my voice faltered, “would he have collected information to bring back from his trips to Moscow?” Bonanomi’s voice rose, “No, no he wouldn’t do things like that because that would have been contrary to the idea. You know the idea was “let’s talk to the Russians”. I remember that the Russians were very careful about what they said but when you went to dinner with them with no commissar around then they would talk quite freely. I always avoided political questions; I just asked them: “Where do you live? What is your freedom in your work? How do you choose what you want to do? ... and so on” and I was in a good position because Switzerland was neutral.”

By 1967, the job of the Committee was done, but contact with a few scientists from behind the Iron Curtain continued as relations gradually became a little easier. The ice had finally started to melt.

Back in Louis's study, I remembered that my father-in-law had kept a second medal in the display cabinet. It had a Cyrillic inscription and above it hung a neat, black-and-white portrait of the Russian radio pioneer, Alexander Popov, stern-faced and looking uncomfortable at having to share the wall with a citation from Fort Monmouth in New Jersey.

BIRTHDAY IMAGES

by Roy Cecil

One cornflower blue afternoon
In late summer
2001,
On my 57th birthday,
In Room 106
Of the Hotel Bellevue
In Cadenabbia
On the western shore of Lake Como,
Still hazy from a post-prandial siesta,
I turn on the TV, a Sony.

As one does.

Some far-fetched disaster movie,
Dubbed in Italian,
Is being screened.

An aeroplane crashes into a tall building
And explodes in a ball of orange.
Billowing smoke daubs the sky
Dirty grey on cerulean.

I point the remote - press PROG +.

The same movie is playing,
But now in German.

Somewhat implausibly
A second aircraft
Flies into another skyscraper.

Ennuyé, I channel-hop again,
And again,
Until CNN reveals

A reality far grimmer than fiction.

The following year on my birthday
A glorious day in late summer,
The sky a flawless azure,
I take a spin on the London Eye
And look across to
Telecom Tower,
Canary Wharf,
Big Ben,
And wonder
Who will be next?
And where?
And when?

ANNABEL

by Kathleen Adkins

I didn't recognise him at first. He'd come to open the new residential wing of our school at Churchminster, where I often helped out. Even when I heard him introduced as Martin Eveleigh, former pupil of the Thomas Wolsey School, Churchminster and undergraduate at St Luke's College, Oxford, I wouldn't have known his face. Flabby complacency had replaced the lean amiability of youth. But when Martin started to speak, I realised he hadn't changed. He had the same persuasive, mellifluous voice of twenty years ago, just a little throatier and more self-important; a man who was used to swaying people, getting his own way.

I sat with the pupils, disgusted. Things had turned out so well for him – Managing Director of a company, which had made a fortune marketing medical equipment and, despite rumours, he was presumably happily married, since he was praising his wife and children for their unstinting support over the years. What an honour it was for him to be invited back to his home town to open this new wing for the handicapped, which would enable every student, whatever their disability, to acquire skills which would help them serve their community and find self-fulfilment. Oh, Martin was in his element!

By the end of the evening every member of the audience would be signing covenants and digging deep into their pockets, swept along by his urgent persuasion and even fear of his displeasure, should they withhold what he wanted. He was an influential man now.

Twenty years on, I had children of my own, and Billy. Gently I wiped his nose and prayed he'd be quiet during the address. He found it so hard to sit still.

I looked back at Martin. Did he ever spare a thought for Annabel, I wondered, the sister whose life he'd destroyed? Did he ever feel any remorse for what he had done?

Even now the thought of it still revolted me. I'd not believed Annabel when she first told me. Martin was so charming, so charismatic. Most older brothers were far too superior to be nice to a younger sister's friend, especially when he was seventeen and she only twelve but Martin was very attentive and when he helped me on with my coat and let his hands slide down from my shoulders to linger just above my breasts, my heart had raced.

I was sure that just for once, Annabel was exaggerating. At ten 'clock one night, she knocked frantically on our door. She pushed Father aside,

rushed up the stairs and burst into my room, leaving him gaping behind her.

"It's wrong, Claire, it's wrong. He said it was all right but it's not."

I sat up in bed stupid with sleep. "Annabel! Why are you here? What's happened?"

"He said it was just a bit of fun but it's not. I wanted to tell Mum but he was so angry I didn't dare."

"Annabel, who are you talking about?"

"He said Mum would blame me for being in his room – his bed. He always does it there."

"Does what? Who?"

"It happens when Mum and Dad leave him in charge. He hovers behind his door. I can see him through the crack as I tiptoe past his room to get to mine. Then he pounces on me and drags me in. He makes me get into his bed and..."

"Martin? You're talking about *Martin*?" I was flabbergasted.

"He takes off my clothes. He says he won't hurt me but he always does. He says if I'd only relax, I'd enjoy it. But I can't."

Was she saying what I thought she was? My mind was in a turmoil of revulsion, rage and jealousy. *How could he? How could this gorgeous brother of hers whom I idolised, do such things to his own sister, things that I hadn't dreamt up with him even in my wildest fantasies?*

She was desperate to talk, to tell me every little detail. "He does things...he touches my...you know...I *hate* what he does. It's wicked..."

I couldn't bear to hear any more. I put my hands to my ears. She misunderstood the gesture and pulled my hands away. "You don't believe me, do you? At least let me stay here tonight." She shook my wrists frantically. "He'll hear me if I go back. He'll do it again."

While Annabel was talking I had been aware of voices from my parents' bedroom. Suddenly it stopped and their bedroom door opened.

"Claire! Swear you won't tell your parents," she said in a panic. "They won't believe me. Please! Swear!"

"I swear. Guides honour." I didn't want to tell them, anyway. If I didn't utter the words, then maybe I could delude myself that it wasn't true. Perhaps Annabel had got things wrong, misunderstood Martin. My father knocked on the door and came in.

"It's very late. Both you and Annabel have got school tomorrow. Annabel must go home now."

"No, I can't go home."

"Why ever not?"

"My parents aren't there."

"You're not on your own though?"

"No-o."

"Who's there? Martin?"

"Well – yes."

"Well then, you *must* go back. He'll be worried sick."

"*Please* let me stay here. *You* tell him, Mr Evans."

"Why? What's wrong?"

"Nothing – only I don't want to go back."

"Have you and Martin had an argument?"

"Sort of."

"Well the sooner you go back and sort it out the better. Come on!" Father's tone brooked no argument. He took Annabel's arm and steered her firmly down the stairs and into his car. He didn't see the desperation in her eyes.

Conscience and shame overcame my jealousy. What sort of a friend was I? I'd failed her when she most needed me. I tried to put it right. "You *must* tell your mum, Annabel. Promise me," I yelled down the stairs. But she never answered. Perhaps she felt if her best friend couldn't believe her story, her parents never would.

They called round. I should have spoken then, before it was too late. "Have you and Annabel had a row?" her father demanded, accusingly. I looked at him. He and Mrs Eveleigh thought the world of their clever, blue-eyed boy, who could charm his way through any situation, especially where his parents were concerned. I didn't know how to explain it to them. It all sounded so sordid, so disgusting, so – *unbelievable*. And his father had a nasty temper. I shook my head, Judas that I was.

Annabel was registered as a missing person and no one ever heard from her again. Or so I thought. It wasn't for another fifteen years, when I had a young family of my own, that I learnt, quite by chance, she'd died six months after her disappearance. I was tracing my family genealogy in the Churchminster records. As I scanned the pages, the surname Eveleigh caught my eye. Annabel Jane Eveleigh. Grateful thanks to the Nightingale Hospital and the caring staff of Ward Eight. I'd been in there myself.

So, she'd died in Churchminster and had actually been buried in the local churchyard. Why had her family not told me? We'd been so close as children yet they'd never seen fit to let me know. I couldn't let matters rest there. I owed it to Annabel to make what amends I could. Five years ago, I'd done my best.

I came out of my reverie. Martin was concluding his speech, talking about his family. How proud he was of them, all living proof of the importance of a good education and how he sincerely believed it should be accessible to every child, especially the handicapped.

Fury choked me. How could he stand up there, extolling family life after what he'd done? I stared at him. For a moment his eyes met mine and rested there briefly. I got the impression that, though I was familiar to him, he couldn't place me. No doubt I had changed even more than he had. After all I had only been twelve the last time he saw me. Perhaps he thought I was one of his many flings. Whatever it was, he came straight over to me – to butter me up or even pay me off I thought cynically.

"Hello," he said with that easy smile of his. "I know this sounds trite but haven't I met you before?"

"I'm Claire Thornton," I supplied unhelpfully, since, as far as I was aware he didn't know my married name.

"Yes, yes of course. Now where was it we met?" He didn't have a clue!

"It was a long time ago – before either of us was married."

His relief, though quickly masked, was obvious. He didn't need to bother with me any more. "Well, we must have a drink sometime, but please excuse me. I must circulate now." As he moved away, I shielded my mouth with my hand and raised my voice.

"Oh, I wasn't one of your lovers, Martin," I said distinctly. "But your sister Annabel was." Martin stopped dead in his tracks. Recognition dawned. He glanced swiftly round the room to see if anyone had heard. "You remember," I went on quietly but clearly. "She died in the Nightingale Hospital, when she was twelve – in the Maternity Ward." It was time for Martin to dig deep in his own pockets. Billy had lived with me and my family, since I'd traced him nearly five years ago. He was severely handicapped and needed expensive specialist treatment. It was the least Martin could do for him. I dropped my hand so that Billy could now read my lips. "Billy dear, bring your wheelchair over here. Come and meet your father."

ANNIVERSARY

by Gill Smith

Yesterday, for our anniversary,
you brought me home six burgundy roses.
I smiled to you. I tried to look happy.
I thanked you, and arranged them in a vase.
Last year, you'd surprised me with a dozen
like those I'd held in my wedding bouquet.
You'd remembered just how I like them best,
with simple greenery - no extra blooms.
This year, our money is tight, I know it;
and I know that your feelings stay the same.
I should have been delighted at your gift,
but after you'd gone, I sat and I sobbed.
Just for a moment, I felt scared, alone;
in case you loved me only half as much.

DEBUT

by Gill Smith

It was a small step for a girl; for a pig-headed, won't-be-beaten, can't-wimp-out-cos-all-the-guys-are-up-for-it kind of girl. It was a big step to stand up. Not in a disabled, physiotherapy, can't-walk-now-can, pray-for-sudden-miracle sort of way. In a what's-this-mike-doing-in-my-hand, forgotten-my-gags, what-if-they-don't-laugh? way. My entry into that scary, put-yourself-on-the-line, hair-always-smelling-of-fags, always-trying-to-be-off-the-cuff-funny-to-keep-up-with-the-other-acts new world. Standing up and facing those blank-eyed, bored-waiting, rather-talk-to-each-other, make-me-laugh-now-or-I'll-push-past-you-to-the-bar punters. Who now don't remember a word I said, don't remember laughing, don't remember my big moment, my debut; my one small step up to that mike, unnoticed toe-dip into stand-up's unrecorded history, that one zero-gravity-like-on-the-moon stride of my life.

SOLID-BOB AND THE SEVEN ELVES.

A heart-warming tale of jealousy and betrayal, as related to an understandably surprised Andrew Unsworth by a Blankety Blank cheque-book and pen.

Once upon a time, there existed a huge castle. In the castle lived a beautiful queen and her mighty husband. They loved each other dearly, which was fortunate. For although their kingdom was mighty it sat upon the summit of a huge mountain. The castle was quite often snowed in, meaning that the queen and her king were often bored and much in need of each others company.

