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December 2017

# Fiction

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Least Expect Them'*

Says Author Jenny Ashcroft



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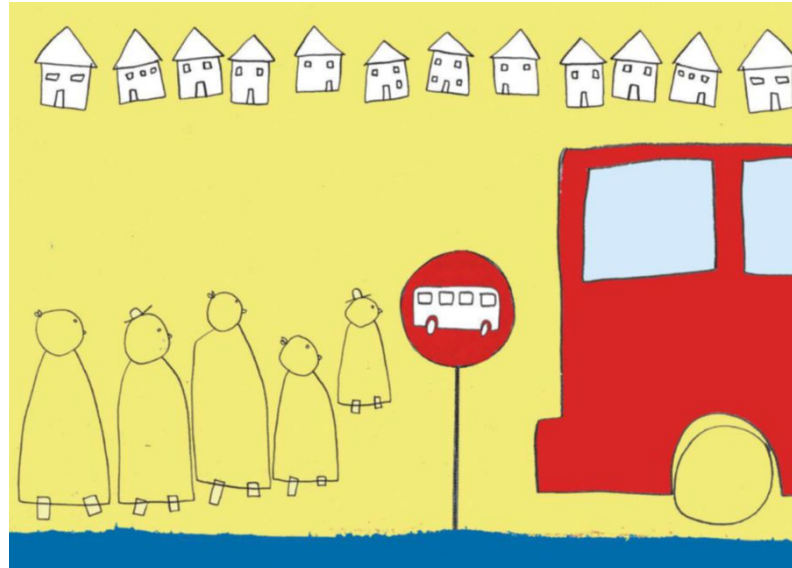


## Welcome

Whenever we have a story in *Woman's Weekly Fiction* with an unusual title, I always want to read that one first — and this month it was the intriguingly named *Love, Sausage, Chips and Beetroot* by Elizabeth Dale that caught my attention straightaway. It's one of our shorter stories but they're often the ones with a clever twist, and this is no exception — you'll find it on page 19. Enjoy!

**Sarah Giles, Editor**

*PS Our next issue is on sale 5th December 2017*



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# Angels Without Wings

NEVER MIND NOT EVEN REMEMBERING MY OWN DEATH,  
I HARDLY REMEMBERED ANYTHING OF MY LIFE

**E**xcuse me," I say, but the man sitting on the grass with the clipboard waves his hand at me to be quiet. He seems to be writing something, quite a lot the way his pen is moving over the paper. I try to sneak a peek, but he glares at me and moves the clipboard so I can't see.

We're up on a grassy hill looking out over a landscape of tired greens, vibrant yellows and mellow browns and there's a faint smell of wood smoke, freshly turned earth and decaying leaves.

I didn't expect being dead to be like this. I mean I've met a lot of dead people in my time

and they've never told me anything. When I say I've met a lot of dead people, I mean people who have died briefly before being brought back.

A question we often ask them is, "What do you remember?"

They usually say, "One minute I was up the ladder fixing the guttering and the next I woke up here." Or, "There I was doing the ironing and suddenly here I am."

"Here" was the accident and emergency department where I work. As you'd expect we get a lot of accidents and emergencies in and some of them are a matter of life or death.

I've read accounts of people watching medics working on them from above or seeing lights at the end of long tunnels and loved ones reaching out to them, but none of my patients have ever reported anything of the sort.

However, I've seen enough in my lifetime to make me believe there is more to this life than we are aware of. You know, little

miracles that happen every day and can't be explained.

There's not a pearly gate in sight. The landscape looks familiar, but perhaps that is so as not to alarm us. Being dead is disorientating enough.

The clipboard seems wrong, though. Up here (if I am up here and not down there!) you'd expect either scrolls or computers, not pens and clipboards.

"I wonder if..."

"Sh!"

I fall silent again and listen to the sound of his pen tapping against the paper. I should have known there'd be some sort of bureaucracy involved.

He hasn't spoken a word to me since I arrived, which I don't remember, by the way. The last thing I remember is riding my bike to work, legs going like the clappers because I was late leaving home, cursing myself for remembering to set the alarm on my mobile phone, but forgetting to plug it into the charger.

*I didn't expect being dead  
to be like this*





My head hurts. So does my elbow. And my knee.

You'd think in the hereafter there wouldn't be any pain — and you'd think they'd have a first-aid kit.

"What is your name?"

He taps a name badge with his pen.

"Edmund," I say and he nods briefly and gets back to his tapping.

Edmund has lustrous black hair that just touches the collar of the smart-but-casual, camel-coloured jacket he wears. He's wearing blue jeans and black boots and he's really quite beautiful.

His eyes are vivid blue, ringed by lashes so sooty, he could be wearing mascara. But there is something about him, something innocent and unworldly.

*Will they show me all the things  
I've done wrong in my life?*

"No wings yet?" I ask and he ignores me.

I wonder if there's some sort of test you have to pass to move further along. Will they show me all the things I've done wrong in my life? Is that what he's doing now, making a list?

I wish I'd made a bucket list. A lot of people do. I've met some

patients in hospital who say, "At least I ticked everything off my bucket list." And others who say the list never ends, because there is always something new and exciting to add to it.

I hope they're managing at the hospital. We're short-staffed. We're always short-staffed and I'm under no illusions about my

dispensability, but I know it'll leave them in a spot for a while and will cost a fortune in agency nurses to plug the gap.

But we have a good team and I know they'll do extra shifts to cover so the patients won't suffer.

I bite my lip to stop the tears that are throbbing behind my eyes. I'm not going to cry. What's the point? Once you're dead, you're dead and there's no going back. Not when you've been dead as long as I have, which has to be several minutes at least.

"I think my arm might be broken," I say and he stops, pen poised, and stares at me. "It hurts," I add and there is a flash of sympathy in his eyes. "Is there anyone here that can help me?"

# Angels Without Wings

I don't like this afterlife. If I thought about it at all, I imagined it a place free of pain and worry, but I am in pain and I'm worried.

Who will take care of Clover?

Clover is my cat. She's a tabby who was found as a tiny kitten in a patch of clover and was hand-reared by a vet nurse. I've had her since she was eight weeks old and she's getting on for 12 years old now.

"I'm worried about what will happen to my cat," I say. "She's called Clover."

"I like cats," Edmund says, his voice soft. "Cats are independent and self-sufficient. It is good to be independent and self-sufficient, isn't it?"

"Yes," I say. "But sometimes we... they need to be looked after."

"Someone will need to feed her," he says thoughtfully.

He puts his pen into a holder on the side of his clipboard. It's one of those with a flap and he closes it, tucks it under his arm and walks off.

I'd get up and follow him, but I hurt all over. He walks a few paces then stops for a second or two before turning back.

He bends down and says, "Wait there."

"I'm not going anywhere," I say with an attempt at a laugh which sounds more like a sob.

He digests that for a moment, then digs in his jeans pocket and takes out a small pack of tissues, which he passes to me. Then he smiles. It's just a brief smile and very small, but I cling to that smile because I think he might be going for help.

Do they have paramedics in the hereafter? Do they even need them? It's nice to think my nursing skills won't go to waste here, but a shame that I'd need them.

Someone will take care of Clover. Not Mags, who is the closest thing to a friend I have, because she already has three cats.

Barbara, the vet nurse, will see that Clover is rehomed. She'll find someone who will love her as much as I do.

I hope someone realises what's happened so she isn't on her own for too long.

Oh, but I'm going to miss her so much.

Here come the tears, a whole flood of them pouring down my face and dripping off my chin. I fumble with the packet of tissues, but my left arm is useless and it hurts. I pull a tissue out with my teeth.

What happened to me? Did I have an accident? I shouldn't have taken the short cut, it was silly, but I was so late. I should have stuck to the cycle lanes and the main roads instead of cutting through the country lanes.

There is, was, still so much I wanted to do with my life.

Never mind not even remembering my own death, I hardly remember anything of my life for the past five years. Last night, for instance, I was late getting home. I've never been one of those people who can walk out at the end of my shift regardless.

We had a little girl with a wooden bead stuck up her nose. Oh, bless her, she was so worried

know walking round with beads up their noses?"

She thought about it. "None."

"There you are then."

"I can take over here if you want to go," Mags whispered as she came into the cubicle. "You should have gone half an hour ago."

"Don't go!" little Lily cried out, clinging tighter to my hand.

"I'm not going anywhere," I said.

"I want to see what this bead looks like after all the bother it's caused."

Dr Ani was busy with another patient and she didn't arrive for another half an hour. She's tiny, always reminds me of a bird and she has very small hands. Not that hand size will help, but she does seem to have a knack with things poked up noses.

"We don't want to have an operation, do we?" she said. "Now, I want you to relax for me, Lily. Close your eyes and think of nice things."

"Do you like kittens, Lily?"

I asked and the little girl smiled.

"Oh, yes..." We talked about kittens for a few moments and

Regrets? No, I don't think I have any. It would have been nice to have raised a family, but I am — was — happy with my lot. I like my ground-floor flat with its small, leafy garden and I love Clover.

I am — was — doing the job I loved. I suppose I do get lonely sometimes and miss having someone close to share life with.

I can hear voices and I squint into the low golden sunshine to see two figures coming my way. It is Edmund and he has his double with him.

That's disappointing if everyone here looks the same, although they are very nice to look at.

His double is slightly taller and much broader and he breaks into a run.

"Hey there, are you OK?"

He kneels on the grass beside me and wriggles out of his jacket, draping it over my shoulders. It's warm and smells nice, like sandalwood. His hair isn't as long as Edmund's, but he has those same blue eyes and dark lashes. He's without Edmund's air of innocence, though, and seems sharper, his bones more angular.

Still beautiful, though.

"Do all the angels look the same here?" I ask.

"Good grief," he says. "You really are hurt, aren't you?"

"I told you she was," Edmund says. "She thinks her arm might be broken."

"That's true. I'm also dead,"

I say, in case he needs to know.

"You're not dead," he says.

"You mean I can go back?"

Ben looks up at his brother.

"I told you," Edmund says. "She says silly things. She asked me if I had wings yet. Why would she say that, Ben?"

Ben takes the clipboard from Edmund's hand, opens the leaf and shows me the first picture. It is a picture of me, made up of thousands of tiny dots. The wind ruffles the pages and I see more pictures drawn in the same way of the trees and plants around us.

It makes me want to cry, as does the overwhelming relief that I am still alive.

"That's brilliant, Edmund," I say, impressed.

"I'm very good at drawing," Edmund tells me.

"Yes, I can see you are."

"My brother says he found you at the side of the road. You appear to have fallen off your bike. He hid



*I did get up and follow him,  
but I hurt all over*

— as was her poor mum.

I've never had kids, never had the opportunity really, and for the past few years I haven't even had time for a proper relationship. But I've always had a rapport with children. I made her laugh and when the second doctor came and tried to get the bead out with no success, I hugged her.

"Third time lucky," I said.

"We'll get Dr Ani to get it out. She's very good, better than the men doctors."

I winked at the doctor when I said it and he hung his head and shuffled out of the cubicle with his shoulders hunched, which made Lily giggle.

If Dr Ani wasn't successful, we were going to have to sedate the child. The giggling stopped abruptly and she grabbed my hand.

"I'm scared," she said. "What if you can't get it out?"

"Of course we'll get it out," I said. "How many people do you



your bike behind the bushes and carried you here."

Edmund smiles down at me. "I am very strong although I am quite thin," he tells me. "You don't weigh much. Do you eat proper meals?"

"Ed," Ben says softly.

"Thank you, Edmund," I say. "I do skip meals sometimes. I know I shouldn't."

"Ben is my twin brother," he says. "I'm not allowed to talk to strangers if he isn't there, in case I annoy them."

"I never said that," Ben says, exasperated. He pulls a mobile phone from his pocket. "Not in those words. I said if anyone comes up here while you're drawing, don't keep talking to them. Some people come here for peace and quiet."

"If people don't want to talk, they shouldn't go where other people are," Edmund says.

"I'm going to call an ambulance now." He makes the call. "Do you remember what happened?" he asks when he's finished. "Was another vehicle involved?"

"I don't remember a thing."

"I saw it happen," Edmund says. "There were no other vehicles on the road."

"What were you doing down by the road?"

"Some people came along with their dog, so I went down to the road until they'd passed by. I didn't want to upset them by talking to them. Then I saw her riding her bike and she just seemed to fall asleep and fall off. She was going very fast."

"We need to have a talk about this," Ben says. "You don't have to hide from people. I explained myself badly." He turns to me.

"The ambulance won't be long."

"What's your name?" Edmund asks. "I am allowed to ask her that, aren't I?"

"Of course you are," I say.

"I'm Cheryl. I'm pleased to meet you, Edmund."

I hold out my good hand and he shakes it gently.

"Edmund, would you go down to the road and wait for the ambulance?" Ben asks. "Tell them where we are?"

"Of course," he says. "Am I allowed to talk to them then?"

"Yes, Ed. You'll have to talk to them. Bring them up here."

Edmund nods and sets off down the hill at a trot.

"Is there anything I can do to make you more comfortable?" Ben asks. "I'm sorry he brought you up here instead of calling for help. I hope..."

"Don't worry. My neck feels fine. I must have had quite a soft landing on the grass, but landed awkwardly on my arm. That's going to put me out of action for a while."