One day the king sat outside on the window-sill sharpening his dagger, idly thinking of his queen. He heard a noise and assumed it to be his darling wife. He craned forward to better hear her sweet voice, but as he did so he slipped from the icy window-sill and hurtled to the ground. As he hit the floor he accidentally impaled himself on the sharp dagger so that a drop of blood fell on the white snow. Before losing consciousness the mighty king noticed the red stain.

'Bugger,' lamented the king. 'Oh, that I had a child, red as blood, as white as snow and as black and solid as the wood of an ebony tree!' he wished, though not literally as such a child would be hideous. Luckily for the king a passing man-servant noticed his plight and did stitch the gaping hole in his body. The good queen took the man-servant to her private quarters and thanked him most kindly, whilst the king could but listen and curse an awful lot. In the course of time the kings dream came true, and a bouncing baby boy was born unto him. The queen rejoiced for it was the most perfect baby the kingdom had ever seen. She called the baby Robert; for his lips were as red as blood, his hair as white as the winter snow, and his skin as black as the wood of an ebony tree. Don't worry, nobody else in the kingdom could understand the reasoning either, but they did rejoice, apart from the mighty king that is. For although the child's hair was a perfect white, the kings own hair was as black as the sky at midnight. And whilst the child's skin was a perfect black the kings skin was as white as the freshly fallen snow. The king could not work out how such a thing was possible, until one day an aide took him aside and explained to the king the basic facts of life. The king was not amused. The queen was upset as she loved both Robert and the king equally, but the king would forever be bitter.

Over the next few years the child grew to be a strong, mighty and handsome young man. He was a fine military tactician, talented with a blade and now went by the name of Solid-Bob, a nick-name coined by the popular press of the day and instantly seized upon by a loving public.

The men were fearful and in awe of his martial prowess, the women thought him funny and clever, and loved his muscular physique. The king, however, thought him nothing but a well-mannered fool who deserved no more than a passing glance and ignored him. Until one day he took a sudden interest in the boy....

The king had an enchanted shield made from solid silver which when spoken to in a rhyming manner magically developed the power of speech. The king spoke to the mirror.

'Shield, Shield, found in a field,
tell me whose hair will first recede?'

The king stared at his reflection on the shield. It was well known that the king's hair was the longest in the land, and some wise men even said that he might never go bald.

'My mighty king with lots of hair
thy hefty skull may soon be bare.
If thee become as bald as cod
chop some off of Solid-Bob.'

The king was enraged. The length of a man's hair was directly linked to his competence and experience in battle. 'Damn,' thought the angry king, 'I cannot face a balding pate, that idiot Solid-Bob I hate!' And with that he stormed off to his own private part of the castle to hatch an evil plan and kill the handsome young prince. He thought long and hard as to how he should end the life of the darling child, before enlisting the help of one of the queen's servants. Her name was Jennet, one of the queen's chambermaids, and a lady of negotiable affection. She was dissatisfied with the queen's service and listened intently to the evil king's plan.

'The foolish boy, I would right hook him,
instead I'll pay you to love and fu-'

The king stopped, realising that he was still speaking in rhyme.

'If I give you a lot of money, will you kill Solid-bob?' Queried the king.

'Perhaps, but it would have to be a lot of money.' Replied the plucky young harlot.

'Okay then,' conceded the king, 'this bag contains a *lot* of money.' The king passed the chambermaid a bag of gold coins, 'now, will you kill Solid-Bob?'

Jennet extracted a hand full of gold coins from the king's purse before letting them slip through her fingers for dramatic effect. 'I suppose so.'

'Then bring me his heart as proof of your wicked deed.' Ordered the king.

'So your saying it's traditional for a prince to be tied naked to an oak tree?'

Solid-Bob shivered. It was a cold day and he wasn't looking his best.

'You mean you've never heard of the Rite Of Ramblers?' Answered Jennet, trying not to laugh at Solid-Bobs childish naiveté.

'No,' he said earnestly, 'I haven't.'

'But you've heard of the Last Rites?'

'Yes.'

'Oh. Good. We'll be performing those next.' Jennet hitched up her robe and placed a hand on the hilt of her dagger. She tried to think of the money.

'Really? Why? Are we going to sacrifice something?' Solid-Bob was terribly keen on sacrifice as a constructive religious pastime, though could never fathom exactly why a benevolent and caring God that dearly loved his creation should expect humanity to destroy it as a token of appreciation.

'Close your eyes,' said Jennet seductively, 'you might not want to see it.'

'Yes, your probably right, agreed the prince, 'I've never been much fond of the sight of blood. I remember one time at the monastery whe...'

Without thinking of her personal safety, though with the purse of gold coins firmly in mind, Jennet unsheathed the dagger from its scabbard and lunged at the prince who – quick as a flash and with 20 years of the finest military training – instinctively broke into tears. Jennet looked down upon the wretched sovereign. His incessant blubbing pained her gentle heart and she took pity upon him. Without untying him, Jennet took off back to the castle. Later she killed a pig, cut out its heart and used it to fool the king.

Presently the forest began to grow dark, and Solid-Bob began to panic. Although nothing caused him fear, he had never actually done anything fearful without a team of trained flunkies at his side. As a result he had a terrific fear of being alone.

With the deftness and agility of a goldfish, and the ingenuity of a dead bunny the gallant prince eventually freed himself from his bonds and took off at high speed into the woods. Eventually Solid-Bob came upon a small house and, as he was a prince, he let himself in. The room was Spartan indeed. In the middle was a large table lined with seven little chairs. On the table there sat seven little plates, each with a meagre serving of cheese and biscuits.

Solid-Bob was a little disappointed at the poor level of service, for he was a prince and expected an awful lot more; though as he *had* arrived at such short notice Solid-Bob forgave them.

Along one side of the room sat seven little beds. Solid-Bob felt tired after his horrid ordeal, so made himself at home on one, falling fast asleep.

Meanwhile, the bitter king was pleased with Jennets work. To celebrate he stole up to his private chamber to consult his magic shield.

'Shield, shield, found in a field,
Tell me whose hair will first recede?'

The king spoke with a boastful confidence, though was not satisfied with the ungodly shields reply.

'With a bumble-bees wax thy head be polished.
Solid-Bob is *not* abolished.'

'Damn and blast.' Thought the king, although these words did not match those that left his mouth.

Meanwhile Solid-Bob was having quite a pleasant time, if lying naked on a bed whilst being poked and subjected to critical comment by seven female elves can be described as fun.

'My, my,' said Sulky, one of the elves, 'hasn't he got big muscles?'

'Hasn't he got a big chin?' Said Dreamy.

'Yes,' replied Floozy, 'hasn't he got a big....'

'...That's enough!' Interjected Crabby.

Solid-Bob stared in amazement at his ethereal host.

'Your elves, aren't you' He said. Spotting the obvious was a princely survival trait.

'That's right. And you are?' asked Floozy, reluctantly passing him a towel.

'I am Solid-Bob, prince of this mighty kingdom. I have narrowly escaped death at the hands of a feeble paramour and whilst making good my escape I chanced upon this hovel.'

'Don't be so bloody rude! It might well be a hovel, but we call it home.' Asserted Dreamy.

'Are you any good with your hands?' She asked.

'Yes of course,' Said Solid-Bob enthusiastically, 'I know the secret Lung-To strangling techniques, I can kill a wild boar with my bare hands, I can....'

'...What about DIY? Fixing cupboards, shelves, privies, that kind of thing.'

'Well, yes. I suppose so.' Solid-Bob had never actually done any craft-work before but mere peasants did it, so it couldn't be that hard.

'Good,' said Sulky, 'You can get started right away and in return you can stay here. We're off to the bakery.'

And so Solid-Bob stayed with the Elves, who were kind to him and generously clothed and fed him. The king, however, was not so content.

His evil – yet intelligent and sophisticated, mind had hit upon a cunning plan to eradicate Solid-Bob once and for all.

With impressive skill and judgement he poisoned only one half of an apple, leaving the other untainted. This he placed in a basket of identical apples from which he would later pluck out the poisoned one, again using impressive skill and judgement. The king then disguised himself as a merchant and made his way to the Elves' home.

Solid-Bob was installing some guttering to the house when the merchant approached him. Solid-Bob did not recognise the king and even though the wise elves had repeatedly warned him against speaking to strangers, he did so anyway.

'Hello there!' He said cheerfully.

'Hello, my fine young man.' Replied the merchant, 'would you like an apple?'

'Not really. Why?'

'Because my apples are the finest in the kingdom, blessed by the very hand of God.'

'Really? Then why don't you eat them?' Asked Solid-Bob.

'Okay then, I will,' Said the merchant and took a bite from the apple, 'but God's creation is for everyone to enjoy and I wish to share it with you.'

'Sounds fair enough.' Said the prince and took the apple, biting into the poisonous side. 'How much do I owe you?'

'Nothing.' Said the merchant as he walked away. 'Nothing at all.'

Solid-Bob began to feel a little peculiar, realised the apple must have been poisoned and collapsed in a heap on the floor.

The Elves were sad when they returned from the bakery. They mourned his passing for several days. Then, due to the pungent and unhealthy smell emanating from his rotting corpse, they decided to bury him. They placed his stiff, lifeless body into a glass coffin and proceeded to carry it to the castle.

As the funerary procession ventured through the forest it chanced upon a female member of minor magical royalty travelling to the immediate kingdom from distant realms that until now the seven elves had never really considered the existence of. Under more usual circumstances the seven elves would've welcomed the well-heeled toff and invited her for tea and scones at their humble abode, before drugging her flunkies, borrowing her jewellery and possessions without permission, then dumping all extraneous bodies into a nearby river.

As it was, they passed her without even acknowledging her Majestic presence.

'Hark, fine ladies!' Commanded the beautiful – yet highly intelligent, resourceful and in no way stereotyped – princess. The demand had no effect on the elves, and they continued their march up the hill.

'Kind women of this glorious kingdom, halt, I implore ye!'

Crabby turned to her fellow pallbearers and threw them a solemn look of incredulity.

'Would you listen to that! Anyone'd think she were a queen or something.'

'Who?' Asked Dreamy.

'Yon silly bitch o'er there, see.' Replied Crabby, nodding in the direction of the foreign royal. 'I don't know who these 'kind women' she keeps banging on about are, but she won't find 'em round here.'

'I can't see any.' Agreed Floozy. 'Perhaps she's one of those 'care in the community' jobbies I keeps on hearing about.'

'Eh?'

'That new scheme the Frenetic Wizards of the Delicate Lemon came up with. You know?' Floozy guessed from their blank expressions that they did not. 'They opened an home for all those daft beggars.' She motioned towards the princess, 'You know what these princesses are like nowadays. They find a talking frog, automatically assume it's a prince, kiss it, and then end up enchanted with a bad case of hepatitis C for the rest of their lives. Anyway, they ends up wi' too many of 'em. Had to close the home down didn't they? And release evil snow queens and sleeping beauties back into an unsuspecting society.'

'Shocking.' Said the rest of the elves.

'Yeah, but with the present state of the Magical Health Service I'm not surprised.'

'Shit, I think she's heard us,' hissed Dreamy, 'She's coming this way.'

With a hearty 'heave-ho' and a need to drop the coffin before they developed a hernia, the seven elves dropped a mental cog and charged up the hill away from the potentially enchanted princess.

The rather fine example of feminine beauty currently beseeching the Elven Ladies' noticed their reluctance to talk and, in the blink of an untrained eye, de-materialised before popping back into existence right in front of them. Which is quite a cruel thing to do to a group of old ladies, when you think about it.

'Bloody hell!' Screamed Dodgy, a normally quiet and unassuming member of the Elven fraternity. 'She must be an enchanted princess!'

'Indeed I am, little woman. Might I ask your business in these parts?' Said the now-recognised princess.

'You can ask,' Challenged Crabby, 'But we ain't tellin'. Not to the likes of thee anyway.'