A fat lot of use I'm going to be as a nurse with a broken arm, but perhaps this has been the wake-up call I need. I don't need a bucket list, I need a life outside work.

Ben sits on the grass next to me. "I promised my parents I'd take care of him while they went on holiday. He wanted to come up here and draw rather than come to the shops with me. He finds too many people and too much noise overwhelming. I shouldn't have left him."

"He seems very capable," I say. "It's probably good for him to do things on his own."

Ben looks pleased. "That's what I say, but Mum's very protective of him. She even makes him wear that name badge. It has phone numbers on the back. He wants to be more independent. You wouldn't believe the fight I had on my hands to get her to go on holiday. Sorry, the last thing you need now is me wittering on."

"No, no, I do," I say. "It's good to talk. It keeps me awake. So do you live at home?"

"I left home when I went to university and never went back. Sometimes Edmund comes over

"Cheryl! Is that you?" David, the paramedic says. "What have you done to yourself, love? Hi, Ben."

"I'm a firefighter,"

Ben says when I look puzzled. "Our paths cross from time to time."

"All we need is a cop and we'll have a full set," David quips.

I give myself over to their care and thank Edmund and Ben for looking after me.

My arm isn't broken. It's badly sprained and bruised. In fact, nothing is broken. Dr Ani says if I'd been awake when I fell, it might have been worse. As it was, I was out cold and landed boneless, like a drunk.

"Not enough sleep," Dr Ani says after blood tests and scans. "Not enough to eat or drink. Too much rushing about. Now you have to take some time off and rest. Doctor's orders. We will manage without you for a while."

Mags drives me home a few hours later and we look for my bike down the lane, but there's no sign of it. Edmund must have hidden it very well.

"Not that you'll be riding a bike for a while anyway," Mags says.

"Do you think I imagined them?" I say. "The beautiful twins."

"Are you sure you didn't bang your head?" Mags asks.

"I feel so very tired."

"I'm not surprised. Would you like me to stay with you tonight?"

"I'll be fine."



to stay for a night. He often says he'd like a place of his own and I think he'd cope fine."

"He seems very capable," I say.

"He is, he really is."

I tell him about my basement flat opposite the park and my beautiful silver tabby Clover and he listens as if he's genuinely interested.

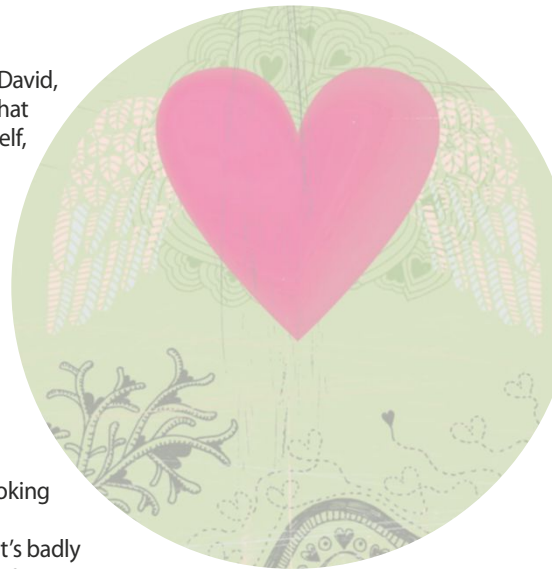
We talk until the paramedics arrive, with Edmund leading the way.

"I'm going to make sure you eat something, though."

When she's gone, I get into bed. It has never felt so welcoming or comfortable. Knowing I don't have to get up, I slide into a deep, restful sleep and I dream of Ben, striding up the hill to the rescue.

In the morning, I start to make my bucket list. The first thing I write is, "Get a life."

I have a leisurely bath and I potter around the flat, as



well as you can potter with one arm in a sling.

In the afternoon, the doorbell rings and when I open the door, there's Ben with my bike.

"Ah, I guessed right," he says. "I thought that had to be Clover sitting in your window. How are you? You're looking better than yesterday. Where would you like the bike?"

"In the hall, please. Thank you."

He props it against the wall. He's even more beautiful than I remember.

"I thought it was a bit dodgy leaving it behind a bush, so I took it home with me yesterday. Is there anything I can do for you while I'm here?"

"No... yes. Stay for a coffee?"

"I've got Edmund with me, sorry."

"Him too. I'll make you some lunch. Please?"

"I like cats," Edmund says, appearing at the open front door. "Your cat is beautiful. Will she let me stroke her?"

"Why don't you come in and find out?" I say.

"Thank you," Edmund says.

"We'd like that."

Look at me, the day after I thought I was dead here I am inviting two guests into my home and offering to make them lunch.

"I'll need some help," I tell Edmund and he looks delighted, but not as delighted as his brother. "What shall I do?"

"We'll both help, Ed," Ben says.

I can't stop smiling. Once you open the door on life, you never know who might walk in. Things are going to change — I am going to change. I'll still work hard, it isn't in me not to, but there's going to be time for me, too. Time to finish making that list. Time to live.

THE END

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# Wag Tales



*Izzy never said much about herself but I did suspect a sad story lay hidden away behind her sorrowful eyes*

**S**ue, sometimes I think you'd be happier if you were a dog, too." My husband often tells me that. Don't fret. He always says it with a mischievous glint in his eye.

His words did enter my mind as I watched young Izzy. She stood at the reception desk of my dog-grooming parlour with Mrs Moss and her shih tzu. Actually, she's a shih tzu cross so, technically, she's a mongrel. Nobody would ever dare tell Mrs Moss that, though. "Her fur is still in her eyes," she said to Izzy. "Can I have a discount?"

Izzy is brilliant with dogs. She's a natural. She's all of 16. She's learning on the job while attending a college course. "No," she blurted before she struggled to find a less impolite reply. "I mean... I'm sure Susan can snip her fringe a bit shorter for you?"

Mrs Moss amended her complaint, "I meant it's too short. Yes, it's far too short. You can't glue a bit back on, can you? Can I have that discount now?" Her and her discounts!

I thought this might be the best moment to intervene. I didn't want Izzy to get nipped by snippy Mrs Moss. "Harriet?" I stepped out of the doorway where I'd lurked unseen. It leads into the back room where the heart of my business lies. I sauntered over to the reception desk. "Is something the matter?" Mrs Moss forced a smile. "There you are, Susan."

"Is there a problem?" I'm as boxy as a bull dog; she can't bully me into 10 per cent off. "No, no, it's fine. You did

a lovely job today." She surrendered her credit card and Izzy put her payment through. Then off she went, back to her shiny silver car. Izzy watched her all the way, through the window. "Can I stay in the back with the dogs from now on?" she asked in a worried tone.

"Sorry, I will need you to man the phone... and deal with humans... now and again," I replied. "It'll get easier as you go along, I promise."

Izzy never said much about herself but I did suspect a sad story lay hidden away behind her sorrowful eyes.

The phone rang and I gazed at it pointedly until she picked it up.

"Hello, Wag Tails Dog Grooming. Oh, no, sorry, Mr Clarke, we close at 5.30pm. I doubt anybody will be here

might be bringing his boxer in after hours."

"It's all right, I'll sort it out. Let's get back to work, shall we?"

Trixie is a nervy toy poodle. Growl, tremble, yip is her repertoire. Izzy was in charge of shampooing since she hadn't yet got up to speed on clipping and nails. She spoke reassuringly to Trixie as she lifted the shower head in the bathing cubicle.

On the grooming-table in front of me stood Beatrice, a bearded collie, in a knot — or a 100 of them. I wielded my clippers, knowing this wouldn't be pretty. A bald dog would be off home this afternoon.

I glanced over to Izzy. I had a plan, regarding her. I'd decided, if I told enough tales of my own 50-plus years, I'd hit the jackpot one day and she'd open up like a can fog food. I'd already told her about who'd bullied me at school and how I hadn't left with many qualifications. I'd told her about my first love and how he'd stood me up at the registry office (I cried buckets for days). I'd told her positive stories, as well, to balance things up. I'd

**The phone rang and I gazed at it pointedly until she picked it up**

any later than... Hello... Hello?" She dropped the receiver down with a clatter. "He hung up." Her disdainful expression suggested all her fears about mankind had been confirmed yet again. "Sorry, his dog was yapping in the background, I barely heard a word he said... but I think he





gone into great detail about the day I met my hubby.

I told her about Janet who used to own the parlour and how one day she'd asked if I wanted to take it over when she retired.

Today, I couldn't decide whether to tell a happy story about the day I was crowned Carnival Queen or a poignant story about the day I had my big operation (the one that stopped me having kids).

Before I could launch into either, the bell over the door in the shop front alerted us to another customer.

"You go," I told Izzy. "Just pop Trixie in the dog-dryer first."

A pale-faced woman trailed in from reception when Izzy returned. "Oh, no, you've started." Beatrice's owner flapped her hands. "I was going to ask you if there was another way round this. I feel just awful."

Her dog already had a few long stripes of coat missing, looking like landing strips. "I'm sorry, love. I told you this morning, your dog won't grow a nice shiny coat again until all these knots are gone. Hold her head for me. That's it. When I'm finished, I'll give you some advice on grooming."

I smiled as I clip-clip-clipped away while she stood looking guilty and mortified. "We all make mistakes," I soothed. "This reminds me of... of... Oh, yes, the day I had my car accident. It was all my own fault, I don't mind admitting."

I gave Izzy a glance as she removed Trixie from the dog-drier.

"Yes," I went on with my tale. "I pulled out at a junction without paying attention. What a flaming idiot. A van hit me, side on. Still, we all make mistakes. It's best to fess up and get on with it."

Beatrice's mistress gave her dog an apologetic hug. "I'll never let her get in this state again."

"Course you won't. We're here to help. I'll give you a bit of a price cut if you want to bring her in on a regular basis." Beatrice ended up fluffy at two ends and as naked as Lady Godiva in the middle. She did look a lot more comfortable though, and, for that matter, so did her owner when she left us.

"It's always nice to put something right, isn't it?" I said to Izzy, in case the tale she hadn't yet told involved a bit of trouble she'd created for herself. Dogs sometimes bite when they're scared... even the sweetest-natured ones. "You can clip Trixie now. I'll supervise," I added.

"Really? Great!" Her smile could have outshone the sun.

Once she'd lifted Trixie onto the grooming-table, she turned on her clippers. I didn't offer her any real guidance, she'd done the same clip before and I wanted her to know I trusted her. She did well too, sectioning

"Oh yes," she said as Izzy put her payment through. "I think me and my Harry chased her around half of Cornwall before we caught her. She sat in our caravan then, shaking. She did the same for days, the poor little mite."

We chatted on for another five minutes. Izzy very nearly joined in.

As soon as Maggie and her little friend left us, I glanced over to the clock on the wall. It was ticking its way towards 5.30pm.

"Oh... Mr Clarke's still due in with his boxer," Izzy said. "I'm ever so sorry about not being able to put him off." She wrung her hands as if she expected me to boil up like a volcano, since I hadn't bothered earlier in the day.

I did frown a bit, but not at her. I'd known Mr Clarke for years. He owns a cairn terrier. He often drops her in on spec, usually when she'd decided to go scuba-diving in a muddy puddle.

"I have no idea where he's got a boxer from," I said to Izzy. "He

I unwrapped my chocolates right away. Well, it had been a long day. "Here you go, Izzy. Dig in. What a nice man. It's enough to restore your faith in human nature, isn't it?"

She picked out a strawberry cream. "I didn't need him to do that." I assumed by her sullen manner she meant she'd given up on humanity as a toddler, but then a smile lifted her lips. "You restore my faith in human nature every day, Sue."

Well, I didn't see that coming. "Do I?"

"Of course you do. You're always kind, reassuring and encouraging... to everybody. Except maybe Mrs Moss. Mr Clarke's right, you ought to say thank you now and again. So... thanks."

I stood sniffing a bit while replaying the day in my head. It seemed a pretty ordinary one to me. It struck me then that perhaps Izzy hadn't found many people to thank in her life... for ordinary days, or otherwise.

I told you she has a tale to tell. Whatever it was, I could see a lot of myself in her as we stood with that box of chocolates. I hoped she could see a lot of herself in me, too.

"Come on, let's demolish this lot." I offered her another treat. "You know what my husband's always saying to me? He says, 'Sue, I sometimes think you'd be happier if you were a dog yourself.' I don't think so. For a start, chocolate's poisonous to dogs."

"That's very true," Izzy agreed. "I suppose I'd rather be a person, really."

"You don't want to stay in the back with pooches all day then? Not even if Mrs Moss comes back?"

I didn't expect the big, wide grin she wore or the twinkle in her eye, but both were very welcome. My trainee — and new young friend — did open up a bit then. She showed me one thing she'd hidden very well so far — and gave me a right old laugh.

"Oh, she'll be back all right, Sue," she said. "She's still after a discount!"

THE END

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**Our Minister of Goodwill hurried off, smiling to himself**

each portion of the dog off in her mind so she didn't miss anything. She might not have been the fastest clipper in town, but she had steady hands and a good eye.

"I'll make a cuppa while you carry on." I left her to it. I hurried off into the kitchen that sits behind the parlour and made a brew. I returned with two mugs. "That's lovely work, Izzy. Really, really lovely work."