'You dare question my power and authority?' Roared the princess.

'No, I'm not. I'm sure your very adept at slicing the heads off of innocent people..'

'..Not to mention kissing frogs!' Interjected Floozy.

'Yes,' Continued Crabby. 'Not to mention kissing frogs. But I'm afraid, my lady, that this is a solemn occasion. I cannot stress enough the import of our task. Our noses – not to mention our backs – can't take much more of this.'

'I can see for myself the solemnity of the occasion, and I wish to hinder you no more, but I must see for myself the face of your catatonic friend.'

'How the hell does she know that?!' said Dodgy. She turned back to the princess.

'How the hell do you know of our recent loss?' She challenged.

'Well, it was pretty obvious,' She said. 'You put him in a glass coffin. I could see him a mile off.'

'Oh yes. Should've realised.' The elves gave themselves a mental kick for their momentary lapse of common sense. 'So what exactly *do* you want?' They enquired.

'I have travelled long and far to see the one they call,' she paused for effect, 'Solid-bob. I wish to marry him.'

'Well I'm afraid your a bit too late,' Said Floozy, 'though obviously not as late as poor bob here.'

'Let me take his body to do with as I please,' she begged the Elves. 'Just name your price.'

In a second the Elven ladies minds snapped back to the one thing they were especially good at – profiteering. 'What's it worth?' They queried.

'I will make you my finest ladies.' Replied the desperate princess.

'Sounds fair enough.' They agreed. 'Done. Sold to the necrophiliac weirdo with the stiff fetish.'

Ignoring the Elves erroneous conclusions the princess opened the glass coffin and gazed upon the prostrate corpse and wept at such a sad loss. One of her tears alighted upon the prince's cheek. Imagine her surprise as the prince's eyes opened and he returned to the living.

'Marry me!' She said.

'Yes.' Said Solid-Bob distantly, as he was naturally disorientated. The two were married the following month and the Elves were indeed the finest ladies at the wedding.

As for the king, he later consulted his magical shield.

'Shield, shield found in a field,
Tell me whose hair will first recede?'
He expected the shield to flatter him, though he met with no such luck.
'My mighty king with lots of hair,
Thy hefty skull may soon be bare.
If thee become as bald as cod
Chop some off of Solid-Bob.'

The king flew into a terrible rage and in a frenzied display of bad temper pulled his scalp clean off. He would never again be regarded as the mightiest king the kingdom had ever seen.

LYING IN STATE IN LATVIA

by Tony Matthews

Screened by trees and bushes,
Near the park's main gate
Lenin's toppled statue lies,
Prostrate in a wooden crate.

His upthrust fist exhorts the clouds,
He rants but no one heeds,
His bearded jowl rests on the ground,
He speaks to grass and weeds.

Debris fills his iron folds,
His face is stained with rust;
The colossus of the Comintern
Is turning into dust.

A child peers in at Lenin,
Observes with awed surprise
The giant man is weeping,
As rain runs from his eyes.

NEVER A CROSS WORD

by Ted Jones

'Harold!'

It was her first call of the day. He ignored it, feigning deafness, but he knew the silence would last for only half a minute. In precisely 30 seconds, she would call again – and the next time she would be audible across the Mersey. But he needed that silence. He was stuck on an important clue: 27 across. 'Recycle Gates for waste' – eight letters ending in 'e'. The word 'recycle' hinted at an anagram: of 'recycle' itself, perhaps? No, not enough letters.

His internal clock continued to count: 27, 28, 29...

'Harold!'

It was much louder this time. It wasn't just the decibels – it was the tone: urgent and reproachful at the same time, as if adding the unspoken: 'I know you heard me the first time.'

'Yes, Gladys?'

'Has the paper arrived yet?'

'Not yet, dear.'

Of course the paper *had* arrived – he was more than half-way through the crossword. He never wrote the answers directly onto the newspaper – she liked to be first with the paper. He had a pad of squared graph paper onto which he would copy the blacked-out squares from the puzzle, then fill in the answers on the graph paper. Then he would copy the clues that he had not been able to answer first time around, to think about later, so that she would not know that it had arrived half an hour earlier.

'I thought I heard it half an hour ago'.

'I'll go and have a look, dear.'

Re-fold the paper carefully. Walk to the front door. Pause. 'Oh yes! Here it is, Gladys.' As she called out her next words, he mimed them with his lips: 'And a cup of tea'.

'Coming, dear'.

It had been thirteen years now. She had always been delicate, even before Arthur was born. After that she had stopped going out, saying that she was afraid of the traffic. It hadn't been an easy pregnancy – touch and go at one time – but afterwards she wouldn't do anything any more. She said she couldn't take the chance of getting pregnant again. Harold had moved into the spare room.

When Arthur went off to university, she began to spend most of her time in bed. There had been a succession of doctors, but they hadn't

been able to work out what was wrong with her. The doctors would refer her to specialists, but they hadn't fared any better with them. The main problem was the changing symptoms: one time it would be high blood pressure, then low blood pressure; agoraphobia, then claustrophobia, followed by angina, backache and dizzy spells – but never anything you could see. One doctor had suggested her illness might be psychosomatic, and had recommended that she see a psychologist. She never went to him again.

Harold had spent a lot of time in specialists' waiting rooms. That's how he got into crosswords – as a respite from reading five-year-old 'oldie' magazines. They claimed to be 'for the mature reader', but the adverts weren't for long-handled shoe-horns or incontinence pants: they were for Caribbean cruises and luxury property in Bermuda. He didn't know any old age pensioners who could afford that sort of thing. Neither did he know any pensioners who looked like the people in the magazines – smiling, bright-eyed models, Brylcreemed grey hair and fake suntan. They certainly didn't look like carers.

It's a funny word, 'carer', he thought. It's used to describe those people in the zoo who feed the animals and clean out their cages – which, when you think about it, is what home carers do. There's no difference between the carer and the care-*ee* really. They're interdependent – without the one the other wouldn't exist: like warders and prisoners.

But there is one big difference: prisoners have a release date. Carers don't – there's no early parole for good behaviour. The opposite is the case – the better you are at caring, the longer it goes on. Harold thought of that poem by Oscar Wilde that he had seen in the library: 'each day is like a year – a year whose days were long'.

'Harold!'

'Just waiting for the kettle, dear.'

'Recycle Gates for waste?' Could 'Gates' mean 'entrance'? It has something to do with gates and it fits, but it doesn't have much to do with recycling.

He had put off retirement as long as he could, and after that he'd tried to get a job at B & Q, but without success. That hurt – being turned down by B & Q – he presumed he must look pretty old. He had always cherished a vision of his retirement days: in the library catching up on the papers, watching the footy on Saturday afternoons at Goodison Park, the odd pint in the evenings at the George and Dragon...

But he'd never managed to see Everton play, and he hadn't got to the George. Coincidentally, the day of his retirement was the day on which Gladys became a full-time invalid. She had never been an early riser. He

hadn't minded that – it gave him a bit of time to himself – but now she didn't rise at all.

Arthur met Helen at university, and soon after that he left for his first teaching job. They got married and Helen got pregnant. Harold had hoped that they might be able to take on some of the caring responsibilities, but Arthur took a position in Keswick, 150 miles away. It was the farthest away of all the posts offered him. And anyway, Helen wasn't much into family – except her own.

Tea tray ready; freshly ironed lace doily; tea strainer – she could always tell if he tried to use teabags. Milk in the cup first; Daily Post in the freezer for a few minutes so it would feel as if it had just arrived.

Mrs. Hardacre next door had once called him a saint. He wondered which one. Saint Sebastian perhaps – patron saint of the sick? But he'd always thought old Sebastian got a fairly rough deal. Buried in the walls of Rome just because he wouldn't renounce Christianity, shot through with arrows after he escaped, and finally beaten to death and dumped in the drains – immured, skewered and sewerred, you might say. He'd told Mrs H. that if Sebastian was all that was on offer, he would prefer to remain unsanctified. Saint Gerome would be more his thing, he thought: the scholarly saint, drifting into venerable old age with his books – and perhaps a crossword or two.

He took another look at his crossword: 27 across would really help. 'Gates for waste?' It was beginning to look as if the second letter would be 'o'. What about 'porticos'? It fits, but what has it got to do with waste? Only then did he notice the capital letter in 'Gates'.

Mrs. Hardacre was one of those women who talked a lot but didn't say much. 'You wouldn't know what to do with yourself if anything happened to Gladys', she would say. How wrong she was. He knew very well what he would do. He'd had the house valued and had worked out that he could buy a small flat, get a little car and get along quite nicely on his pension. And he would take up bowls: the fresh air would do him good after being cooped up all these years with only the stairs for exercise.

He worked out that in the 13 years, at about fifteen trips a day, he had climbed those stairs over 71,000 times. There were 15 steps, which meant he'd climbed one million and sixty-five thousand stairs. And that was only up.

The steps seemed to be getting higher these days. There were times when he wondered if he would make it to the top. A couple of days ago, by the time he got there he was gasping for breath and his chest felt as if he were being hugged by a grizzly bear. He ought to go and see a doctor

– they're always saying carers should keep fit – but he just couldn't forgive himself if anything happened to Gladys while he was out.

He had had her death notice ready for some years: '...after a long and courageous struggle with lethargy...' and such. He had even rehearsed his funeral oration: phrases like 'the perfect wife'; 'lifelong companion'; and 'not a cross word in 40 years' – came to mind. He would go on to list her many achievements – 'founder-member of Hypochondriacs Anonymous', 'black belt in martyrdom' – and so on.

But when Death called at 27 Primrose Avenue, it wasn't for Gladys. Mrs Hardacre found Harold's twisted body at the bottom of the stairs covered in breakfast – a colourful collage of lightly boiled eggs, buttered toast soldiers, marmalade, fragments of Royal Doulton – and the wreckage of shattered dreams. 'I always said those stairs would be the death of him', thought Mrs H. as she called the ambulance.

The ambulance men said that on the way to the hospital he had rambled on about gates and capital letters, but he never became fully conscious. Arthur rushed down from Keswick and Harold smiled when he heard Arthur's voice and muttered something in his ear that he didn't understand. Arthur asked him to repeat it, but he could not, and what he had heard didn't make any sense to him.

Arthur was amazed at how much younger his father looked in the funeral casket – death had taken twenty years off him. Arthur helped sort out his father's effects, applied for probate and such.

Gladys bought a grave in Stanley Park Cemetery and ordered twin headstones, one for Harold and one left blank, for herself. Arthur suggested that after the house was sold, his mother should go into a retirement home near Keswick. 'You'll have someone to keep an eye on you full-time there, Mum – after all, Helen's going to be pretty busy with the kids for the next few years. But we'll be able to come and see you at week-ends'.

But Gladys would hear none of it. 'Couldn't you find me a little apartment near you?' she had said.

'But Mum, how will you manage on your own?'

'Oh, I'll manage', she had said.

She had managed very well. She had her hair cut short, joined the WI, and started to take ballroom dancing lessons.

A year later, Arthur was offered a higher paid job in Berkshire. 'You'll like it down there, Mum,' he said. 'We can find you a retirement home near us – or if you like we'll look for an apartment'.

But Gladys decided to stay in the Lake District. 'It would be too much of a wrench to leave all my friends and have to make new ones', she said. 'And besides, I don't know if I'd find a decent bowling club down there'.

With the proceeds from the house she bought herself a little Peugeot 106, and twice a year – on Harold's birthday and at Easter – she drives down the M6 to Liverpool and puts some carnations, dyed royal blue in honour of the football team he never saw, on his grave – without noticing that, since the plot was geographically closer to Liverpool's ground than to Everton's, the carnations on all the adjacent graves were red.

And Arthur, now headmaster of a posh private college popular with rock stars' children, never fails to drive up North in the Mercedes to see if his mother is all right – every year just before Christmas. He hardly ever thinks of his father – except that he wonders now and then what the old man had meant when he whispered those last, wheezing words in his ear: 'for waste' and 'software'.

THIEVES OF PEACE

by Ursula van Noort

See the sky lark rising high.
Wings flapping, twittering,
Climbing, pitch increasing.
When a roaring giant passes by.

Hear the larks' song in the cloudless sky.
Invisible elusive, hidden.
A harmonious concert trails my way.
To be drowned by the noisy giant, why?

Watch the sky lark spiral to the ground
Into the densely woven field of corn.
Holding, safe enfolding, silent
When you hear again the giant's rumbling sound.

The giants keep on flying as they please.
Heaving their bodies through the weightless air.
Gasping, clambering, disappearing.
The ever relentless thieves of peace.

THIEVES OF TIME

by Ursula van Noort

The pace of life is not the same,
Traffic lights and traffic jams,
Noise, CO₂ and road rage,
Part of our lives is now a waiting game.

Thieves come disguised;
Call centres, menus, endlessly repeated.
Enraged, we are grieving for lost time.
Why are we surprised?

How often do we hear,
Messages, options, numbers,
Too numerous to recall.
Precious time wasted, do we care?

Computer pages to download,
Searching, tracing, printing, chaos in the Internet.
The stress builds up, we need to chill;
With wine and cigarettes we try to cope.

We are running out of time on earth;
Time squandered, stolen, irretrievably devoured.
Restlessly we fall from one event to the next.
Where has time gone, what is it worth?

Then, at last, we have come to the bridge of reason.
Now we measure time like precious gold.
The auburn hair has turned to grey.
We breathlessly have reached the autumn season.

THE OWL THAT WAS AFRAID OF THE DARK

a story for children

by Tony Rossiter

Tom was playing in the outbuilding at the bottom of his garden when he caught sight of it out of the corner of his eye: a flash of something white. It looked like a huge, pale moth. It fluttered out from under the eaves, silently flapped its wings and disappeared through the gap in the wall.

Tom climbed onto the top of the old piano. He could hear a soft hissing – and a rasping noise that sounded familiar. It was like his dad’s snoring. He could just see onto the ledge under the eaves. That was where he saw five white, fluffy chicks. The biggest one was nearly twice as big as the smallest. Next to them was a pile of black pellets, some feathers and a few small bones.

“Barn owls,” said his mum when Tom told her what he had seen. “Perhaps they’ll get rid of those mice for us. Your dad keeps saying he’ll do something about them, but he never does.”

“I’m going to keep a close eye on those chicks,” said Tom.

“Oh no you’re not. Barn owls mustn’t be disturbed when they’re nesting. It’s against the law. You can have a peep at them once a week. And don’t get too close.”

A week later Tom was in the outbuilding, watching and waiting, when the adult bird returned with prey. It was a vole, and all five chicks strained to get at it. They didn’t have any manners. The biggest chick grabbed it and fended off the others until it was all gone. The smallest chick didn’t get a look-in.

“It’s so tiny, that little one,” Tom said to his dad later. “Will it be all right?”

“Depends how much food it gets. The bigger ones are bound to get more.”

“That’s not fair. The little one needs more than the others.”

“There isn’t always enough to go round, Tom. If they all got exactly the same, it could be that none of them would have enough. This way, at least one or two of them survive.”

“But I like the little one. That’s my favourite.”

“I’m afraid it’ll have a hard time, Tom. With barn owls, the first chick is quite big by the time the last one hatches. It’s bound to have a struggle, the last one.”

“It’ll just have to try extra hard,” said Tom.

His dad smiled. "You never know. If you have to struggle in life, you can end up stronger than someone who's had it easy."

Tom got into a routine of going down to the outhouse every Friday evening. Whenever he saw the chicks being fed, the biggest ones always got the lion's share.

It wasn't long before the two biggest chicks fledged and left the nest. A week later, two more were gone. Now only the smallest one was left. It looked lonely and sorry for itself, left there all on its own.

Tom realised that it was not getting any bigger.

"The mother must have stopped feeding it," said his dad.

The next afternoon Tom saw a small, pale bundle of feathers fanning its way uncertainly over the lawn. It swooped down to the flower-bed and picked up what looked like a large beetle. The next day he saw it fly aimlessly over the lawn and disappear into the wood beyond. But it returned without food.

"It should hunt at night," said Tom's dad. "That's when barn owls catch most of their prey. It won't get enough food otherwise."

"Perhaps it's afraid of the dark," said Tom. "Can't we do something to help? Why don't we can catch a mouse – mum's always going on about them – and put it out on the lawn at night."

"Well, it's worth a try. But we'll have to coax it out. We'll need more than one mouse."

So Tom's dad put mousetraps down in the kitchen, and it was not long before they had three dead mice.

They put the first mouse in the outhouse near the piano, and in the morning it was gone. The next night they put the second mouse by the gap in the wall, and in the morning that was gone. On the third night they put the last mouse in the middle of the lawn. And not long afterwards a young owl, very pale and small, with long, white-feathered legs, appeared stealthily out of the darkness, swooped down onto the lawn, took the mouse in its talons and let out a melancholy screech as it flew back to the outhouse.

Tom and his dad did not put any more mice out. But late in the evening, after it was dark, they often saw the young barn owl out hunting.

SLOUGH AND THE INVENTION THAT CHANGED THE WORLD

by Ray Essen

2006 marked the centenary of the birth of the former Poet Laureate, Sir John Betjeman, whose lament on Slough began with the lines, "Come, friendly bombs, and fall on Slough, It isn't fit for humans now..."

When Betjeman wrote those lines in 1937 he could not have known that a small team of scientists from Slough had begun to design Britain's first radar defence shield intended to protect towns like Slough from aerial bombardment. Because of the need to develop radar in complete secrecy, the team soon moved to a remote site on the Suffolk coast but the scientist in charge – Robert Watson Watt – continued to direct the work from a research establishment located in the grounds of Ditton Park on the outskirts of Slough.

Three years later, radar played a decisive role in the Battle of Britain and helped to defend our towns and cities during the Blitz and throughout the Second World War.

The following parody tells the story of Robert Watson Watt and the invention that changed the world:

What Watson Watt! - Not yet Sir R.
You arrived at Ditton Park in your black Bentley car.
I remember the day in nineteen twenty-seven,
The place burnt down, nearly sent us to heaven.

You came to take charge of Slough Radio Station,
And we welcomed you there with so much elation.
All those aerials and gadgets and gantries of wood,
You worked us as hard as you possibly could.

Now Hitler's in power so prepare for a bombing
No defence, no warning of when he's a coming.
"Why not?" said 'Skip' Wilkins, "Invent radar"
Then we can see the *Luftwaffe* from afar.

Politicians want proof before they commit
The cash to make radar such a big hit.
So Skip laid on a demo; soon spotted a plane,
His boss, Watson Watt, cried: "We're an island again."

Say no'wt to the locals about our invention
Guard that tongue of yours and not a mention.
Top secret it is - so not a word must be said
Zip it tight, keep it shut, keep it all in your head.

Mister Chamberlain's known for 'Peace in our Time'
After signing a pact to make everything fine.
The PM flew back to spout plenty of hot air;
He'd get better protection from our hardware.

It was put to the test in the Battle of Britain
Defending our skies from the enemy airman.
The valiant few who saved our nation
Were helped to victory by radio-location.

Two years later we thanked Sir R.
By knighting the Scot who saw from afar
That radar could give a protective shield
For the nation, he knew, would never yield.

But Sir John, it's your parody we turn to now
You mocked our town, and this is how:
"Come, friendly bombs, and fall on Slough
To get it ready for the plough."

The moment has come to end my story;
About time - you say - before I bore thee.
But remember that time is all around
And thanks to Sir Robert, so are we.

ONE MAN'S NOW IS ANOTHER MAN'S THEN

by Dave Smith

I asked the time. He asked me when
and where I wanted it. And then
explained that everything depends
on where day starts and when night ends.

"In London when it's half-past-two
it's eight-fifteen in Kathmandu.
And yet in Stockholm they would see
the time as being half-past-three.

When midnight comes to Ayers Rock,
in Hyderabad it's eight o'clock
and down in Cape Town half-past-four
but half-past-nine in Singapore."

He quoted times from near and far,
from Panama and Zanzibar.
Chile, China, Brazil, Bahrain.
The man was driving me insane.

I asked him "What on Earth's the use
my knowing time in Belarus?"
And "Why the hell I'd want to know
the hour of day in Tokyo?"

I said "I have no interest
in time in Prague and Budapest.
What's more, I couldn't give a damn
what *year* it is in Amsterdam."

I screamed "I want time here and now."
He thought a while then told me how
"here and now and there and then
are all subject to where and when.

If noon here now, in Bonn it's gone
and yet for some it's still to come.
Noon's never lost without a trace.
It circulates from place to place.

The time you want will be somewhere.
Maybe not here, but never care.
No point in hunting it I've found.
Just wait for it will come around."

I cried "I do not have all day.
I have to leave, be on my way."
I turned to go but found that I
no longer cared where, when or why.

For what is life if, full of care,
we have no time to wonder where
noon may be at, where's ten to three,
and if there's breakfast still for tea?

THE NAKED WRAITH

by Tom Parr

Have you ever been shut up in a confined space, damp, dark, and with no hope of getting out alive?

Well, I have.

I was still alive when my husband bricked me up in the cellar.

Fifty years later the wall collapsed, and I was free! At least, my spirit was. The material part of me stayed behind to be discovered by the first person to venture into the cellar.

I couldn't do much moving about at first. Having been cramped in the alcove all that time, you know what it's like, don't you? When you've sat still for a long time and got cramped up. The message from your brain doesn't always get to the right destination. But after experimenting with floating and walking round the cellar for a while, I eventually got the hang of it. I couldn't manage the walking through walls bit though. "Right," I thought, with a last look back at my mummified earthly remains, 'let's go into the wide world and see what's happened to it.'

I floated up the stairs to the living room and barged straight into an exorcism ceremony.

A man, so fat that he seemed to have been poured into his thickly upholstered chair and left to congeal, occupied a seat in a dark corner of the room.

Another man, tall and pale of face with eyebrows like sticks of liquorice, and wearing a purple cloak stood in the centre of a white chalk circle.

A large orange candle burned by his feet "Out, foul fiend," he thundered, making theatrical gestures. "Return to the darkness from whence you came."

"That's not very nice," I said indignantly. "I've just spent fifty years in that hole. I'm not going back in there again." The very idea!

In the background, watching silently was a man in the uniform of the Royal Air Force. He looked across the room and beckoned me to join him.

Cautiously I eased myself forward and came to a halt beside the airman. "You're looking as worried as a long-tailed cat in a room full of rocking chairs," I said cheerfully. "What's eating you? And why can you see me? I'm a ghost."

"I know that," he replied. "I'm Keith Randall." He held out his hand and automatically I shook hands with him.

"How come you're solid," I squeaked. "I should pass right through you."

"We're made of the same elements," he said, looking a bit superior. As if I should have known. "So we appear solid to each other."

That sounded logical to me, and I calmed down. "Now be quiet." He whispered. "We are in a very serious situation. That man is trying to cast us out of the house."

The chanting went on, and I began to feel a powerful urge to step inside the circle.

"Come back," cried Keith, grabbing my arm. "You must resist. Fight him."

"I can't," I wailed, my feet within an inch of the menacing white line.

Keith lost his grip on my arm, and I slid forward again.

The fat man suddenly lurched to his feet.