My new trainee held her breath while blinking as fast as a bee's wings. Every time I praised her, she fought to hide her tears. It's as if she'd never heard a kind word or been good at a single thing before in her life.

I lavished her with praise when Mrs Compton, Trixie's owner, came in to pick her up, too. "Izzy clipped her. Hasn't she done a good job? Maggie found Trixie on the streets one summer," I explained to Izzy. "Didn't you, Maggie?"

must have bought another dog."

The mystery cleared itself right up when he arrived.

He pushed the door open with his back. He had no other option, since he carted in a box... rather than a boxer dog. "There you go then." He dropped it down on the counter in front of me and Izzy. "I said I'd pop it in. It's a little 'thank you' for all those times I've nipped in with Milly when she's got herself mucked up again. You always fit her in somehow."

Izzy peered into the box. It contained two boxes of chocolates, two spider plants and two bunches of flowers.

"How sweet of you." I hurried round the desk and gave him a kiss on the cheek. "But really, you didn't have to bother."

"Course I did. You should say thank you now and again." Being the modest sort, he didn't hang around. Our Minister of Goodwill hurried off, smiling to himself.

# Cheerful Charmaine

THIS IS WHERE I'M GOING TO COME UNSTUCK.  
WE ARE HEADING TOWARDS A CONVERSATION  
— AND I DON'T DO CONVERSATIONS

**L**

shouldn't have come. I don't do well in social situations. In fact, I'd be a recluse, if I could get away with it.

The trouble is, people come to the Prom Café (which is the rather grand name I've given my van) and I chat and make jokes and they think that's me, but it isn't.

It's all an act, but it's not too difficult to do when I know I'll only be seeing people for a few minutes. I can put on quite a show as Charmaine, the coffee lady.

"Are you all right there, Charmaine?" Annie asks when she sees me sitting on the other side of the chiminea. "You're all alone. Are you cold?"

"I'm lovely and toasty, thanks," I say, pasting on my most cheerful smile. "Sitting here warming my cockles."

It's the sort of thing I always say, jolly old Charmaine, but when it comes to making conversation, I haven't a clue.

"Would you like another burger? My brother-in-law's just put some more on the barbie."

"Ooh, not for me, thanks," I say rubbing my stomach. "I'm full. It was all lovely."

"How about some more wine?"

I hold out my glass. "I never say no to more wine," I say and she fills me up.

Actually, it's only my second glass.

I never accept invitations, but I couldn't say no to this. Annie is one of my regulars at the café and she seemed so down when she asked.

In winter, people buy hot drinks from me and stand protected from the wind and rain in the old Victorian shelter on the prom.

In summer, I put out a couple of folding chairs so my customers can sit in the sun if they want to.

I've seen the same faces for the past couple of years with

a few new ones thrown in during the summer holidays. I serve ice cream to fractious children and coffee to their frazzled carers.

I enjoy it so much that sometimes I forget why I came here.

"Actually, I'll join you," Annie says and plonks herself down on the outdoor sofa next to me. My heart sinks.

She stretches out her legs and sighs. "Ah, it's good to sit down for a minute."

This is where I'm going to come unstuck. We are heading towards a conversation and I don't do conversations.

"You've been on the go since I got here," I say and my voice has gone thin and uncertain because I feel as if I've just stepped onto a cobweb-thin sheet of glass and it could shatter under me at any minute.

Conversations inevitably lead to questions and I don't answer questions. I don't generally ask them either, unless it's something like, "Would you like marshmallows on your hot chocolate?"

*I'd be a recluse, if I could get away with it*





I had practice conversations with myself before coming here, just in case, but you can never predict what someone is going to ask, can you?

"How's business?" Annie asks.

"Good," I say. "Steady."

"That's good. Do you ever think about getting somewhere bigger? I mean a proper café."

"No."

Well, that killed that one dead. I cling to my wine glass and struggle for something to say. All those things I had in reserve

to say in case of awkward silences have been forgotten.

But Annie's no quitter. "You like working from the van then," she says. "I suppose it gives you freedom. If you don't fancy driving it to the prom one day, you don't have to."

"That's right." Come on, Cheerful Charmaine, think of something witty to say.

Make a joke. Stop clenching your teeth and talk to the woman.

"Lovely barbecue."

'Oh, good grief, is that the best you can come up with? Pathetic.'

"It is nice, isn't it?" Annie says. "And we're lucky with the weather. It's a bit chilly, but at least it's dry and not blowing a gale. I'm glad you came, Charmaine."

"So am I." A lie. I would rather be anywhere than here. "Thank you for inviting me."

"Actually, to be honest..." Here it comes. She's going to say she wishes she hadn't bothered. "I can't help thinking you look familiar and not just because I see you on the prom. I know from your accent that you're not local. You must have lived around

*I cling to my wine glass and struggle for something to say*



# Cheerful Charmaine

here a couple of years and no one knows anything about you."

They've been talking about me? Wondering about me? I have that strange numb, freezy feeling in my chest. Fight or flight, isn't it? Well, I'll take the latter.

In my panic, I tilt my wrist to look at my watch and splash wine all down myself.

Annie dashes off to get a towel and by the time she comes back, I'm on my feet ready to leave.

"I was going to say it's time I was going anyway. I don't like leaving the cats too long when they're alone all day."

"You have cats?" Annie is dabbing at my front with a towel.

"Two."

"Let me get you some dry clothes. We're about the same size."

I don't know how this is happening. I'm in Annie's bedroom and she's pulling things out of her wardrobe.

"You're slimmer than me, but these are quite small on me so should fit." She hands

I wasn't going in a taxi. I was going to walk. But she's right, it would be uncomfortable.

She leaves me to it and I look around her bedroom. You could probably fit my whole flat in this room. Well, not quite, but almost. The room suits Annie. She's got big wooden letters that spell *LOVE* on her dressing table, but a king-sized bed that she sleeps in alone since her marriage broke up.

How do I know her marriage broke up? Because I broke it. Smashed it to pieces.

I didn't mean to. I didn't know he was married until it was too late.

And now Annie is my friend and I don't want to be her friend. I can't be her friend. I'm not even sure I can stay here any longer, in this town, I mean.

How mad is it that the first place I have ever really felt at peace is the one place on earth I shouldn't be?

"Knock, knock," she calls out and pops her head around the door. "All done? Well, that



the people down there. It's all part of their plan to get me back, 'out there', but I don't feel ready. I'm not sure I ever will."

She turns to face me. She's really beautiful with her raven-black hair and clear, green eyes and even if she wasn't, she's a lovely, warm-hearted person and I don't understand why Gavin cheated on her with me.

She looks so sad.

"Come back to my place," I say, surprising myself as much as her. "We can get a pizza on the way and I have wine. We can watch a film."

She cups her hands over

"Wife?"

"Please don't make trouble for me, May. I have children to think of."

"Children?"

"Three of them."

It was such a shock. Gavin practically lived in my flat over my café. Well, he did when he was in Yorkshire. I knew he had a home down south, but I didn't realise he shared it with anyone. He'd even talked of selling up and making his secondment in Yorkshire permanent.

"You're lying," I said.

"I'm sorry, May. I'm really sorry."

"Does anyone call you anything for short?" Annie asks as we walk back towards my flat.

"Mum used to call me Charm." Only Gavin used to call me May. I didn't much like it to be honest, but he could have called me a potato and I'd still have loved him.

"Charm? That's nice. Would it be all right if I called you that?"

We pick up a pizza from the takeaway and turn into my street. I live in a flat in what was once a seafront hotel. My van is parked in the communal parking area around the back.

My café went under after I broke up with Gavin. Without wanting to sound like a complete wimp, I went to pieces afterwards. He'd deceived me in the most awful way and had even borrowed money from me.

Not a huge amount, but it was my buffer. My little nest

*I have that strange numb, freezy feeling in my chest*

me a jumper and jeans. "I'll pop your things in the machine and I can drop them at the van tomorrow."

"No, really. No."

Annie's not a pushy person. She's nice. One of my favourite customers actually, and someone I'd love to have as a friend, but I don't do friendship and absolutely not with her.

I don't know why I came, except she said it was her birthday and I felt sorry for her because she often looks so sad. I imagined she was lonely, but there are lots of people here so she can't be.

"Nonsense. You can't go in a taxi all sticky and wet. Just leave your things on the floor."

looks better on you than it does on me! You can keep it, if you like. I bought the shirt and jeans when I was on a diet. You know what it's like. You think you'll fit into something one day and it never happens."

She goes to the window and looks down. It's dark out there, but she's got all sorts of fairy lights and lanterns strung around the garden.

"I didn't expect them all to be here, to be honest," she says.

"When I invited you to my birthday party, I envisaged the two of us with a pizza, a bottle of wine and a rom-com. Then my sister and her husband showed up with bags of shopping. They mean well, but I don't know half

her mouth and nose and her eyes widen. "Shall I?"

"Why not? You can meet my cats."

She giggles. "That would be so naughty. But everyone is having a good time. I don't think we'll be missed. I'll leave a note on the fridge for my sister. I'll just say I walked you home. Or shall we get a taxi?"

"We can walk. It isn't far."

I deliberately moved in near her. That makes me sound like a stalker, but it wasn't her I wanted to see. It was Gavin.

"You can't call me any more," he said last time I spoke to him. "My wife has found out about you."

egg in case I ever got too ill to work for a while.

So with no buffer, it didn't take long for me to go broke.

"Are you all right, Charm?"

I nod. But I'm far from all right. I was about as far from all right as it's possible to get the day I drove down here and parked outside Gavin's house. My café had gone by then, I was living in my car and my life was in ruins and somehow I felt Gavin should pay.

Or perhaps I just wanted him back. I was so confused. I still am sometimes. I wouldn't want him back, though. Not now.

What made it worse was that he came back to me and stayed around long enough to find I was broke before clearing off again. I didn't know if he left because he felt guilty or because he couldn't get any more money out of me.

I had a little money from the sale of my premises, but not enough to start again.

I got his address from one of his work colleagues. "I knew he was married," he told me. "I didn't approve of what he was doing, but I didn't know how to tell you."

I saw Annie come and go, but there was no sign of Gavin or any children.

That was when I started to think straight. I wanted to sit on the seafront and drink coffee, but there were no cafés. There was no way I could afford to open one, but I've always been good at spotting an opportunity and I had enough to buy a small van and set up, as long as I could get the necessary permissions.

And one day, I thought, Gavin might turn up at my café and I'd either run into his arms or throw coffee in his face.

But in the end, it was Annie who stopped for a drink. She'd been for a run along the prom and had her long, black hair tied back in a ponytail.

"This is amazing," she said. "About time we had something like this around here."

After that, she became a regular. One day, I asked who was looking after her children and after a brief flash of pain in her eyes, she said, "I don't have any children. Unfortunately."

It was quite a struggle to hide my surprise. I began to wonder if I'd got the wrong person, but gradually, over the months, I found out more about her.

When she married Gavin, she was a widow. She laughed bitterly when she said he thought he'd be entitled to half the house when they split up. That must have been about the time he came back to Yorkshire, only to find I was broke.

She didn't tell me how she found out he was cheating, just that no matter how much he begged for her forgiveness, the trust had gone and taken the love with it.

I put on a film and we eat the pizza, but it feels like cardboard in my mouth.

I'm going to have to move away. I can't stay here and be friends with Annie. It would be so wrong.

The cats come in and investigate our visitor. They've always been very friendly and affectionate. Except with Gavin. They didn't like him very much and used to shrink away if he tried to pet them. Sam even hissed at him once, which was odd because I'd never seen him

do that before.

"You must be Eddie," Annie says, tickling the black ears of my white cat. "And you're Sam."

Sam is as black as Toto is white. The only white on him are two white socks on his front paws. He rolls onto his back next to her and waits for her to tickle him while Eddie is pushing his face into her neck.

Gavin used to call them The Negatives.

It's odd because I'm sure I didn't tell her their names.

"We have a lot in common, Charm," she says, reaching for her wine glass. "I think life has bruised us both. That day I stopped by your van for the first time... you were the first person I'd spoken to outside work for months. Yet you've told me nothing about yourself."

"Not a lot to tell, really," I say, my mouth so dry, I have to take a slurp of wine. "I loved a guy and he let me down. He took my savings and when my business folded, I had nothing to fall back on. End of story."

My laughter is brittle. "It still hurts. I think it always will. I lost everything because of a man and it just wasn't worth it."

"There are good men," Annie says. "My first husband was one of them and it would have killed me if I'd had to hand over half the house that his death paid for to Gavin."

She finishes off her wine. I want to say, "We have more in common than you realise." But I can't. If I tell her the truth, it could set her back months.

But then she says, "We have much more in common than just being bruised. Gavin's the one that hurt you, isn't he? Why did you come here, Charm? Did you know who I was?"

"I wanted to tell you," I say, my heart hammering. "I don't know for sure why I came here, except I couldn't let him go. I was so confused, but perhaps all I wanted was to hear him say he was sorry. But he wasn't sorry at all, was he? How did you know?"

"I suspected at my party. I'd seen a photo of you on his phone with your cats — that was how I found out. But you

"Your cats were in the photo," Annie goes on. "When you said you had two cats, it more or less confirmed it and as soon as I saw them, I knew. Gavin told me their names and that he called them The Negatives. He said he got lonely and you were there and..."