"That's enough." He snarled. "We're not getting anywhere. Any ghost will have been scared off by your caterwauling anyway." He strode over to the window and pulled back the curtains, letting in a flood of sunshine that put the solitary candle to shame.

I stood trembling with Keith's arm round my shoulders. "Can they see us?" I asked.

"No," he replied, removing his arm, somewhat hastily, I thought.

"Why are you here?" I asked Keith as the thin man in the purple cloak and the fat man in a dark green cardigan bid farewell to each other with very little civility.

"It happened during the war," he said. "One evening I sneaked out of camp to see my girl friend. When I got here, she had already gone into the underground shelter to spend the night. Then a delayed action bomb from an earlier raid exploded and shattered the windows. A large splinter of glass put paid to my existence."

"I hadn't intended to die when I did," I said. "But my husband decided otherwise. It's amazing to find out what lengths some husbands go to when they get all jealous and possessive."

"Yes, quite. You'd better meet my friend," continued Keith. "He's been here a lot longer than I."

"How many more of us haunt this place?" I asked.

"Just one other. Dandy Jim, I call him, though he refers to himself as Beau James. Departed his earthly experience in 1816. He's standing behind you."

I turned round and had I been in my earthly body, would have swooned straight into his arms. An incredibly handsome and richly dressed Regency dandy stood smiling rather superciliously at me.

"So delighted to meet you," he drawled, regarding me through one of those lozenge shaped quizzing glasses that were the fashion in his day.

I didn't know whether to bow or curtsy, so I just nodded. "You came to an untimely end?" I hazarded.

"There was a grand house on this site in more civilised days. I was in a lady's chamber, just about to get stripped off for action when, sink me, if the wench's brother doesn't burst in. Had me at a demmed disadvantage, I can tell you. The fellow went berserk, and here I am." He shrugged and turned his elegant back to me. "Look at that. Still have the blackguard's dagger in me shoulder blades, don't you know? Had no chance to deflower the maiden, either. Attractive little filly she was" James concluded mournfully. He peered at me rather too closely for my liking. "You didn't die of old age, did you?"

"It was my husband's fault," I said. "He came home early and caught me comforting his brother."

"Is that bad?" asked Keith.

"I think the fact that we were in bed together upset him." I stared at the two men. "Now what do we do?"

"For our sins we have to stooge around on this site till judgement day," said Keith. "Unless one of the exorcists he keeps calling in finally gets us. Then we're in dead trouble. Excuse the pun," he added.

"This present occupant," said Keith, "Mervin Mcgreedy, wants us out. He caught sight of James once, and since then he's been trying to get us out.

We have never troubled him in any way. Well, James did rearrange the furniture once, and I turned all his pictures to the wall. But that was a long time ago. We've done nothing since. But he's been willing to pay good money to a succession of mediums to get rid of us."

"I'd like to show my appreciation for my release from the cellar," I said. "How can I do that? Can I make myself visible to him and tell him we mean no harm? He might forget about having us, er, evicted."

"I wouldn't advise it in your present state," said Keith.

"Why not?"

"You're naked."

"What?" I stared down at my form. I hadn't noticed that. "Well, for Heaven's sake, you might have said, instead of just staring at me. You're no gentlemen." I tried to stamp my feet but it wasn't very successful. They made no noise on the carpet. "I told you that my husband found his brother and me in bed. I didn't have time to get dressed."

I tried to preserve my modesty with my hands. It didn't make much difference, me being what Beau James would have called a buxom wench. "What can I do about it?"

"Nothing. You arrive with whatever you were wearing when you departed," replied James with what, in a less sophisticated person, would have been a smirk.

Well, our Mervin's going to have a shock when he goes into the cellar and finds what's left of me propped up against a pile of bricks." I gave an unearthly grin at the thought.

I wasn't wrong. The fat buffoon nearly had a heart attack when he descended into the cellar a few days later and discovered my poor shrivelled carcass still sitting in the niche.

Police in uniform and men in white overalls swarmed all over the place, and Keith, James and myself retreated to the attic until my bits had been taken away. They were eventually given a decent burial, though that made no difference to me in my present state.

A week later Mervin tried once more.

"Here we go again," I groaned.

"What?" Keith appeared beside me.

"Another attempt to get rid of us."

"By Jove." James popped into place. He raised his quizzing glass. "I would have fought for her honour at any time in my day."

"She looks very young and pretty," I said, just to show I wasn't jealous of the fluffy blonde girl whom Mervin had ushered into the room.

Fluffy girl turned to Mervin. "There are two men and a naked woman here. These are the ones you wish me to remove from the premises, I take it."

"That's right," crowed Mervin as the fluffy blonde grinned at us like a cheeky schoolgirl. "You can see them? That's good. I've always known the place was haunted, even before we found that old woman stashed away in the cellar."

"Old woman!" I cried. "I wasn't old. I'll show him." And without thinking I materialised right in front of his nose, quickly followed by Keith and James.

"Oh, my God" he gasped, and fainted dead away. Actually that's not quite correct.

He fainted dead.

"Now look what you've done," said a fat voice in my ear.

"Sorry," I murmured.

Mervin looked down at his earthly remains. "I'm sure I had another forty years or more to live," he complained. "Now I'm stuck with you three."

"Oh, my God. I'm out of here," said the adolescent ghost hunter. "Ghosts I can manage, but not dead bodies."

Things happened in rapid succession after that. A consortium of developers bought the place and within a year the dreary street had an impressive leisure complex with a bowling alley, bar, theatre and cinema with a café attached.

The house may have gone, but the site remains and that is home sweet home to us. I have succeeded in materialising a fetching misty blue robe that floats around me, and the four of us are spending our time before judgement day sitting in the best seats, and enjoying films and plays to our ghostly hearts' content.

For some reason people avoid sitting anywhere near our seats if they can help it, but that's their problem.

GOOD DAYS

by Gill Smith

There are days when I own the world,
when the soil beneath my feet is mine
and my step is light on my earth, my birthright,
when the sun shines my hair a halo
and rain takes care of my planet,
when I am beautiful, sexy, youth is on my side,
when, bat-caped, I can do anything,
be anything,
be anyone.

There are days when words come easy,
pattern the paper, sprinkle the sonnet
when I heal lives with a careful word, gesture
when I could run a marathon, sky dive, win Gold,
make a difference.

There are days when I type my life on the world,
choose my place, my style, my font,
chase my path, take charge.

Some days.

GROWING PAINS

by Wendy Naylor

Janie was feeling angry with her grandmother. Pushing past the table and making the vase of daffodils wobble, she flounced out. She knew it wasn't her fault that her knees were swollen and that she had been forbidden to play hockey, but it made her feel resentful against the world in general. As her guardian Mrs. James just happened to be the nearest person to be on the receiving end of Janie's misery.

Janie argued over the slightest thing being tiresomely unreasonable. She was well aware that her grandmother was at her wit's end to keep an even keel in their relationship. Sometimes she just wanted to be hugged and have her hair smoothed as she had when she was a little girl.

Outside the door Janie mentally surveyed the present situation.

"Why do I have to have beastly swollen knees?" she muttered darkly. "Surely it won't matter if I play hockey on Saturday?"

She hated being barred from her beloved game, secretly admitting that it was not her grandmother's fault. 'Growing pains' she called them but the consultant said it was arthritis.

It was so easy to vent her frustration on her guardian. Tomorrow was her hospital appointment and she was worried.

Waiting outside the consulting room Janie was shocked by the number of youngsters there. Some hobbled in plaster casts, on crutches or splints. Some waited in wheelchairs. A babble of conversation and burst of laughter erupted from a group of boys further down the corridor. No one seemed to mind. At last their turn came.

"Hello, young lady," smiled the consultant. "How are you today?"

"I'm fine" lied Janie "ready for my school hockey match on Saturday."

Noting her flushed face and bright eyes he picked up her sheaf of notes. Flicking through the pages he said,

"Your path report says otherwise, I'm afraid." Glancing over her head at Mrs. James he continued, "I want Janie to come into the ward for a few days to rest those swollen knees. Then we shall see about hockey." He smiled again at Janie.

She stared at his lined face and tired eyes knowing that he had the last word. She gulped and meekly nodded.

That afternoon found her lying in bed in a bright cool ward in the District General Hospital. The ward was on the ground floor and the gardens, visible from the window, were crammed with spring bulbs. Her

blonde hair neatly gathered into an Alice band, Janie winced and tried to toss off this ordeal as she did most things she found unpleasant. Surrounded by some of her favourite things, a pile of books and magazines on her bed table and a vase of grandma's daffodils on her locker, she aimed to shut out the rest of the world. If only her parents had lived. Janie could only imagine what her life might have been.

As she looked at the nodding heads she remembered how she and her mother used to play the game of talking to the flowers. She always told Janie that they nodded back because they understood everything. At five years old Janie believed every word. She longed to hear her mother's voice repeating the story of the flowers

"Wotcher" The voice came from the bed on her left. Janie ignored it. "I said wotcher." The voice repeated. "Are you deaf or something?"

Reluctantly Janie allowed her head and eyes to turn in the direction of the voice. She saw a skinny, and to her, a scarecrow like creature. Her body was suspended from a number of weights and pulleys, with one leg encased in a vast Plaster of Paris shell. Large black eyes stared at her from a pinched white face. Spiky black hair stood up all round the child's head.

"Oh, hello," answered Janie, turning back to her book.

"What you in for?" the voice persisted.

"Swollen knees," said Janie not lifting her head.

"I got knocked down by a bus. Lucky to be alive the doctor says. My name's Polly an' I live in the children's home in the London Road. Where do you live?"

Janie sighed, resigning herself to tolerating this unwelcome intrusion. In a short time she was in possession of Polly's life history, why she was in care and how she longed for a family to call her own.

"I belonged to a lovely family once. My mum was so pretty and kind. One day I was helping her in the kitchen when the policeman called. My dad had an accident in an explosion at work. Then, a few months later my little brother was knocked over on his way home from school. I was supposed to collect him but went to the park instead. I often went there on my way home to look at the flowers. It was more than mum could take." Polly stopped and then said, "I think she blamed me. She neglected me and the home so they took me into care."

Janie wanted to ask if she was still alive but didn't dare.

Against her will, Janie began to enjoy the prattle of this bright cockney sparrow, chirruping away, but was careful not to show it. In return Janie said,

"My parents are dead. They were killed in a car crash on holiday. I was left with my grandmother and they never returned home. I've lived with her ever since."

They both grew quiet, each with their own thoughts. Polly watched everything and with insatiable curiosity never tired of asking questions.

"Do you have a garden? Did those daffs come from there? I love daffs. I got into trouble once because I pinched some from the park to give my mum on her birthday. The park keeper chased me and by the time I got home they were all broken." Polly sniffed and Janie thought she saw tears on her lashes. "Worst of all," continued Polly "my mum was too tired to notice. Before she would have put them in a vase and made them stand up. I threw them in the dustbin."

At visiting time Mrs. James arrived laden with gifts from Janie's school friends.

"They wanted to come but I told them you had to rest." She smiled at Polly who was unashamedly listening.

"What a shame, it's so dull in here." was Janie's reply. "You'd better take some of them back. I've nowhere to put it all."

"You can put the daffs on my locker," piped up Polly, "that'll make room." She was oblivious of the glare she received. She never had any visitors and the golden flowers brightened up her corner.

She gazed at them as if she wanted to eat them. Later after their bedtime drink she said,

Your Gran is so sweet and loving to you. Why are you so rude to her?"

"Mind your own business." snapped Janie.

She turned over so that Polly couldn't talk to her. Her knees were painful tonight.

"The tablets make me tired. I want to sleep."

She woke up to bright morning light and quickly became aware of the gap next to her which should have been Polly's bed. She asked a passing nurse.

"Where's Polly?" The nurse hesitated then said,

"In intensive care, she had a turn for the worse last night. Sorry, I'm busy." and hurried on.

Janie felt a sharp pang of remorse. She felt really bad about how she had treated Polly and wished she could say 'sorry'.

The week passed slowly. Janie began to feel better as her knee swelling went down. She missed Polly's chatter. When she was allowed up Janie wandered round the ward chatting to the other patients. She found they all missed Polly's cheeriness and how her endless questions brightened their days.

Janie pondered for a long time what it must be like to have no one to care whether you lived or died. 'What if it were me in intensive care', she said to herself. 'How worried Gran and all my friends would be. They

would visit and bring me things. I shouldn't have snapped at Polly. Maybe now it's too late to say sorry.' She persuaded the nurses to let her walk down to see Polly.

"I promise I'll be quiet and not over excite her." she said and was pleased when permission was given.

Next visiting day Mrs. James arrived with her arms full and best of all a large pot of daffodils in full flower. Giving her a big hug Janie said,

"Would you mind if I take these down to Polly if they let her have them?"

"Not at all my dear," her relieved grandmother said. "Give her my love and tell her I hope she is feeling better."

Polly was so thrilled that for once she was speechless.

Next day Janie dressed and packed her case, getting ready to be discharged. As she reached the door it swung open to allow the nurses to wheel in the bed with the contraption of strings and pulleys that she recognized. Polly's pale face grinned as she caught sight of Janie.

"So you're gonna rat on me too and go home, are you?" Janie noticed that she was clutching the pot of daffodils as if they would escape.

"I'll come and see you every day," promised Janie. "I may even be able to bring some of my friends if you promise not to get overexcited. When you are well you can visit us at home and we can plant some daffodil bulbs. When they bloom next spring they will be all yours. I'll take you to the park where me and mum used to talk to the flowers."

The dark rings round Polly's eyes could not disguise the look of contentment as they wheeled her back to her place.

"And I promise I won't let the keeper chase you." laughed Janie.

THE POND

by Kathleen Adkins

(Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp)

Oh, leave me silent!
Nature is striving to bring a kind of peace.
Only methane breaks the water's yellow stillness.
The purple sedges suck their lifeblood from the ooze
and ravens croak harsh dirges from the scrub,
while poppies splatter scarlet drops across the fields.

A burnt-out forest of brick chimneys looms
up on the wasteland.
Dandelions peer through cyanide vents.
Wind puffs shrouds of seeds
over the crazy-paving mountain of hastily-smashed walls.

Where naked people queued in snow to die,
four black marble tombstones now stand beside the pond.
The sedges shout their secret to the silence:
'Ashes, ashes. Human ashes.'

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Four black marble tombstones now stand beside the pond,
where naked people queued in snow to die.

Over the crazy-paving mountain of hastily-smashed walls
wind puffs shrouds of seeds.
Dandelions peer through cyanide vents.
Upon the wasteland
a burnt-out forest of brick chimneys looms.

While poppies splatter scarlet drops across the fields
and ravens croak harsh dirges from the scrub,
the purple sedges suck their lifeblood from the ooze.
Only methane breaks the water's yellow stillness.
Nature is striving to bring a kind of peace.
Oh, leave me silent.

SHORT FILM SYNOPSIS

TITLE: STAIN

by Andrew Unsworth

Production Company: Paperknife Productions Ltd

Most men are embarrassed when their wives find stains on the bed sheets; particularly brown ones. But John isn't embarrassed. The stains aren't his. They're bloodstains for a start, and as far as John knows, he doesn't bleed. Well, not unless there's something sharp and pointy sticking in him, and that's not happened since he impaled himself on the school railings while playing dares. No, it's much more likely to be the wife, Gloria, who seems to bleed with alarming frequency around the same time each month. Gloria would agree, were it not for the fact that the bloodstains only ever appear on the pillows. Both pillows. John *and* Gloria's. And besides, Gloria knows that it's John doing the bleeding. It's all that high-pitched screaming on those opera records he's bought causing the capillaries in his nose to burst, or something. He never used to like opera; he only developed a passion for screaming fat women since moving into their new home, with its grand Victorian styling and imposing facade that hints at the exciting history of the house. A history so exciting that it has passed down into local folklore. A history so exciting that people won't walk past the house at night. In fact, if John and Gloria had bothered to do their research they would know that the exciting history of the house includes a screaming opera singer, a blade flashing in the light, and an evil spirit brimming with such psychotic malevolence that the screaming will never stop. Neither will the blood. Had John and Gloria done their research they would've known this. Now it is too late...

FINE MIND, SHAME ABOUT THE BODY

by Roy Cecil

IN THE PREFACE TO HER BIOGRAPHY of Margaret Rutherford (Margaret Rutherford, *A Blithe Spirit*) the author says that 'Mother Rutherford and Father Stringer were the only true parents I ever knew, for they gave me the love and security of being wanted in a real family.' She goes on to claim that they had 'staunchly defended me and stood firmly by my side during my greatest personal crisis, when others I had deeply loved and helped in many ways were sadly lacking.'

The author of that biography, Dawn Langley Simmons, died on September 18th 2000. Her obituary in *The Times* concludes with the words 'Dawn Simmons, author, was born around 1923. She died ... probably aged 77.'

Simmons herself claims to have been born in 1937, no minor discrepancy when piecing together the events of a life of confusion, conflict and controversy.

Indeed controversy entered her life from its conception. She was the illegitimate child of Jack Copper, Vita Sackville-West's chauffeur. Copper was also a philanderer and a bully. Simmons's mother Marjorie was only sixteen when the child was born. Marjorie's full identity remains uncertain but it is known she was of superior parentage to Copper, whom she later married. The pregnancy though was fraught with trauma. Unmarried pregnant girls of sixteen were far less tolerated in society than today. Marjorie locked herself away for most of the nine months but such isolation did not save her from brutal beatings from those around her. One close and sadistic relative is alleged to have kicked Marjorie in the stomach. Whether or not this was a causal factor for the problems which beset Simmons for most of her life remains a moot point.

Simmons was born at Sissinghurst Castle with only a mid-wife in attendance. There was immediate confusion over the sex of the child. The clitoris was so swollen that the mid-wife did not know whether Simmons was a boy or a girl. At that time, when in doubt, a child would automatically be registered as a boy, and Marjorie's child was named Gordon Langley Hall. Today, especially if the child were born in hospital, the aberration would have been spotted and relatively minor surgery would have spared Hall – and later Simmons – the mental stress and physical abuse and controversy that blighted much of her life.

As a child Hall spent her holidays at Sissinghurst. She played with Sackville-West's son, Nigel Nicolson, who claimed not to have noticed

anything odd about Hall. However, the child was nicknamed Dinky, a name which Nicolson felt had connotations of bisexuality. Simmons herself though was painfully aware of her 'deformity,' and later describes herself as looking and feeling like a little girl. At the Church of England boys school she attended she felt unable to share cloakroom facilities, and when the time came for her voice to break it refused to oblige. Around this time Hall also met Virginia Woolf. It may be stretching credibility to suggest that the adventures of Woolf's eponymous hero-heroine Orlando had any major influence on Hall but there are uncanny similarities between fiction and fact.

Hall showed early signs of writing skills and Sackville-West and her husband, Harold Nicolson, read her juvenile writings, adding their encouragement.

From her natural family though there was little interest or affection. Copper hated the child and even Marjorie behaved more like a sister than a mother. Fortunately she was raised by her grandmother, Nelly Hall Ticehurst. When she died Hall's world collapsed and, scraping together what little money she had saved together with insurance money from her late grandmother's estate, she fled to Canada. Determined to conceal what she knew to be her true sexuality she crew cut her hair and set about making her way in the world.

Hall worked for a while as an uncertified teacher on an isolated Ojibway Indian Reservation. When she was not teaching or preparing the school lunch, she was making notes for her future writings. She moved eventually to Ontario where she joined the *Winnipeg Free Press* as obituaries editor. From there she crossed the border and her fortunes began to change. She worked for a while as society editor on the *Nevada Daily Press* in Missouri, but the desire to progress to greater things prompted her to move to New York. There by day she worked as an editor with a newspaper syndicate. At night she wrote her first full length book *Me Papoose Sitter*. Shortly after it was published Hall became very ill with internal haemorrhaging and abdominal swelling. By chance, a distant female relative, Isabel Lydia Whitney, discovered Hall in hospital and, impressed by her fortitude, invited her to share her forty room mansion on West Tenth Street.

Hall spent six happy years living with Whitney. Her contacts ensured Hall was introduced into the society circuit and she was able to mingle comfortably with the rich and powerful. Clearly her early acquaintances with the literary giants counted for more than her illegitimacy or ambiguous sexuality. It was during this time that Hall met that great English character actress Dame Margaret Rutherford. Miss Rutherford had been given a copy of *Me Papoose Sitter* and was struck by its contents.

She felt the role of the Ojibway woman, Poor Old Grandmother, in the proposed film of the book was just made for her, and she and her husband Stringer Davis travelled to New York to see Hall. While there Whitney told Rutherford and Davis not only of Hall's medical condition, but also the fact that she, Whitney, was dying of leukemia. Rutherford and Stringer were deeply touched by what they learned and, having married too late to have children of their own, they 'adopted' Hall at the age of 23.

Hall remained with Whitney until she died. She had requested that she be buried in England beside Hall's grandmother, Nelly Hall Ticehurst, and Hall, assisted by Joan Crawford, made the arrangements. Whitney bequeathed Hall her property, her art collection and over \$2 million.

With her inheritance Hall was able to move to Charleston, South Carolina where she bought and settled in an old pink stucco mansion house, the Dr Joseph Johnson House. From then on, Hall spent part of each year in Charleston and part at Rutherford's home in Gerrards Cross.

For a while all seemed well. The writing began to flourish. Hall concentrated on writing biographies of the rich and famous. Perhaps significantly these include ones of Princess Margaret and Jacqueline Kennedy, both women whose lives had in some way been tainted by ill fortune. She was again welcomed into the local society, her credentials as a successful writer, her relationship to Margaret Rutherford, and now her wealth all playing their parts. On the downside, Hall also began to associate openly with the African American community in Charleston which to an extent alienated her from both straight and gay communities, especially since Charleston's gays were vehemently assimilationist, while the crossing of ethnic lines was still taboo in Deep South society at large.

Suddenly Hall once more became violently ill and she was rushed by her frightened housekeeper to the local hospital. There her condition was at last recognised and some time later she entered the Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore for the corrective surgery that was to transform her life.

So, in 1968, Gordon Langley Hall emerged from the Johns Hopkins in dress and high heels as Dawn Pepita Hall, names she took in memory of the Sackville-Wests. She faced many visits to a woman's clinic, where doctors appeared to be more concerned about her mental state than the physical. She was told that in matters relating to sex she had the mind of a fourteen-year-old, and that were she ever to marry she would need someone of great understanding. She was however advised that she was capable of child-bearing.

Back in Charleston, the elderly dowagers managed to get over the shock of Hall's transformation, and their amusement at the name change.

They too recognised the need for Dawn to find some respectable bachelor from their ranks whom she could marry, although their motives may have been driven more by self interest than those of Dawn's medical advisers.

After so many years of confusion and repression it is perhaps not surprising that Hall had difficulty paying heed to such caution. The first man in her life almost fitted the bill in that he appeared very much the kind of gentleman the dowagers wished upon her. Sadly, he was already married.

His place was swiftly taken by John-Paul Simmons. Simmons had arranged a date with Hall's housekeeper but failed to turn up at the appointed hour. The housekeeper stormed off in a huff and Hall herself opened the door to the young man.

The courtship was brief. Simmons proposed, Hall accepted, and Dawn Pepita's life once more yielded to controversy and confrontation.