She bites her lip.

"I didn't know, Annie," I say. "I had no idea he was married. When we broke up, he said he had three children."

"He's such a liar," she says. "Do you know where he is now?"

I shake my head.

"Neither do I. He left the company and moved away, I think. But I don't care. I'm just glad he's out of my life."

"I'm sorry I lied to you."

"You didn't. Not really. You just didn't tell me anything. I'm glad I got to know you before I realised who you were."

"I'll move away too," I say.

"Why?"

I squeeze my eyes shut to hold back the tears. "You don't want me here."

## She didn't tell me how she found out he was cheating

looked so different. Your hair was straightened and sleek and dyed red and you were wearing make-up. You look much nicer now."

I touch my hair. I've let the colour go and it's back to dirty-blond curls. I tie it back in a ponytail when I'm working in the van and I don't wear so much make-up now.

I'd put on make-up for the party and straightened my hair. I don't know why I bothered because it was already going curly again and besides, it didn't feel like me any more. The me that fell in love with Gavin has gone.

"Who said? I like you, Charm. I thought we were friends. Please stay. The prom needs a café and I need a friend."

I refill our wine glasses. I don't want to move away. I love it here. This is my life now and I like it.

"To friendship," I say.

"To friendship," she says and we clink glasses and laugh. "And we have Gavin to thank for that."

That makes us both laugh even harder. I no longer have to pretend to be Cheerful Charmaine and if that isn't something to celebrate, I don't know what is.

THE END

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# Thinking Positive

They'd evolved routines to go with their new habit of parsimony. Alexa was getting tired of beans on waffles, though

Alexa sighed as she carried her basket around the supermarket. She'd offered to get the shopping on her way home, as it was her half-day at work; since being made redundant, Greg usually insisted on doing every shop, as if he had to justify his existence by being extra useful.

Heartbreaking, in a way.

She fancied a treat or two, but given all the bills they had coming in, that lemon torte calling to her from the chiller cabinet was as far out of reach as a holiday in the Med (or a day at Camber Sands, come to think).

Greg, thankfully, had now reached the "acceptance" stage of the five stages of "grief" post-redundancy, his natural optimism gradually returning.

His philosophical *sangfroid*, however, was not without its irksome side. There were only so many times she could hear, "Worse things happen at sea!" without wanting to ask, edgily, how the downturn in their fortunes could be compared to a trawler running aground. She knew how he'd respond: "It's a metaphor, love." Possibly even adding, "I never met a metaphor I didn't like."

But it wasn't a metaphor, she thought grumpily, tossing

marked-down veg into her basket, it was a cliché.

Despite Greg's healthier perspective, they lay awake at night, totting up overheads instead of sheep, listening to their landlady Mrs Cardew shuffle about in the flat upstairs, her dachshund lan barking in response to her one-sided conversation.

Apparently, all four of them were insomniacs.

Mrs C wasn't the worst landlady (she'd got a plumber in, at only the second time of asking, to fix the leaky cistern), but what if she raised the rent? What if she gave them notice once she clocked that Greg wasn't going out in the morning? What if, what if..?

Luckily, Alexa still had her receptionist job, even if it was only four days a week, but they'd evolved routines to go with their new habit of parsimony. For starters, they always went extra carefully through their till receipt before leaving a supermarket, in case they'd been overcharged.

She was tired of beans on waffles, though, or their

delicious alternative, waffles *au surprise* (no beans). Overall, she was just plain tired.

At the checkout, she noticed a poster in the window of the travel agent's opposite the supermarket, said poster showing couples frolicking on a palm-fringed beach.

Think positive, she told herself. Think of the reality — landing at an airport at 3am with your contact lenses welded to your eyeballs, looking for your transfer bus. That was thinking positive — albeit in a negative way.

Carrying her shopping into the street, it struck her that nobody else had a care in the world. Look at that woman up ahead, carrying bags with

shops. Yep, there she went. Probably gave her clothes to Oxfam after a couple of wears (in which case, Alexa made a mental note to pop into Oxfam at the next available opportunity).

Next stop for madam was a home accessories shop, the sort of place where everything was hand-stitched, painted or crafted.

Alexa entered the shop behind her quarry, edging her bags around pricey breakables. The woman bought a little porcelain clown, which duly vanished into clouds of pastel-coloured tissue paper. She probably already had a spot in mind on her mantelpiece.

Alexa indulged in a daydream where she and the woman swapped consciousness, though the fantasy took a surreal turn when she pictured them returning bodily to their respective homes (by now, each in possession of a porcelain clown).

Greg would look at the clown and say, "Reminds me of when my dad took us to the circus and me and my sis crawled under a tent flap, and saw a clown swearing as he tried to master a unicycle."

While madam's husband would say, "That's the 12th

*It struck her that nobody else had a care in the world*

glittery shop logos on the sides, not plastic carriers bulging with sniff-before-you-cook carrots. The only plastic getting stretched in madam's case was her credit card.

Some masochistic sense made Alexa follow the woman at a discreet distance, just to confirm her assumption she'd be heading for more designer

porcelain clown you've bought this week, Cynthia. I think you need to see someone."

The contrast, however fictitious, made her think fondly of Greg — a bloke on his uppers who wouldn't begrudge her an impulse buy, welcoming it with an anecdote.

She followed the woman out of the shop.

Madam was now juggling lots of bags and, as she did so, her shoulder bag slid to one side and her wallet slipped out, falling unnoticed onto the pavement behind her.

Alexa hurried forward to pick it up.

The wallet was weighty. Just peeping in, she could see folded notes. What was another of Greg's favourites from the bumper book of positive clichés? "Something always turns up when you least expect it."

Except, neither of them had ever been thieves.

"Excuse me!" she called to the woman up ahead, and waved the wallet as she turned. "You dropped this."

Madam hurried back. "That was a close one," she shuddered, lifting the wallet from Alexa's hand and then, quite brazenly checking its contents before she nodded curtly and went on her way.

Alexa stared after her. What had she been expecting, exactly? A proper thank-you would have been nice. But as Greg would no doubt remind her, virtue was its own reward. Yeah, right. Tell that to all those oligarchs who didn't pay taxes.

She trudged home to find Greg dressed to go jogging — running had become his new "thing" to stay focused and stimulated. "Any news?" he asked while unpacking the shopping, as if she was a jaded soldier returning from the front.

She told him about the clown-buying woman and the wallet. "You did the right thing, love. They're called Pagliacci figurines, those clowns," he added. "Gran had one. Dad said he'd turn its face to the wall when she wasn't looking, cos he always found clowns creepy, especially crying ones."

She smiled. She might've known he'd have a little story.

"What about you?" she asked as he laced his trainers. "Did Robert Redford drop around and offer you a million quid for one night of passion with me?"

"He did." He grinned. "I told him, throw in a fish and chip supper, and you're on! Oh — and Mrs C asked if you'd pop up for a word, soon as you got back."

She tensed. "Did she wonder why you were at home during the day?"

"If she did, she probably assumed I was working from home."

"Mmm. Think it's about the rent?"

"Nah — she'd have asked to see both of us or just have told me. Probably a woman-to-woman thing," he added blithely, making her tense further.

As soon as he'd left, she climbed the stairs to the flat above. Mrs Cardew admitted her, Alexa stepping over Ian in his basket.

"I'll get to the point," said

when she gets out of hospital. We looked into it and turns out we can change the names on the booking for a small additional fee. So, rather than let the tickets go to waste, we got to thinking about two people it would mean the world to —"

Oh, my goodness! She's going to send us on a cruise! Virtue is its own reward! I know Greg and I were adamant about not taking handouts from family, but if it was spending money for a cruise..? Oh, Mrs C, if it wasn't for that rather large mole on your chin, I could kiss you! Sorry, I missed a bit there. Could you rewind for a sec, Mrs C?

"Sorry, I missed that last bit," she confessed out loud.

"I was just saying, luckily, we were able to change all the booking details and put the tickets in the names of our niece and her fiancé, so they'll be able to take the cruise instead. It's a joint early wedding present from Joyce and myself. Well, she

By the time she heard Greg's key in the door, she'd managed to laugh at her own presumption, expecting her landlady to offer a free cruise. Oh — and see the funny side of Mrs C hoping against hope that Greg stay unemployed a bit longer!

He breezed in, carrying a ribboned cardboard box. Could it be..?

"A proper lemon torte," he confirmed, lifting the lid so she could peer in. "Hand-made by pastry artisans at *L'Éclair d'or*, not out of the cut-price chiller cabinet. And how can we afford such profligacy, you ask?" He winked as he set it down. "I'm guessing you forgot to go through the till receipt when you'd done the shopping, because I had a quick look at it when I was unpacking, and guess what? They forgot to charge for the veg! I thought we'd put the pennies saved towards a little treat. Hope that's OK?"

He was looking at her anxiously, probably because she was frowning as she totted up the discrepancy in price between torte and veg. But then she thought of how long since they'd had a treat, and honestly, what was the point of making things grimmer than they were?

"Of course it's OK," she told him, relaxing her frown. "Anyway, we'll be quids in when Robert coughs up for his night of passion with me, remember."

"Oh, yeah, there is that. By the way, what did Mrs C want?"

"Tell you in a mo. Don't worry, it's all good." And she ran to get the plates.

She'd adopt his own way of looking at things when revealing Mrs C's "offer". Because were two distinct ways of looking at it — "losing out" on a cruise that had never been up for grabs in the first place, or the news they'd been offered two rent-free weeks in exchange for watering a few plants and looking after a small dog.

Going for the second option was definitely a case of thinking positive — a state of mind it wouldn't hurt to try. Just now and then.

THE END

© Gabrielle Mullarkey, 2017

*She's going to send us on a cruise!  
Virtue is its own reward!*

Mrs Cardew, waving Alexa into an adjoining armchair. "I've noticed that Greg seems to be around a lot during the day."

Alexa's heart sank. "He'll get another job soon! He has two interviews coming up. We — we can pay for everything on my salary in the meantime!"

"Oh, I'm sure you can, Alexandra. You're both very responsible for young people. Which is why..." Here she turned a little coy. "I was meant to go on a cruise to the Canaries next month with my sister, Joyce, but after she booked it, she had a fall and learned she'd need to go on the list for a knee op. Well, now she's due to have the op in the middle of the very week of the cruise, so it was either miss the cruise or miss the op."

"I'm sorry," said Alexa, wondering where this was heading.

"It got Joyce and I thinking. It seemed risky to go on the cruise, in case her knee got worse. I certainly don't want to go on it without her, plus she'll need someone to look after her

is our only niece."

Alexa gaped at her. "I... see."

"This is where Greg comes in. I'll have to go and stay with Joyce for at least the week after her op, possibly a fortnight. So if Greg could look after Ian while I'm gone, and keep an eye on this place? Thought I'd run it past you, Alexandra, as men can be quite sensitive about being out of work. I do understand. My late Harold went through a sticky patch in the 70s."

"I'll ask him," murmured Alexa. "When you say keep an eye on Ian —?"

"Have him stay with you both. He's very fond of Greg, and Joyce is allergic. Of course, I wouldn't charge you rent for that fortnight. That's fair, don't you think?"

"Greg might get a job before next month, though, Mrs C."

"Mrs Leveridge from up the road is on standby, but Greg would be my first choice. If the worst comes to the worst and he gets a job, I'll have a rethink."

Alexa went back downstairs, feeling Mrs C had done a number on her.





Alice knows the sort of woman Lindsay sees in the mirror — but it's not her at all

Wednesdays are always busy at the Ashley Grove Residential Home. It's the day Lindsay

and Maria arrive with bags of multi-coloured rollers and lacquer to set up their salon.

Alice is waiting in the conservatory in a line of other ladies, and her wet hair is dripping onto the towel covering her shoulders.

The drips make gentle tapping sounds and Alice imagines they're sending messages in code.

Dripdripdrip. Drip. Driiiiip.

Remember you are Alice. Remember you are Alice.

Alice smiles. She'd mentioned her fantasy to one of the young care assistants once, just for fun. An attempt to bridge the gap between two different worlds.

"Honestly, Alice," the girl laughed. "What an imagination."

But later that same day, she'd seen the girl speaking to her supervisor, and every now and then one of them turned and looked at Alice with pity and concern.

Alice couldn't hear them, but she knew what they were saying.

"Poor soul. But what can you expect in her 90s. The world must seem a confusing place."

"Your turn, Alice," Maria calls across the room. "Lindsay's ready for you now."

# Alice Through T



Alice eases herself to her feet and shuffles into the lounge, where Lindsay's waiting. She smiles and begins trawling a purple comb through Alice's hair.

"So she's definitely going out with him?" Maria says, removing rollers from the head of Carol Smith, who's sitting next to Alice.

"Oh, yes," says Lindsay, "it's all over Facebook."

"I thought she didn't want anyone to know."

"You know what she's like." Lindsay twists Alice's head slightly. "She never could keep a secret."

Alice coughs when Maria generously sprays Carol's hair with lacquer and some of the mist disperses into the adjacent space.

"Sorry, Alice," Maria says, as if just remembering she's there.

Alice smiles. It never fails to amuse her how Lindsay and Maria carefully enunciate their words when speaking to the residents, talking loudly and slowly; different when gossiping with each other.

"So what will we do today?"

The tone of Lindsay's voice makes Alice realise she's the one now being addressed. "A little trim, do you think?"

Lindsay stands behind Alice and they both look into the mirror.

"Whatever you think." Alice nods and gazes at her reflection in the glass.

Lindsay smiles. The same smile the staff reserve for all the residents at Ashley Grove. Alice knows what Lindsay's seeing in the mirror; an old woman with lined skin. Someone for whom the world's a strange and harrowing place; who doesn't understand social media and mobile phones. Who's never sent a text message in her life.

A woman Alice doesn't recognise at all.



"I can't get over it, I really can't. Sitting there as bold as brass while the Reverend Jackson read out the names. The cheek of him."

"Who are we talking about?" Alice asked. She'd just walked into

the dining-room and sat down opposite her father. Her father made a face to warn her and shook his head slowly, but it was too late. Mrs Conway was in full flow.

"Walter Harrison," Mrs Conway said, the contempt obvious in her voice.

"Again," Mr Conway sighed.

"Ah," said Alice. She lowered her head and stared at the plate of cold ham and potatoes.

"And before either of you says a word," said Mrs Conway, "it's all I could get from the butcher's and I had to queue for over 40 minutes."

"It looks lovely, Mum," Alice said, thankful that the conversation had been steered clear of Walter. Her mother was now on her second favourite subject, regaling her husband and daughter on the trials and tribulations of stretching the ration coupons to feed them.

"We all have to make sacrifices these days, dear," Mr Conway

*When she looked up again, she saw her father staring at her*

endeavoured to appease his wife.

"Some of us more than others," said Mrs Conway.

Alice's heart skipped a beat. She guessed the conversation was about to take a backward step, and she wasn't wrong.

"Seven names on the list this week," said Mrs Conway. "Three dead; two seriously injured, Mrs Bell's grandson one of them; and two lads missing in action."

"That's awful," Alice said quietly.

"Yes, well, it might have been nice if you could've made it to church, young lady. Fancy lying in bed until this time."

"Sorry, Mum," Alice said, "but you know I was on a late shift yesterday. I slept right through the alarm."

"And that's another thing I don't understand," said Mrs Conway.

"What are they doing keeping you working there until all hours of the day and night? You're only typing lists of clothing, for goodness' sake."

"But it's important, Mum," Alice said. "The troops have to be suitably equipped. We have to make sure the right kit goes to the right place and they've got everything they need."

"What they need is for all of them that's fit and able to be over there helping to fight." Mrs Conway rose from her chair and went into the kitchen.

When she came back into the room, Walter Harrison's name was spilling from her lips.

"You know as well as I do, dear, that Walter has an exemption on medical grounds," said Alice's dad.

"Hah!" Mrs Conway banged the teapot on the table.

"Walter's got a bad heart, Mum. You know that. He's had it since he was a little boy. It's not his fault he can't enlist."

"There's other things he could be doing," said Mrs Conway, refusing to be mollified. He could

join the Home Guard, or the ARP like your father." Her voice was rising with each word spoken. "It's not fair, is it?"

"No, Mum," Alice agreed. "It's not fair."

She knew her face was flushed, so she bent over to stir her tea even though she'd given up taking sugar when rationing was introduced.

When she looked up again, she saw her father staring at her. What did he see, she wondered? How much did he know?

"It must be nice to have a cosy job behind a desk," Mrs Conway said, rising to clear away the plates. "Your cousins didn't have that option, did they? Nor Mrs Bell's grandson, come to that."

"You can't blame Walter for what happened to them, Mum. He didn't start the war. It's not his fault."

But her mother was already walking into the kitchen, wiping away hot tears.

Alice was on early shift the next day. It was just getting light when she made her way to the bus-stop.

Katy Brennan was already there as Alice approached. They nodded to each other and commented on the weather. When the bus came, they sat and watched the countryside speeding past.

They were the only two passengers who got off at Priestly Manor, five miles outside the village. The magnificent grounds of the large house had once been on view to people passing by, but now all anyone could see was an ugly black fence with a halo of barbed wire and a sentry standing guard.

"It seems a bit excessive for administration offices, don't you think?" Mrs Conway had said when the fence first went up.

"I heard there's a warehouse full of uniforms and equipment and food round the back," said her husband. "I expect they have to be mindful of racketeers."

"You mean people would steal the food meant for our own boys?" said Mrs Conway.

"Some of them would steal the sugar from your tea," replied her husband.

If they hoped their questions would be answered when, at the age of 17, Alice announced she'd got a job in the typing pool, they were disappointed.

"It's pretty boring, really," Alice told her parents. "It's not much different from when I worked at the insurance office, except there are more of us. All we do is type up lists of jackets and boots and match them with the deliveries that come into the storeroom."

Alice walked along the gravel path towards what had once been the estate manager's house. Katy, several steps in front of her, was already turning right into the main entrance of the manor. Neither acknowledged the presence of the other. It was better that way, they were told. Don't get too friendly. Don't get too close.

Alice smiled, remembering her mother's words when Alice

# Alice Through The Looking Glass

complained about the tediousness of the job.

"Someone's got to do it, love," her mother had said. "And I'd much rather you were doing that, safe and sound, instead of nursing overseas, like you wanted to."

The irony wasn't lost on Alice. It was OK for Walter, with his weak heart, to go and fight, but heaven forbid her darling daughter should put herself in danger.

But Alice knew there was more to it than that. Her mother wasn't a bad person. She'd been fond of Walter when he and Alice had been at school together. But like everyone else, after three years her mother was war-weary. After losing two nephews and the son of one of her best friends, didn't she have a right to be?

Alice showed her security pass to the sentry and walked into the hall. She continued along a corridor, through a door and down some steps, through another door and then down another flight of stairs until she was standing in what she always thought of as the bowels of the earth.

She showed her pass to yet another guard, who nodded and pushed open the heavy metal door, allowing her to walk inside.

Even after two years, it still seemed surreal to Alice. The artificial light hit her like a slap in the face, the buzz of the machines like humming bees flirting around her ears.

No one looked up when she entered. To break concentration, even for a second, could mean a single letter of the alphabet missed, a word lost, a life endangered.

Alice removed her coat and sat at the desk vacated by her teammate only minutes earlier. Jane's perfume still clung to the headset Alice pressed against her ears.

She pushed a switch and all she heard was static. Just empty space. A vacuum in eternity. She turned a dial. More static. Now and again she paused and wrote some numbers in her notebook. Another turn. An hour and then another. Whoosh. Gurgle. What sounded like a wave crashing against a rock.

A voice.

Alice held up her hand and, immediately, two women in uniform appeared at her side.

No one spoke. No one asked her what she'd heard. They only

watched as Alice twiddled with the dials in front of her. They watched her face, scrutinising every frown, trying to read between the lines furrowed in Alice's forehead. Still neither of them uttered a word. No one touched the dials. No one except Alice.

And then she looked up at them and nodded. She reached for her notebook and pen and wrote slowly, one word at a time.

*Uncle. Tom's. Cat. Has. Come. Home. He. Has. Caught. His. Mouse.*

Alice felt a hand squeeze her shoulder. She slid from her chair and one of the uniformed officers slipped into her place and clamped Alice's earphones to her own head.

Alice grabbed her notebook and walked to the back of the room and knocked on a wooden door.

"Come in."

Alice went in and placed the notebook on the desk of the man in the room. He read it quickly, took off his glasses, rubbed his eyes and read it again.

Alice watched the smile slide across his face.

"Thank God," said Walter. "Thank God."

He rose from his chair and lifted Alice off her feet, swinging her around until they were both dizzy.

*"Three weeks without contact. We thought he'd been captured"*

"Three weeks," he said. "Three weeks without any contact. We thought he'd been captured, for sure."

Walter picked up his telephone. In little more than a minute, the room was filled with people. Katy Brennan was amongst them, clutching a file so close, Alice thought it would take a crowbar to prise it from her.

They clustered around Walter's desk as each of them barked orders, noted comments. Alice read out the co-ordinates she'd written in her notepad — not just empty space, after all — and everyone turned to the huge map pinned to Walter's wall.

Alice finished her shift at six o'clock. It was already dark as she walked towards the gate, and it was starting to rain. But she didn't mind. In fact, she welcomed it after the stifling heat of the windowless room.

She heard a car coming up behind her. It stopped at her side. The driver stretched over and opened the passenger door.

"Can I give you a lift?"

Alice hesitated and looked around her.

"We're not supposed to..."

"Come on, jump in."

"What if someone in the village sees me getting out?" Alice said as she closed the door.

"We'll say I saw you standing at the bus-stop and offered you a lift. We both work in the same place. It would probably be more suspicious if I drove past you."

"I suppose..."

They carried on without speaking for a few minutes. Walter broke the silence.

"I saw your mother in church yesterday. She looked as if she'd like to see me up before a firing squad."

"I'm sorry, Walter. She doesn't understand. She has no idea what you do. Or me, for that matter."

"That's how it should be." He nodded. "My parents think I count helmets all day."

He went quiet again and Alice knew him well enough to know there was something else he wanted, or didn't want, to say.

"We found a white feather on

the doorstep last week."

"Oh, Walter, that's horrible. I'm so sorry." She reached over and gently touched his arm.

Without taking his eyes off the road, Walter lifted her hand and gently kissed it.

"All these secrets," Alice sighed. "All the lies. Katy Brennan and I were good friends at school. Now we hardly acknowledge each other."

"It's better that way," said Walter. "There's less likelihood of someone saying something they shouldn't. Less likelihood of someone overhearing."

"Do you think we'll ever be able to tell people?" Alice asked.

"About what? Us? Or the job?"

"Both," she said.

"They'll find out about us, won't they? As soon as the war's over and we tell them we're getting married."

"Mum asked me about my locket," Alice said, opening the top

of her coat and pulling out a small silver locket from beneath her blouse.

"What did you tell her?"

"I said it was a birthday present from the girls I work with." Alice let the fine chain slip through her fingers.

"As soon as this madness is over, I'll buy you a proper engagement ring," said Walter.

"That'll be nice." Alice smiled at him. "But I'll still wear my locket every day of my life."

◆◆◆

"You're wearing your locket again today, Alice," Lindsay says, removing the cape from Alice's shoulders with a flourish and seeing the tarnished links of the chain sliding through Alice's gnarled fingers. "Come to think of it, I don't think I've ever seen you without it."

Alice is about to say her husband bought it for her the day he asked her to marry him, but Lindsay's already turned to Maria to continue their discussion about their mutual friend.

"I don't think he's that well off," Maria says, "not when he's got an ex-wife and three kids to support."

Lindsay sighs her agreement and starts dusting Alice's neck and shoulders with a soft, powdered brush.

She gently turns Alice's head towards the mirror and pats her newly acquired waves in place.

"Do you like it?"

"I like it very much."

Alice smiles at Walter who's just appeared and is standing behind her. She lifts up her hand and he takes it in his and kisses it lightly, without either of them taking their eyes away from the mirror. Then Walter helps Alice to her feet and offers her his arm in order to escort her into the dining-room for lunch.

"I hear they're showing a DVD later," Lindsay says as they bid her goodbye. "Are you going to watch?"

"Maybe," says Walter, "but we really prefer listening to the radio in our room."

"They're such a sweet couple," says Maria, watching them go.

"Fancy being married to the same person all those years."

"Well, life was so much simpler then, wasn't it?" says Lindsay. "Everything's so complicated nowadays."

THE END

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# Love, Sausage, Chips And Beetroot

*If Tim didn't act soon, he was going to fail the test their customer set him every day*

Kirsty smiled when she saw Sarah walk into the cafe. "Tim!" she called over her shoulder.

He came rushing in from the kitchen and when he saw their new customer, he almost dropped the tray of chips he was carrying.

"Um, er, hi!" He grinned at Sarah, blushing.

"Hello!" she smiled back — a big, warm grin. And then she frowned as she studied the menu.

Kirsty waited. What gastronomic challenge was she going to set Tim today?

"Could I have the moussaka?" she said. "But could I possibly have it with beetroot instead of peas?"

"Beetroot!" Tim cried, startled. "Um, I don't think..."

"Of course you can!" Kirsty said. "Tim will sort you out, won't you, Tim? You just go and sit down and he'll bring it over."

Tim just stood there, staring after Sarah as she walked to a table.

"Tim!"

He didn't move a muscle.

"Tim!" Kirsty tugged his sleeve. Suddenly he turned. "Yes?"

he asked.

"Are you getting the beetroot?"

"What?" He frowned.

"Never mind." Kirsty went into the kitchen and opened a jar of beetroot. She sliced and warmed it, before adding it to the moussaka and handing him the plate.

"Can I give her extra chips?" he asked, eagerly.

Kirsty smiled. "Yes, go on!"

She watched as Tim piled them on, added a garnish and carried the plate over to Sarah. He laughed as she said something to him.

"What did she say?" Kirsty asked him.

"What?"

"What was so funny?"

"Do you know, I can't remember." Tim sighed. "Isn't she beautiful?"

Kirsty smiled. She'd never seen Tim like this before. He was absolutely besotted, and it seemed mutual. "You know why she asks for strange things, don't you?" she asked.

"They're not strange..."

Kirsty laughed. Not strange! Yesterday it had been fish and chips and pineapple.