John-Paul Simmons was a chauffeur and garage-hand with aspirations to become a sculptor. Then 22 years old he was nine years younger than Hall claimed to be. He was also black.

The wedding was reputedly the first legal mixed marriage in South Carolina and the tensions within the community began to escalate even as it was announced. The ceremony had to be held in the living room of Hall's mansion as no white church would perform the service, and the black church where it was to have taken place was threatened with bombing. The wedding announcement was placed in the obituary section of the local *News and Courier*. A firebomb thrown at crates destroyed their wedding gifts from England and nearly caused harm to the couple and their elderly neighbour.

When she learned that the marriage had not taken place in church Margaret Rutherford arranged for the couple to travel to England for a blessing at a church in Hastings.

Back in Charleston life did not become any easier. Dawn was followed by boys in the street who taunted her on her sexuality. Her dogs were shot, and she was beaten up and raped by a Ku Klux Klan member. The one star to shine amid the gloom was the birth of a daughter, Natasha Margienell Manigault Simmons in 1971, but even motherhood failed to stem the waves of prejudice. As Charlestonians saw it Dawn was anathema. They justified their hatred by the fact that Dawn had transgressed too many socially constructed lines – gender, race and class.

Eventually the family were forced to abandon Dawn's mansion. Simmons herself was told years later that the Mafia had been employed to kill her, and probably would have done so had they not fled Charleston.

In fact, their decision to leave was precipitated after Dawn was attacked and badly wounded when she disturbed an intruder, who was about to knife her infant daughter.

With Dawn's home and money gone, John-Paul also ran off with another woman, older still than Dawn. He was later found, himself deserted, living in a cellar in Albany, New York, selling his blood to survive. His mind had been wrecked by alcohol and drug abuse and he was later confined in an asylum. Dawn divorced him in 1982. She then moved to New York State and became an active member of an Episcopal church.

In later years Simmon's writing changed direction. After the biography of her adopted mother she wrote other celebrity biographies. In 1993 she wrote a semi-fictional account of a British woman who marries a black man from Charleston, *She-Crab Soup*. Her autobiography, *Dawn: A Charleston Legend*, was published in 1995.

In her final years she reaped more column inches as an eccentric than as a writer. Sadly, her biographical details do not feature in any major literary companion, whether English, American or International. Whilst her early novels are probably not of great merit, her output as a biographer certainly ought to be noted.

Her ex-husband, John-Paul survives her, as does Natasha.

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TEARS OF LOVE

(As water is to life so are words given in LOVE)

by Sandy Lee-Guard

**WHY? A familiar cry! Who was it today?
Not me, at least I think! What would happen tomorrow?
It rain last night – heavy showers were reported!
It did rain last night but only in tears!**

**No-one knew but it kept happening! But then we do know why?
Why things are as they are! How to change – would anyone try?
They needed the rain to quench a thirst!
They needed it so much but instead only tears fell last night!**

**It takes talk – something they bulk at! It takes nerve – to set
out to do right! It takes time because time heals!
It takes one person or two!
To met at a border, to shake and say sorry!
Maybe tears of joy could be planted!**

**Getting together, taking an active role! Feeling empathy; put
the other first!**

**Opening hearts with words of grace! Thinking carefully, love
conquers all!**

**Dryness kills – hearts and souls no longer relate!
But maybe tears of understanding will prevail!**

**Words rain down to create a knowledge seeping through to the
driest part!**

**Giving life to human needs!
Watered carefully gives sustainable growth!
Tears of Love have just been sown!
Life is far more important don't you think?**

NIGHT AND DAY

By Nazalee Raja

There once was a girl who fell in love with a man while she was a student before she became a woman. She married the man and had a daughter, and found that love did not give her the happy-ever-after she had promised herself as a girl.

Night followed day. Day followed night.

The woman with the girl locked inside resolved to begin again with a new life. She cherished her daughter and hoped this would sustain her. She became obsessed with cutting the split ends from her hair. She never knew how long she spent at this, or that it was her small way of reducing the brokenness in her life. She knew only that it soothed her.

There once was a boy who wanted to be a writer, who grew up to be a man who wanted to be a writer, so the man became a teacher. He told himself this job would support him, and his wife and his daughter, while he composed his fiction. He knew it would be hard to provide for his family with his imagination. Man cannot live by writing alone. He told himself this, but teaching demanded all his time and energy and left him no time to think.

Night followed day. Day followed night.

The man's creativity slowly shrivelled up and withdrew into the hard, acidic core of him, where it tormented him with pinpricks of doubt about who he was and what he was doing with his life. The words he had once thought would express his inner passion now congealed inside him, filling him with bile. His sourness about himself expanded and filled his life, blurring his vision until everything looked grey, even his wife and child, until he and his marriage were both mere husks.

There once was a girl who was truly loved by both her parents. She knew this because they told her so as they sat her down and explained that they were getting divorced. Daddy was moving to another home as soon as he could afford one. In the meantime, Daddy slept on the sofa, and the air between her parents was purple with bitterness. They agreed they had lost their way – to each other, but not her, they assured her.

The girl was a romantic, a gift from her mother. She wanted her parents to live together and be there to read her to sleep.

Night followed day. Day followed night.

The girl's sanctuary was her imagination, a gift from her father. She invented stories about the world outside her night-time window. She told

these tales to her father before he bid her goodnight, hoping to change the future and make him stay, like Scheherazade cheating death with stories. Each evening, she recited an instalment of the story *Night and Day*:

Once upon a time, there was a young god with golden hair and a sunny smile who fell in love with a mortal maiden with long, dark tresses which fell to her knees. He courted her, until she fell in love. They were ready to live happily-ever-after, each fulfilled by the love of the other, and would have done so but for his father.

There was a rule in those times against mortals, who were few, and gods, who were many, falling in love and being happy. The young god's father was furious and accused the maiden of corrupting his son.

To punish her, he took the couple to stand trial before the king of the gods, as was the custom in those times. There the young god and maiden both vowed to love each other forever. The king of the gods knew the rules: this pairing could not be allowed. Yet he pitied the couple and disliked the father.

To teach the father a lesson, the king of the gods decreed that the young god would henceforth be called Day and bring light to the world; the maiden would become an immortal called Night to bring it rest and darkness.

The lesser gods responsible for pulling the sun and moon across the sky were idle and neglected their duties. This judgement would bring consistency to the world, and deprive the jealous god of his son.

Moreover, it would give the lovers the chance to meet: once when Night turned to Day and again when Day turned to Night. To this day, the sky is red at dawn and dusk because of the lovers' ardent embrace.

There once was a girl who told a story about the creation of night and day to show her father the power of love. One night, after the vivid red, mauve and orange had faded from the sky, she heard a tapping at her window. Outside, a maiden with long, dark tresses pleaded for the girl's help. The maiden, Night, said the girl had guessed the truth, and now held the power to break the spell. The King of the gods decreed it. The lovers could be united, at last, if the girl said the word.

The girl, being a romantic, liked this idea. Yet, she worried that the world would end without Night and Day performing their duties. Plants would not grow. People would not know when to sleep. Sadly she told the maiden she was sorry, she couldn't agree.

Day followed night. Night followed day.

The girl continued to use her imagination. It became her greatest friend and consolation.

There once was a boy who wanted to be a writer, but this desire was suppressed in the man he became. One day it was revived by the daughter he'd created. Following her example, he began to write again. At first, his words were inanimate, but he persevered until he'd coaxed them back to life, and after a while, they gave him new life.

The man gave up teaching and worked in a supermarket, where he sat at the checkout planning his stories. His writing became a means of self-realisation, and his creativity matured when he remembered what he had loved about stories as a boy:

You can lose yourself in a story, but you can also find yourself.

Day followed night. Night followed day.

The man, inspired by his daughter's story, left one of his own for his wife to find.

There once was a girl who fell in love with a man who wanted to be a writer. The girl became a woman in love with a man who wouldn't write. There came a day when she could find no more split ends. She knew it was time to find her new life.

Day followed night. Night followed day.

The woman came home one day to find a present waiting for her from the man she had loved. She read it with a fast beating heart. She understood: he had returned to her. It was a story about two people falling in love; a story as old as night and day.

LOVE LETTER

by Gill Smith

My darlings,
I'm sorry you aren't here yet;
sorry not to laugh and play with you;
sorry I can't hold you, yet.

Your father and I,
we've chosen to wait;
we want to give you everything
and then more love.

Do you mind, I wonder,
waiting a little longer,
for my career, a bigger home,
a garden to play in with you.

Be patient with us, darlings,
when your parents fuss, get it wrong.
We've all these spare months
of love to lavish.

And when we're old, forgetful
but doting, please forgive us those years
we won't get to spend
with you and your children.

Until we meet, my beautiful babies,
stay in my dreams,
my thoughts and my heart.
I love you.

WHAT PRICE TAPS?

by Merle Fletcher

Some people would call it a 'fetish' I suppose, this 'thing' I have about wallowing in bubble baths.

But it's unbeatable you know. Up to your wotsits in soft white froth, table beside you with your favourite drink and smokes, plus scented candle all completed by the randy feller seated at the tap end! Well, if they want it they've got to pay the price haven't they? And I mean to say, suffering the taps is little enough to pay these days isn't it?

Honestly though, this erotica in the bath tub is all very well, but you'd never imagine what it leads to at times. Why half the time if I'd read about it or someone told me, I'd just think it was a lot of pork pies. But when it actually happens to YOU – well you're more or less obliged to believe it's really occurred, aren't you? The last time it caused problems I can tell you. In this old Victorian house I was. You know the kind, divided into flats like. Graham has this flat on the first floor: there were two stories above, a basement, oh and an attic room right at the top. I hadn't intended anything to happen at all, bumped into him quite by chance I had – but you know how it is! Got asked back for a nightcap, hadn't had it in ages, and before you know what's what – Gray's yer lover for the night.

Not exactly an elegant looking house, but he'd gone to town on his apartment all right. Tastefully done out purposely for the art of sheer seduction. Just one large room it was, with a kitchen, bathroom across the hall.

Leastways, that's how it stood when Gray took it over. But now, oh boy. He'd wanted his own secluded little seduction spot: the sort of thing that made your knees go weak at the sight of it, that aroused the appetite of all those erogenous zones: invited you to it with the irresistible desire of a starving woman being offered food. So he'd built his bed up kind of high, just enough feet below ceiling level so you wouldn't bump your heads. They're so high the ceilings in Victorian houses, aren't they? Anyway, it was almost like being on cloud seven before you'd ever started. He hadn't wasted any space either. The area below the bed was all enclosed and was like a dressing room, with clothes hanging all down one side. Had enough to open a shop he did. It had a little mirrored unit and a stool. Dead posh. A mini staircase led up to the den, which had a black wrought iron balustrade around it. Carpeted in goat skins it was. Oooh, I tell you it's very sight awoke every nerve ending in your body.

Anyway, I'm going off the track a bit. It wasn't the first time I'd been there, so Gray knew I liked to bath first. I always consider it a good idea, don't you? After all, you've no way of knowing where they've been that day and you don't want one of those near you if it's even been within 'screwing distance' of any one else in the past few hours. Besides which it keeps their desire active and by the time you get down to it they're so desperate they'll do just about anything to please. So he opened the wine and we sipped, while I casually slipped off a shoe, then undid a button, followed by another a minute later. You can't rush these things. It's like a carefully prepared meal. If you gulp it down then you're likely to get indigestion or some nasty thing like that. Every morsel needs to be savoured. Besides which it's so beneficial to HIM. Why with every move you make, with every extra inch he sees of you his little heart flutters that bit faster; adrenalin pumps that bit more rapidly, so anxious is he to get his hands on your body.