"It's so she has a chance to talk to you for longer," she explained.

"Do you really think so?" Tim asked, looking very pleased.

Kirsty smiled at him. It was blindingly obvious. To think she

and Tim were almost the same age, and yet he seemed as streetwise as a baby — it made her feel so old!

"And it's a challenge for you," she continued. "She throws it down for you to prove you're worthy, like a knight of old."

"A what?"

"And you know the way to a man's, or rather a woman's, heart?" she asked him.

"No..."

"Through their stomach." She smiled, prodding him in his middle. "So keep up the good work and she could be all yours!"

Tim smiled at her. "I will," he said.

But the next day when Sarah walked in and ordered burnt sausages and apple sauce, Tim just stared at her.

"Burnt... burnt sausages?" he asked eventually. "Are you sure?"

"Yes." She smiled. "They must be really over-done. The blacker the better. Could you do that for me, please? And piles of apple sauce."

"Er..."

"Yes," said Kirsty, taking a couple of sausages and putting them back under the grill.

"She said I was wonderful!" Tim told Kirsty after delivering the burnt sausages.

"You are!" Kirsty told him.

"So when are you going to ask her out?"

"Oh, I couldn't do that!" he cried, startled.

"Oh, Tim!" Kirsty sighed. "Why do you think she keeps coming in here at lunch-time?"

"Because she's hungry?"

"But there are countless cafés in this road."

"Er... we cater to her every whim."

"You cater to her every whim." Kirsty smiled. "If you don't act soon, she's going to ask you for something we haven't got and then you'll fail the test!"

"No!" Tim cried, horrified.

"Ask her out, go on!" Kirsty urged him, as Sarah got up to go. But he just stood there, transfixed, as she walked out of the door.

"Tomorrow," he told Kirsty. "I'll ask her tomorrow."

She grinned at him. She'd believe it when she saw it.

But Sarah didn't come in the next day.

"Maybe she's ill?" Kirsty suggested to a dejected Tim.

"Perhaps it was those sausages we gave her?" he asked, looking really worried.

"You get ill from undercooked food, not overcooked," Kirsty told him. "It looks like the mid-day rush is over. My lunch-break. I'm just popping to the bank."

When she came back, Tim was sitting hunched over at a table. At first, Kirsty thought he was ill.

"Tim!" she cried.

He gazed up at her, miserably.

"What's wrong?"

"It's Sarah," he whispered.

Kirsty sat down next to him.

"She came in?"

He nodded.

"And you asked her out?"

"No."

"Oh, Tim!" she cried. "Why not?"

"She came in with a man."

"Oh," Kirsty frowned. "Perhaps he was her brother?"

"He had his arm around her."

"Well, maybe he was consoling her. She'd had bad news, that will be why she was late today."

He shook his head.

"She's pregnant."

"What?"

"That's why she's been asking for strange things to eat. Not so she could talk to me."

"No!" Kirsty felt terrible.

Tim looked so upset, she felt so sorry for him. And then, as she bent towards him and he gazed up at her out of pale, blue eyes, her heart missed a beat and her legs went all wobbly. Suddenly, the truth hit her. This was why she'd enjoyed helping him so much. How strange that it took this to make her realise it...

"Lunch may be over, but I'm getting you double sausage and chips," she said. "You need comfort food."

"You're so good to me," Tim said earnestly.

Kirsty smiled at him. Not nearly as good as she was going to be. She'd given him false hope, she had a lot of making up to do. This time, if she had anything to do with it, Tim's love-life was suddenly going to change from luke-warm to absolutely smouldering.

Besides, she thought as she smiled at him tenderly and put the plate of steaming food in front of him, didn't they say that the way to a man's heart was through his stomach?

THE END

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# The Right Perspective

Steph tried to ignore the ringing phone — it was probably only her mother. But what if it was Dan?

When the phone rang, Steph thought she'd leave it, let it go to the answer-machine. She'd been tempted often enough, not wanting to speak to people, not wanting to communicate with anyone. Not even her mother. Especially not her mother, since Dan left. There was too much potential for "I told you so" to sustain any conversation, too much room for, "It was always going to end like this." Steph terminated those calls as quickly as she could. Her mother said she'd grown cold, abrupt.

It was still ringing, the phone. She must have forgotten to put the machine on.

Steph told herself to let it ring and whoever it was, probably her mother, would give up eventually. And yet, it might be Dan, wanting to surprise her. And if it was, it would be to tell her he was sorry, he'd like to come back. Even after six weeks. It happened sometimes. Mistakes made, apologies accepted, moving on, stronger for the experience. That sort of thing. Always possible.

It wasn't Dan. Steph swallowed back her disappointment as Jane

Trafford talked at her about the new project at the community centre she ran. "Healthy Minds And Bodies. It's going to be wonderful."

"All the rage," Steph said. "And the creative arts are just perfect and singing is absolutely fabulous for it," Jane carried on. And on.

Steph let her. The woman was a one-way conversation.

Singing used to be great, when she was doing duo work with Dan. It could still have been great, if he hadn't decided that she wasn't the one for him anymore, if he hadn't taken his double bass and left. It numbed her, his going, after all that time together, after all the promise of a future with both of them in it. She'd not sung anything since.

"Anyway, Jane, is there something you need?" Steph tried not to sound curt, but thinking of Dan made her angry and hopeless by turns. "It's just that I'm busy doing a project and way behind, as usual."

Way behind because she hadn't actually started it yet, her mind as blank as any canvas, stumped for ideas.

"I've got some funding," Jane said, "to have a singing group and I want you to run it."

"Oh... Jane. I don't... I can't. Thanks for thinking of me, but I'm really an artist," Steph said.

"Yes, I know, dear, first and foremost you are, but we already have an Art Group, and Line Dancing, there's going to be Mat Making too. You do sing and play and you're very good with people..."

Flattery.

Steph tried to think, tried to stop imagining the possibility of a cheque, whatever size. Passing up work really wasn't sensible.

Her mother had said as much. It was true. If nothing changed, she'd have to get a lodger. If Dan didn't return.

He might still. She'd have him back like a shot. There was a lot good about their relationship. It could work again.

Jane's voice drove into her thoughts. "And it's just once a week, short term initially, and if after that it's not for you, we can always try someone else."

There was a pause, a sigh. "But I'd rather it was you, Stephanie. You never know who you're going to get when it's a stranger. Say you'll do it, even if it's just to get the ball rolling."

Cornered.

"All right," Steph said, "let's give it a go."

How could she refuse? Jane was her godmother.

There was some talk about where the money was coming from, how there'd have to be progress reports.

"And I'll have to do those, I suppose..." Steph broke in, knowing full well.

"It's not very often. Just to keep the dreaded Funders happy, you know." As if the inconvenience was a fly to be batted away.

There was  
a lot  
good about  
their  
relationship

"Why can't people just get together and sing?"

"Money, dear. Tutors need paying. Rooms need renting. Organisers need funding and to get it, the Funders want to know what it's for. The way of the world."

There was a pause. Steph wondered if she was meant to fill it.

"Up until now, we've had volunteers, but these days everyone seems to want paying... " As if it was a real mystery.

Taking a long breath, Steph tried not to feel hard, money grabbing. "Yes," she said, "mortgages are irritating things and eating vastly overrated."

"Oh, I didn't mean... Oh..." Jane hooted. "You're pulling my leg, aren't you?"

Steph scrambled about, under bits of paint-stained rags, papers and books for her diary, the desk its usual mess. Creative, Dan said, when it was one of her attractive qualities; disorganised, when it wasn't. "How about Tuesday afternoons?" she said.

"OK, that sounds feasible. I'll put it to the group and get back to you."

"That's the only time I can do, actually."

Not entirely true, but she ran three different art groups plus sessions in a day centre. There wasn't enough time to do her own work, the project she had to get started. Only that wasn't really true, either. She had time.

"If it isn't OK for them I can probably find you someone else." She invented a knock at the door and told Jane she'd have to go.

In the kitchen, Steph shovelled some coffee beans into the grinder and zapped them. The kettle bubbled away furiously and refused to switch itself off.



When she'd played music with Dan, it was generally in plush places, cocktail bars, hotel function rooms, and often playing an in-house grand piano, usually gleaming. Steph hauled in her dusty portable keyboard and looked around the community centre with its dull walls and children's art work, with its play-group corner and wheezing water heater.

It was chilly. The radiators sounded as if they were being operated by little men in chains and couldn't have been on for more than five minutes. She set up the stand, arranged her piano onto it. From her bag, she pulled out the music she intended to use. There were copies of a few songs she wanted to try and rough notes she'd made about what to do in the session.

Jane floated out of the office, tall, in a long skirt and boots which looked soft and exotic. Her hair fell in drifts around her shoulders, giving her an ethereal air. Steph felt decidedly underdressed, dowdy even.

"Stephanie!" Jane sounded determined. "Good to see you again. Glad we could all slot in together. I've put out the chairs... will rows be all right?"

Her energy and enthusiasm always made Steph feel breathless and somehow insignificant. "Will we have that many people coming?"

There were an awful lot of chairs.

"You never can tell with these things, we can always spirit away the extras if necessary. Shall we leave them in rows?"

They rearranged them and were satisfied.

"Now," Jane said, "we'll go for six weeks and see how it pans out. You'll need to invoice me."

There was a noise at the door. Four women walked in, complete with litter which swirled around them like autumn leaves.

"What a wind!" One of them pulled off her bobble hat and picked at the sweet wrapper stuck to it. "Look at that."

"Ladies, ladies, good afternoon." Jane swept across to the entrance and guided them in. "Take off your coats. You're a trifle early but there's tea and coffee." She waved her hand at the kitchen hatch. "Just help yourselves. This is Stephanie. She's your tutor."

Steph greeted them with a wave and a smile.

"We won't have to do exams, will we?" a lady in pink said. Her face was troubled, as if she hadn't actually signed up for this but had been dragged in off the street.

"No exams. Just singing," Steph said, with a smile she hoped was encouraging.

"I mean, I've never sung since I was at school..."

"Oh, that's OK. You'll be surprised how it comes back."

"And then they told me to shut up because I couldn't sing in tune." A nervous laugh. "I don't know why I'm here, actually."

Steph pinned up a smile. It was going to be a hard afternoon.

"A success if ever there was one and they've promised to bring some friends next time. I knew you'd be a hit." Jane spooned some instant coffee into a couple of mugs, poured on water from the kettle. "Here you are. Milk's just there."

"Did Mum suggest this?"

Jane frowned, spoon hovering over the sugar. "Why on earth would she do that?"



"Dan and I split." Steph watched Jane stir her coffee.

"She's worried about me. Keeps wanting to cook meals, clean up the house."

"Mothers do, but you'll be pleased to note that godmothers don't. At least, not this one." There was a smile. "I hope you don't let her take over. She'll end up trying to scrape paint off your studio floor. Which wouldn't do at all."

Steph took a drink. "I don't think Dan's coming back."

It was the first time she'd said it. Her voice quivered.

Jane's warm hand patted hers. "So you're striking out on your own. It's a good thing. Look at how you found Miriam's voice..."

The lady in pink. Steph gave a small laugh and gulped at her drink to stop herself crying, because the reality of life without Dan was like being hit by a tank.

"Not long since she lost her husband, after 62 years of marriage. She's as fearful of life as anyone I've ever met. He did everything for her, you know. Idolised her. So she hasn't a clue about how to carry on. Can't pay a bill."

Steph was feeling lectured at. "Dan didn't idolise me."

"Should hope not. It isn't healthy. Look at poor Miriam."

"At least I know how to pay my bills," Steph said. Jane was gazing at her as if expecting more. "Will do, anyway. When I get a lodger."

There, she'd said it. Hammered the nail in. Dan wasn't coming back and she had to get on with it. She studied the bottom of her cup.

"A lodger's not the end of the world," Jane said. "Better to hang on to that house of yours and be glad Dan didn't have a half share. There's a lot to be thankful for, Stephanie."

Driving into her street, Steph realised that she'd been singing along with the radio. She continued to sing while composing an advert for the spare room, and as she tipped the remnants of her life with Dan into a black bin bag. Stuffing it into the wheelie bin, she kept on singing, which may have alarmed the neighbours. She didn't care. It felt good. She wandered into her studio, in the late afternoon light, looked at her paint brushes, ran her fingers over their sable ends, felt the smooth strength of them. Later, she thought.

Steph stretched out on the sofa, pulled a blanket around her and snuggled up, feeling more relaxed than she had in weeks.

The phone rang.

It could be a short call, she could truthfully plead work; she could truthfully say that she had a project on the go and knew what to do for it, at long last, so would have to get going. She could say anything.

"Hi, Mum," Is what she did say. "You'll never guess what I've been doing today."

THE END

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# The Case Of The Murderous Meal

IT WAS 1913 AND WE HAD A MYSTERY TO DEAL WITH — BUT WERE SELINA HOLMES AND I UP TO THE JOB?

**T**he patient was dying, and there was nothing I could do to save her.

“Any improvement?” Selina Holmes came out of the hospital’s laboratory as I went past.

I shook my head. “Her vital organs are failing, one by one. What about the samples you took?”

Selina’s hawk-like face seemed to grow harsher. “Nothing, I’m afraid. I can detect none of the usual poisons.”

“Well, I can’t think of any other reason why a woman who appears to be in perfect health one day, should suffer such calamitous liver and kidney failure the next, can you?”

My answer had been sharper than was necessary and I hastened to apologise. “Sorry, Holmes. I didn’t mean to snap. It’s just that I can’t get over the feeling that

there’s something not quite right with this case.”

“No, neither can I.”

“I meant medical case, not anything criminal.” I tried to make light of my misgivings.

“Maybe it’s merely that we’ve begun to see crimes in everything, having been mixed up in so many.”

“Maybe.” She nodded. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, Doctor Watson, I must be getting on.”

She disappeared back into the laboratory, leaving me cudgelling my brains to think of anything else I could try. But nothing occurred to me.

When I was summoned to the ward later that evening, I had no illusions as to what I would find. Mrs Hogan’s relatives were clustered around her bed while the Sister gently sponged her face, which was drained of all colour. Even my experienced fingers found it hard to locate the pulse, for the flutter was irregular and faint.

The woman sitting nearest snuffled into a handkerchief. I stared at the face on the pillow, wondering if Mrs Hogan would have stirred many feelings of the softer sort when she was in full possession of her health.

The sharp lines from nose to mouth, the thin lips which were set in a straight line and the frown lines in the centre of her forehead all betokened an uncertain temper. I could imagine that she would be less than generous, with both money and pleasantries. But her niece, at least, seemed to be affected by her impending death.

I couldn’t say the same for her nephew. He stood behind his sister, his hand resting on the back of the chair, his back rigid. His wife waited dutifully by his side, keeping her eyes lowered, but neither showed the slightest sign of a tear.

With a suddenness that took us all by surprise, Mrs Hogan’s eyes opened. She didn’t seem to see any of us, but stared straight at the opposite wall.

“Aunt?” the niece breathed, reaching for the hand that lay on the coverlet.

Mrs Hogan moved it away from the would-be comforting

*My answer  
had  
been  
sharper  
than was  
necessary*





Illustration: Getty

# The Case Of The Murderous Meal

fingers. She turned her head on the pillow the merest fraction of an inch and looked in the direction of her family. I couldn't tell if she actually saw them or some figment caused by her body's break-down, but the frown-lines deepened. When her eyes closed again, the frown remained.

"Aunt?" the niece said again. "Aunt Madeleine?"

"Leave it, Phyllis," her brother said. "She can't hear you." He shifted from one foot to the other. "How much longer, Doctor?"

"I'm sorry, I can't say." It was true, although if he hadn't made his impatience so plain, I would have been more sympathetic. In the event, it was not many more minutes before I was able to pronounce that it was all over.

Phyllis Bebbington sniffled, although I could see no trace of any redness around her eyes. Mrs Stephen Blackwell touched her handkerchief to her face then tucked the square of linen away, and her husband made no attempt to hide his relief that they were free to leave.

"You'll issue the medical certificate of my aunt's death?" he asked brusquely as he ushered his wife and sister towards the door.

"I'm afraid I will have to request a post-mortem, Mr Blackwell."

"Oh, Doctor! Surely not?" Mrs Bebbington cried, and her brother echoed her consternation. His wife merely stared at me.

"I'm sorry, but we have to determine the cause of this sudden onset of illness." I was firm, seeing them prepared to argue.

"Oh, Stephen! Can't you stop it? I can't bear to think of poor Auntie being cut up."

I would have wagered my salary on Mrs Hogan's never suffering anyone to address her as Auntie, least of all Phyllis Bebbington. I cut short the remonstrations. "I'm sorry it is so distressing for you, but I am legally obliged to be positive about the cause of death. And, at the present, I'm not."

Neither Mr Blackwell nor his sister were easy to convince, but they had to accept it in the end.

"Fishy!" Selina said when I recounted the scene to her. "Makes you wonder what they're afraid you'll find."

"Some people do have an abhorrence of such things as post-mortems," I said.

"Nobody likes to think of it when it's someone you loved, but from what you've told me, I should say there was little affection in this instance. And you'd think they'd want to know what killed their aunt. Unless," she added darkly, "they already do."

"She died of organ failure, Holmes, and you could find no trace of any poison that would cause it," I reminded her. "What makes you think there has been foul play?"

"Just a feeling, Watson. You have it too, but whether we can prove anything of the sort is another matter."

"Well, first things first. I must request the PM and then it's over to you in the laboratory. If we find so much as a sniff of anything untoward, the Police will be informed immediately. I have to admit I didn't take to her family, but that's no reason to suspect they had a hand in her death."

But I was doomed to frustration. The damage to her organs was plain to see, but Selina's tests could find no reason for their failure. Whatever might

be our suspicions in the matter, there was nothing further we could do. I signed the certificate and that appeared to be that. Mrs Hogan's family were free to make their plans for her funeral.

So I was surprised when, a few weeks later, I found a woman waiting in my office in the New Hospital. I couldn't put a name to the face at first, until she spoke in a tight voice that betrayed acute anxiety.

"Doctor Watson? My name is Sarah Blackwell. I don't know if you'll remember? Madeleine Hogan was my husband's aunt. I'm sorry to trouble you, but I've heard... I've been told that you and your colleague investigate crimes. I want to retain you to investigate Mrs Hogan's death."

It seemed that Holmes and I weren't the only ones to harbour suspicions then, but why did this woman want to stir up a hornets' nest when everything had been laid so neatly to rest?

"What makes you think there's



anything to investigate?"

"I can pay," Mrs Blackwell assured me. "I have a little money of my own."

So this wasn't with her husband's agreement, and probably without his knowledge. Did she have an idea that he could have had a hand in his aunt's death? If so, I'd have thought the last thing she would want to do was to set an inquiry in motion but, remembering the man's harsh countenance and the discomfort with which he'd attended his aunt's deathbed, I wondered if she had become concerned for her own safety.

"If you have any concerns over the cause of Mrs Hogan's illness, you had better contact the Police," I said.

She shook her head, the feathers in her hat seeming to express a more urgent negative than she allowed herself to show.

"I couldn't, Doctor. Not when it's family. And I don't... I'm not..."

"You're not sure? But you're worried that things might not be as straight-forward as they should?"

"That's exactly it," she said gratefully. "I thought, if it was you and Miss Holmes, it could be presented as a medical investigation? And Stephen and Phyllis wouldn't have to know I had anything to do with it."

So she wasn't certain which of them had desired their aunt's death. If either of them had, and it wasn't purely an example of how little we know about diseases and their causes, even in 1913. And, I have to admit, the case interested me in my professional capacity as a doctor as well as a detective.

"Very well, Mrs Blackwell. We'll see what we can do."

But I was far from confident we could earn our fee. The trail had gone cold. Mrs Hogan's house was shut up and the servants gone elsewhere. Where on earth would we start? The more I thought about it, the more impossible it seemed. And that was supposing that Mrs Hogan's death hadn't been entirely natural.

"Mrs Blackwell has the right idea," Selina said when I confessed what I'd done. "Ask them to participate in a scientific exploration into the causes of sudden onset organ failure, and the family can hardly refuse to co-operate. Whether or not they tell us the truth is up to us to determine, but it's as good a place to begin as any."

"Which of them shall we interview first, do you think?"

Selina considered. "I think we should have another word with the cook."

Mrs Ferris was living with her sister and she was not at all amused to be questioned again about the meal she had prepared for Mrs Hogan the night she was taken ill. "I told you afore, Doctor. She had the Brown Windsor, with a nice bit o' haddock, boiled taters and peas

to foller. And I'd made a bread-and-butter pudden with raisins in, which she was ever so partial to." She sniffed, folded her arms across her bulging bosom and glowered at us. "An' you tell me what there was in that to poison the poor lady! Unless you was thinkin' I put 'emlock in the soup or somethin'? Although where you think I'd get 'old of such-like, me not likely to rekernise it if it jumped up and bit me in the..."

"There was no hemlock in the soup, Mrs Ferris," Selina said.

"It sounds a very nice dinner, and I'm sure she enjoyed it," I said, seeking to soothe the ruffled feathers.

"I 'ope she did, seein' as it was 'er last supper." Mrs Ferris was clearly not mollified, and there was something else underlying her animosity apart from being asked to go over ground that she had already covered.

I thought I could guess what it was. Without the cap and apron that made her the queen of the kitchen, I sensed she felt diminished in some way. But the fact that she was living in her sister's house proved she hadn't yet found another position. Until we could discover the truth, I was afraid she would find it very difficult to do so. She naturally had no references from Mrs Hogan and, although the case had not been splashed across the newspapers, it couldn't be concealed that her last employer had died of a suspected poisoning. Not a good recommendation, if you were a cook.

"And there's nothing else you can tell us that would give any clue as to the reason for her death? She had been given no sweetmeats — no sugared almonds or plums or anything of that nature?"

Mrs Ferris pursed her lips. "Not that I know of, Doctor. Young Aggie would know better than me if there was anything like that lyin' about, her bein' the housemaid an' all."

But Young Aggie had disappeared into the horde of London housemaids. It would be a monumental task to trace her, and to what purpose?

"If there had been any sweets, she would have said so when her mistress was taken ill," I pointed out when Selina and I had left the

house and were on our way back to Euston Road. "Especially if she knew someone had given them to Mrs Hogan."

"Unless that someone had paid her not to mention them."

"In that case, the most likely person would be one of the family. We need to find some sort of motive to give us a starting point."

"You haven't followed your thought through, Watson. If the maid was bribed not to speak, whoever did so is opening themselves to blackmail. Or murder, if the girl was silly enough to resort to that kind of extortion. Where someone has killed once, it would seem the obvious solution to their difficulties. That's the trouble with murder — it snowballs."

A nasty thought struck me. "I hope that's not the reason we can't find her."

Selina's lips compressed. "I hope so indeed. So it's time for you to see what you can discover from Stephen Blackwell and Phyllis Bebbington in your guise of medical researcher."

I decided to start with Phyllis Bebbington. She had appeared to be more moved by her aunt's death than her brother, but I wondered if that was because she was the better actor. I had discerned no trace of any actual tears, despite her sobs. On the other hand, she had definitely been much against carrying out a post-mortem.

A young and skinny maid let me in, whose black dress and white apron had been made for a larger figure than hers. I suspected that her employer

grudged the need to have a new one made.

"I don't know what you think I can tell you, Doctor," Mrs Bebbington greeted me when I was shown into the cramped parlour. "That will be all, Doris."

The maid bobbed her head and went out. I extracted a notebook and pencil from my case and gathered myself together. As I was ostensibly collecting medical information, I had to tread carefully when trying to glean information on Mrs Hogan. "Had your aunt always enjoyed good health?"

"She always said she hadn't had a day's sickness in her life." There was a faintly sour note in Mrs Bebbington's voice and I noticed the many bottles of medicine claiming to be effective against headaches which were ranged along the mantelshelf. "Ah," I said understandingly. "It's funny, isn't it, how people who don't suffer themselves have little patience with those of us who do?"

Her lips firmed, but she didn't rise to the bait.

"So her illness would have come as a complete shock?" I persevered.

She nodded. "Her maid told me she took to her bed, but she wouldn't call a doctor. Said it was something she'd eaten and that she'd be all right in the morning. And she was, but then it all began again." Her fingers clenched into fists for a moment. "I'm a martyr to migraine, Doctor Watson, but she wouldn't believe it. 'Oh, pull yourself together, Phyllis,' she'd say. 'Spending your money on all these jollops and pills — no wonder you always feel ill.' Poor Aunt Madeleine. If she hadn't been too mean to call the doctor, she might still be alive."

I let the latent animosity pass without comment. So we could rule out any history of reaction to certain foods and she took no quack remedies into which poison could be introduced.

"According to my notes, it was only a matter of two hours or so

after she'd eaten her meal that the symptoms came on?"

"I think so. You'd have to ask my brother about that. It was he who spoke to the servants when it became apparent that something was seriously wrong."

Her fingers clenched again, and I had a sudden vision of her reaching out to her aunt's hand as it lay on the hospital bedspread, and of Mrs Hogan resisting her touch. Was that an indication of dislike or suspicion?

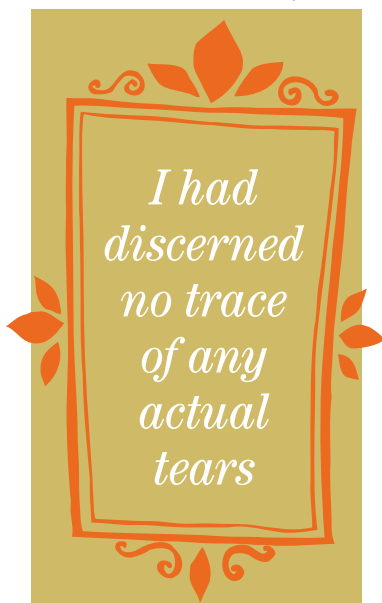
"But she was all right the last time you saw her? When was that?" I put the question casually.

"About three or four weeks ago," Mrs Bebbington said stiffly. She seemed to think that some explanation was due. "My aunt was perfectly capable of running her life and she didn't want our advice. Interfering, she called it, when we only meant it for the best. But if she wanted us, we had to drop everything. Oh, yes! Sometimes it wasn't convenient, but that didn't matter." She caught herself up and forced an indulgent smile. "She was an elderly woman, you see, Doctor, and they have their little ways."