I make 'em wait I do. When I was down to stocking, pants and suspender I sent Graham to run the bath and when it was ready I toddled across the hall. His eyes were nearly popping out of his head at the sight of me. Poor soul. He hadn't eaten for some time either and I was getting pretty aroused myself to say the least. Good as an angel without wings he was. Everything there just as I liked it. The foam bath, chilled champagne, candle, fags. Even one of my favourite tracks playing. He is a dear.

We sunk ourselves up to the brink we did and he sponged me all over. He made sure as he did so that he aroused that appetite I was talking about earlier – of my erogenous zones. It didn't take a lot of work either. Mind you, my little toes played their part too – but you've all done this yourselves haven't you? The bathroom became more and more steamy. The windows and mirrors misted up and not only from the heat of the water either. Well, we got so carried away with excitement, lusty quirks and laughter that rose as our anticipation did – well his certainly did anyway. We were high spirited in more ways than one and we simply didn't notice. Not a word of a lie. We never heard a sound, yet there must have been all this rumpus going on for quite some time. But you see, we were to a considerable degree, totally enveloped in what we were doing. And enveloped in bubbles too I might add.

All of a sudden there was this almighty big crash and a damn great axe thing came splintering through the door. Fair had heart failure I did.

"What the hell?" says Gray as this arm came through the gap and drew back the bolt. And before you could say: "Wash yer back luv" there stood this ruddy great fireman, helmet an' all. You wouldn't credit it would you? Could have blown me away in a bubble you could. I didn't know

where to look. Good job I don't blush. Here, wasn't a bad looking chap either, what you could see of him that wasn't hidden behind the gear like. I could have covered my face in shame – but most of my shame was submerged in soapsuds anyway. So –

“Sorry to burst in on this little hum, er, party, but there's a fire broken out in the top floor, the attic. Got to empty the building soon as we can. So if you wouldn't mind”. No panic at all there wasn't.

I'd got no clothes. No robe. So I just stood up in all my glory, stepped out of the tub and wrapped a bath sheet round me carnal knowledge. The fireman's eyes were bulging too at this point I remember. Still, that might have been the smoke from upstairs, ay?”

“Come on Gray, don't just sit there luv” I says, chucking him another towel, “all good things have to come to an end”. Not that we'd had the end if you recall. Next thing we knew we were outside the house looking in. The firemen were real sporting, gave us blankets to wrap round us. It wasn't the warmest of weather you see and by this time somebody's anticipation had drooped somewhat. What a mess! Engines, firemen, hoses, other occupants, ambulance, onlookers. You name it, it was there. Especially water, oh, and smoke – there was plenty of both of them.

We felt our night had been ruined, but the saddest thing of all was the old boy who lived in the attic flat. Got taken away in the ambulance he did. Suffering from the fumes of the smoke or something. That was the most terrible part. Real shame I reckoned. Not that I knew him, nor did Graham. It's the thought though isn't it? Not nice knowing that while you're living it up in a bath tub some old geezer's croaking it. By the time we were allowed back in, most of the night had gone. So had our ardour, so the fulfilment of our decadence had to be postponed for another occasion.

Graham's flat hadn't suffered any damage though, that was the good bit, and I guess it's all part of life's cruel pattern: not getting what you want when you want it most. Like I said at the beginning though, the things these water sports lead to: and we're both still hungry! Still, here's to the next time I say. Wonder what that'll bring?

A LETTER TO MY GRANDSON

by Michael Percy

Seeing you in your cot just a few hours after you were born made what I must do today almost unbearable. I must leave you. But although you will never have your own real memories of your grandparents I want you to know something about your grandad and me, even if it is only a few lines on a scrap of paper – these lines, this paper.

Your life will not be easy and I would give anything to change that fact. When you are older I am sure you will rage against people like me who knew what they should have done but failed. Failed you and all our children. When I was born, sixty-two years ago, this tragedy was already written but for us the world was a beautiful place and it was impossible to imagine anything that could stop that beauty continuing forever.

There were problems but they seemed to be within our control. You will learn about the collapse of Soviet communism in your history lessons but when I was just ten years old I watched the television pictures of people smashing the Berlin wall and how excited my parents were. It seemed like an important victory. A year later a man called Nelson Mandela was set free marking the end of the dreadful apartheid in South Africa. But looking back, the signposts to catastrophe were there: in the same year the Allies went to war against Iraq and your history books will call that The First Oil War.

What you will never find in history books is this: Jessica Fairweather met Neil Tennant on June 15th 1999. I actually remember the time, it was three o'clock on a glorious sunny afternoon. We were at university together, I was studying to be a teacher and Neil an engineer. I had finished my lectures that day and was on my way to halls. Neil marched up to me and dumped a picnic hamper at my feet. The other girls were as stunned as me as he pulled open the hamper. "I've spent my whole month's food money on this," he said. "If you don't come and eat it with me I'll throw it in the bin and starve until July". How could I refuse? I was just twenty and Neil was twenty-two. Within a few months we were totally committed to each other and that lasted for forty-two years. Until this year, 2041.

In my last year at university I spent more time than I should have with a womens' protest group at a nuclear weapons base called Greenham Common. It was the year 2000 and amidst the celebrations for the close of the millennium and the start of a new century, we celebrated the end of the peace camp at Greenham Common after nearly twenty years of protest. We sang together and danced next to the wire fence as the base

closed and the weapons were moved away. It seemed like another victory but the following year the Twin Towers were destroyed in America and The Second Oil War began when The Allies invaded Afghanistan followed by Iraq then Syria. As you will learn, that conflict devastated the Middle East for twenty years. As we endured the war, joining protests whenever possible, and suffering endless suicide attacks at home, your grandfather and I tried to build a life for ourselves. There was still so much to put right in the world and when we began to hear the phrase 'global warming' it simply joined a long list of world problems to be solved. And we thought we could solve them.

Government after government lacked the courage to take more than half measures in energy production and use. But it's not fair to put all the blame on the government: the people squabbled about so called unfair greenhouse taxes and accused other nations of causing the problem. Very few nations reduced air travel and businesses continued to guard their profits at all costs. It began to occur to me that the human race does not deserve this beautiful planet and that it will only truly blossom when we are all gone.

Through these years of war, Neil and I struggled to build a life into which our own children could safely be born. Thomas, your father, was born in 2011 while we were still living in London. Watching you in your cot takes me back all those years – you look so much like him. We knew he deserved the best possible chance of a happy and peaceful life so we sold everything and bought a small-holding in Devon, and began learning to live off the land. It was hard but at the time we never fully realised how important those few acres would be to our family's future.

Those were the happiest days of my life. Despite the shadow hanging over us we seemed to have found a brief shaft of sunlight. I wish you could have seen Brindiwell Farm in those days. The house was in the lea of a small hill so we never suffered the worst of the winter winds. Every morning I looked out of my bedroom window onto our land, our fields of hope, spreading out from the house, flat and fertile. There was a stream running down from the hill and of course a well. Your grandad put wind turbines on top of the hill for electricity and we learned to plough and sow and harvest.

My beautiful daughter Laila, your aunt, was born after our first year at Brindiwell. It was a hard life – we were either working or asleep – but through it all we were able to watch your father and his sister blossom like our crops in the red Devon soil.

The new century began with ten years of war – the Second Oil War – which brought with it ten years of price rises. Oil was far from exhausted but supplies were unreliable causing rising prices for everything that was made from oil or used it as fuel. The rise in transport costs had its most

devastating impact on the price of food, making life in cities unupportable for people on low wages. By 2035 large parts of the cities were abandoned and many thousands of people were living in temporary camps surviving on tiny food rations. If ever you go to a city try to picture what it was like when I was a young woman. Those rusting car wrecks were the gleaming pride of the city. At night the streets were lit like daylight and the shops were crammed with people – happy people. I dream about those city nights but when I wake I can't help but weep for all those lost lives.

Science offered replacements for oil but nothing was as versatile and none of the options were cheaper – why should they be said the businessmen? There was a rush to use coal but that added to global warming. Massive wind farms were planned but industry did not have the capacity to make the turbines at the same time as the tanks and guns needed for the war – the tanks won. In the end it was not a lack of oil that brought the world to its knees but simply the fear of oil's end, and greed.

Some believe that the Water Wars were just an extension of the Second Oil War, the shed blood simply flowing in ever widening rivers across the world. Whatever its name, warfare spread and the barren deserts grew. In 2022, the armies held their breath as they watched Israel destroyed by Iranian nuclear missiles followed by the American retaliation on Iran. Over five days twelve million people died, but the dreadful irony was the destruction of the Iranian oil fields. When the armies breathed again they realised the most precious commodity on earth was not black oil but clean water and so the Water Wars began.

Through all this we tilled our land and watched it change in a reflection of what was happening to the world. Our summers grew longer, the rain less frequent and the soil more dry. When we first moved to Brindiwell we were able to sell much of our produce but after just a dozen years, we were struggling to feed ourselves.

When Laila was eighteen she announced she wanted to become a nurse or even a doctor but in those times the only organisation that offered training was the National Defence Force so our baby girl became a soldier. The signs had been there when she was small – her dolls were not mummies and daddies but doctors and patients. Your father stayed on the farm with us and the happy news was that he met your mother Amy and she came to live with us at Brindiwell Farm.

The warmer climate meant we had to learn about new crops. The stream from the hillside behind the house ran dry in 2036 which became known as the Dry Year, although more arid years lay ahead. It is strange how people remember years by the bad things. We could have called the year Laila's year because she qualified as a doctor. But forever we will say that Laila qualified in the Dry Year.

Everyone who was trained by the NDF was required to give five years military service before returning to civilian life so our little soldier went to war, but to save life rather than take it. Laila changed in those years. She never told us what she saw and experienced but we knew it was scarring her deeply. She served in Eastern Europe and Spain and witnessed the Cordoba gas attacks. She volunteered to go to Mexico and was caught in the struggle to halt the anthrax epidemic. On the rare occasions she returned to Brindiwell Farm she looked grey and old. After resting for several days she would sit for hours on the hillside reading the books she loved as a child. After a week she could smile again but as the time approached for her return a black mood descended like a winter mist.

We lost Laila in 2039. Killed on active service was all we were told, not even where or when. The practice was to bury soldiers where they fell and the letter of condolence from the NDF promised that we would be told where she was buried when 'the current hostilities ceased'. That time never came and I have never seen my daughter's grave.

You woke just now and I went to pick you up to save your mother's sleep. But you were hungry and soon Amy took you and fed you. I am writing this as I watch you snuggled at your mother's breast, your small arm raised so the tiny fingers can caress your mother's lips. Amy is smiling down at you. This little tableaux has made me weep, but with happiness. You are the future and my husband, your grandfather, will live on in your name – Neil.

I began this by saying I wanted you to know about your grandparents and I am afraid our story has a sad ending. Grandpa Neil was murdered just a few months ago by raiders who stole the last of our goats. Your mum has a picture of us both which I hope you will treasure along with this letter. One day you will inherit Brindiwell Farm and when that time comes I hope things have returned just a little to what they were when we first came here nearly thirty years ago. Growing our food is hard in the dry brown fields that now surround the cottage but Thomas works miracles to keep us all alive.

Now I am watching the sun rise on what will be another scorching day. What was once a vista of green trees reaching down to the river is now a flat and featureless brown wasteland. Before the house wakes I will collect a few things and leave. I am now sixty-two years old. I have trouble walking and cannot work in the fields. If I stay another day, if I look once more upon your beautiful face, I know I will not have the strength to leave. But I played my part in spoiling your birthright and so I want to do the only thing I can to lighten your father's burden. My tears are blurring the page as I write this last line. Goodbye my love – we know we let you down and it is too much to expect forgiveness but try to love us as I know we would have loved you.