"Indeed," I said, pretending to run my pencil down a list of questions. A thought occurred to me. "Did she drink at all?"

Phyllis Bebbington bridled. "Really! What sort of a question is that?"

"It's merely that alcohol can have an effect on the internal





# The Case Of The Murderous Meal

organs, especially the liver." I raised my eyebrows interrogatively, my pencil poised.

"She liked a glass of stout with her dinner and a sweet sherry in the evening, but that was all. She would never have let herself become intoxicated." Mrs Bebbington sounded scandalised.

I made a note and, for form's sake, reeled off a few more questions, but I was fairly certain she had told me all she could. Or would.

When I'd completed my inquiries, she rang for Doris to show me out. As the maid came in, she stumbled slightly over a wrinkle in the carpet.

"Oh, do take care, girl!" Mrs Bebbington said sharply. She rubbed at the threadbare spot with her toe. "Mind yourself, Doctor. But I'll be able to throw this old rag away now. Get something decent." Her lips curved upwards in a satisfied smile before she recollected herself, produced her handkerchief to dab her eyes and bade me farewell in subdued tones.

"So she's expecting a substantial sum from her aunt's Will?" Selina said. "A motive for murder, wouldn't you say?"

"She's been a widow for some years, she told me, but her husband clearly left her with small means, for the house was neither large nor well-appointed and the only servant I saw was very young."

"And therefore cheap."

"It's clear she hasn't spent any money on Doris's uniform," I agreed.

"What about the Blackwells?"

I frowned. "He's a hard nut to crack. To all outward seeming, he's a prosperous businessman in no need of money like his

sister, but I didn't get the impression that he'd do anything to help her financially. He told me nothing but what we already knew about the beginning of Mrs Hogan's illness. He was summoned by the maid when it became evident that she was suffering from more than a bout of indigestion."

"They both slept in, I suppose, Aggie and the cook? I wonder they didn't hear her call out in the night. She doesn't strike me as the sort of mistress who'd care about disturbing their rest."

"Maybe she didn't call, or her groans weren't enough to wake them."

"Mrs Bebbington lives nearer than her brother, but I suppose they thought it beyond a woman's capability to deal with," Selina said with wrinkled nose.

"It's natural enough," I said, "but I'll tell you something, Holmes. That man's a bully. And I don't mean merely verbal abuse. His wife sat in the corner and never so much as opened her mouth except to agree with him, but I noticed a discolouration along her cheekbone. I think she'd been slapped."

"Hardly surprising she wants to retain us, then. I wonder if she's hoping we'll find something to his discredit? Not necessarily murder. In fact, I fail to see any means by which either of them could have poisoned their aunt. But you know, Watson, I'd feel happier if I could discover how it was achieved."

It was very pleasant to be sitting in our old parlour, talking over medical cases with my father. He was retired from practice but he kept an interest in the strides that modern medicine had made.

He was particularly fascinated by Mrs Hogan's case.

"Not arsenic? Belladonna? Definitely not strychnine — wrong set of symptoms entirely. I can't think of many poisons causing the sort of damage you describe which may be met with in common household wares. I'm assuming none of the people involved are chemists who would have access to some of the more obscure?"

"No. Mrs Bebbington is the widow of a draper and Mr Blackwell is something to do with finance in the City. As far as I'm aware, they have no medical or chemical knowledge."

"And Mrs Blackwell?"

I frowned. "I can't see any reason for her to wish Mrs Hogan dead and she was the one who retained us to make this enquiry."

"My dear Mary, if you read my case notes for Mr Sherlock Holmes's investigations, you will find several instances where people tried to throw him off the scent by such means."

"The same thing applies, though." I sighed. "Miss Holmes could find no trace of anything untoward."

He smiled reminiscently. "She reminds me so much of him, you know."

"Me too, Father. You're certain he never had a natural daughter?"

"Absolutely. But, thinking about your case, have you considered mushroom poisoning? It needn't be by intent. Some patients react differently, as you're aware."

"It was one of the things I considered. But the meal she ate was perfectly innocuous. It contained no mushrooms of any sort, and the timescale of the symptoms' appearance

indicates that it must have been in that meal that the poison — if any — was administered."

"When neither of your suspects was present. A very pretty little mystery you have there. Worthy of Mr Holmes himself."

"But the point is," I said, thinking aloud, "that if things stay as they are, poor Mrs Ferris will always have it hanging over her head that her employer died after eating a meal she'd cooked. Mrs Blackwell will always wonder if her husband or sister-in-law is capable of murder. And there's someone else. Young Aggie. Nobody knows where she is. Is that only because she's found another place, or has she gone into hiding because she knows something and is afraid for her life? Or did she eat some of that last dinner and is dead too? It may be a mystery, but I wouldn't call it particularly pretty."



As I walked back to the Hospital I saw, striding jauntily towards me down the Euston Road, a slim youth with his hands in his pockets and his lips pursed in a whistle. I was so wrapped up in my thoughts, I barely gave him a second glance until he spoke.

"Good evening, Watson! I've had a very entertaining day and I've brought some news you'll find interesting."

"Holmes?" I gasped, peering into the face beneath the baggy cap.

"Sh! Don't give my secret away!" She grinned. "Give me half an hour, then come around to my rooms. And bring something to eat. I haven't had anything all day!"

She would answer no questions until she had eaten the meat pie I had brought and drunk a large cup of tea.

"So?" I said, having contained my impatience with an effort. "What's your interesting news, and why did you have to dress as a man to get it?"

"That Master of Disguise, Sherlock Holmes, would be proud of me!" she said, looking down at herself with satisfaction. "You see, Watson, a youth

hanging about, smoking and making conversation, will not be remarked upon, whereas a woman doing the same would be the immediate object of attention. She'd be assumed to be on the game and, if she made it plain she wasn't, everyone

*I barely gave him a second glance until he spoke*

would be so curious as to her intent, she'd never learn anything of interest. Whereas I did."

"Don't be so mysterious, Holmes!"

"Mr Stephen Blackwell is not the prosperous financier he would have the world believe. I've spent the day chatting to clerks and messenger boys. Trust them to know the state of things. The money from Mrs Hogan's Will has been enough to stave off bankruptcy."

"As bad as that?"

She nodded and poured herself another cup of tea.

"So it isn't only Mrs Bebbington who gains from Mrs Hogan's death. Her brother does, too. I wonder if they applied to their aunt for help and were refused?" I said.

"Very timely, her demise, wouldn't you say?"

"Yes. But how was it achieved?"

"Did your father have any ideas?"

"He suggested mushroom poisoning. I told him we'd considered it, but she hadn't eaten mushrooms that night and you'd found nothing to suggest it. But he sent you these." I pulled some papers from my medical bag. "This is Sherlock Holmes's thesis on poisonous fungi. Father thought you'd be interested, even if they have nothing to do with this case."  
"I am indeed." She stretched out a hand for the papers and the last I saw as I left was her perusing them with her usual intensity.



"Wake up!"

I felt my shoulder vigorously shaken and sat up quickly. "What is it, Sister? Has Miss Taylor taken a turn for the worse?"

"It's me, Watson. We need to go and ask Mrs Ferris another question."

I rubbed my eyes, looked at the face bending over me and then up at the clock.

"Holmes? What on earth..?"

"I think I know how the poison got into Mrs Hogan's system, but I need to speak to the cook again."

"It's half-past five in the morning. Mrs Ferris will be asleep and I'm on call here until 7 o'clock," I pointed out. "We can't go yet. So tell me your theory."

\*\*\*

"The night before? Beef stew, Miss. Cass'role, the Missus called it, but that's what it was, right enough."



"Did she eat it all?" Selina asked.

Mrs Ferris screwed up her face, thinking. "Had a good appetite, she did, but I disremember whether she ate all of it."

"You didn't finish it off then, or save some for another day?"

"Oh, no, I wouldn't touch it, Miss. All them little bits of mushroom! Can't a-bear mushroom, I can't. Eurgh."

Mrs Ferris's mouth made spitting-out motions. "Dunno why the Missus was so keen on 'em."

"What about Aggie?" I said it as lightly as I could. "Did she eat any?"

"Dunno, Doctor. She might've. She didn't mind mushrooms. I didn't see her eat none, though."

"And Mrs Hogan had her usual glass of stout with her dinner?"

"Oh, yes, even though I'd put plenty of wine in with the beef to make it nice and rich-like. Young Aggie, she went down the Marquis and brought back a jug as usual." Mrs Ferris glared from one to the other of us. "But there weren't nothin' wrong with it. It gets powerful hot in that kitchen when you're cookin' and I 'ad jest a drop meself, like I allus do. An' don't you go thinkin' I put a wrong mushroom in that stew, 'cos I didn't. The Missus was fine after she ate it. It was after she ate the 'addock she was took ill."

"Where did the mushrooms come from, Mrs Ferris?" Selina asked. "You didn't pick them yourself?"

"Lor', no, Miss. I wouldn't know the right ones to pick, even if there was any growing hereabouts, which there ain't. I got 'em from Hodges the greengrocer, as usual. If you want

to know where he gets 'em from, you'll have to ask him."

"But I don't think we need to, do you?" I said as we sat on the omnibus back.

"No. There have been no other cases." She pounded her fist on the seat beside her. "If only we had better means of detection, Watson. If I could have determined what the poison was right at the start, we could at least have made a guess at the mushroom involved!"

"It would have made no difference, if Mr Holmes's paper is accurate — and, knowing him, it will be."

"The most likely suspect is a Death Cap, but they are most uncommon and don't grow in the same sort of habitat as field mushrooms. So someone knows their fungi and where to find them."

"But that means they had to be there to put it in the stew. And we know that neither the Blackwells nor Mrs Bebbington were."

"So it's imperative we find the maid. I can see no reason why she should want to poison her employer, but she can at least tell us who asked her to put the mushrooms in. I think, Watson, it's time we spoke to your Inspector."

"Stop calling him that!" I said.

There had been moments when I thought he cared for me, but I couldn't possibly marry a man who disapproved of women as scientists — or doctors — so I was not keen to visit Police Inspector Robert Rowlands. I was determined to keep the interview formal and not to let him provoke me into losing my temper, as had happened so many times before. I explained our findings in scientific detail and neutral tones, trying all the while not to think about the way his hair curled into his neck, or the line of his lips.

"I thought you said her last meal was plain soup, fish and bread-and-butter pudding? Where do the mushrooms come in?" He sat back in his chair,

looking at me with an intensity I found disturbing.

"The night before," I said.

"But she drank stout with it. Alcohol causes a different reaction."

"So if she hadn't drunk it, she wouldn't have been poisoned? My dear Doctor, that sounds like accident, not murder."

"No, Inspector, that's not it. If it's the mushroom we think it is, the alcohol merely confused the timing. The damage would have already been done."

"And you're worried the maid may have been silenced because she knows who put it in the stew?"

"Yes. We need to find this girl. Mrs Hogan's death may still be from natural causes, although if Death Caps are involved that's unlikely, but we need to find out what she knows. We've placed advertisements in the papers, but she hasn't replied."

"Perhaps she hasn't seen it," he said. "Has it occurred to you she can't read?"

"Mrs Ferris says she can."

"It could be that she hasn't seen the newspapers it was inserted in. But you're concerned about her and, from what you've told me, there are grounds for believing a felony has taken place and she could be in danger. We should be negligent if we didn't check."



# The Case Of The Murderous Meal

I was taken aback at his easy capitulation. I'd thought I'd have to argue, like before.

"Do you want me to order an exhumation?" he asked.

"There's no point." I was suspicious of this new, co-operative Inspector. He had always been highly derogatory about women investigating crime. "We have no test that would reveal the toxins, but any present would have disappeared by now, even if we had."

He came around the desk to where I sat. "Listen, Mary. You're not to put yourself in danger again. No taking the poison yourself to prove who committed the crime."

"I can't. Last time there was an antidote. With this, organ damage is irreversible and fatal."

"Then make doubly sure you don't," he said.

His nearness was doing unwarranted things to my breathing. I had to get things back on a professional footing, or I might say and do things I would regret.

"I don't think you're in any position to tell me what to do, Inspector."

"No, because you refuse to contemplate giving me that right."

I glared at him, a challenge in my face. "I'm a doctor, a scientist and a woman. Is it that you can't stomach or is it that Holmes and I have proved ourselves successful as detectives?"

"Neither. I don't want to find you dead or dying, that's all. Can't you understand what that means, Mary?"

His use of my name and the sincerity in his face brought the blood rushing to mine.

"I shan't compromise either my health or the investigation, if that's what you're afraid of."

He retreated to the other side of the desk and I breathed a little easier. But he seemed unwarrantedly cheerful as he promised me that enquiries would be made for the missing maid as discreetly, but as urgently, as possible.

The tug at my white coat made me look down. A small girl with a smear of dirt across one cheek was looking up at me.

"What is it?" I bent down. "Are you visiting someone in the hospital?"

She shook her head with impatience.

"You're Doctor Watson, ain't you? Well, our Sam told me to come and tell you."

Light dawned. This was one of the latest recruits to the Baker Street Irregulars. Sam Bryant's father had been the youngest of the street children who had been Sherlock Holmes's eyes and ears on the streets of London, and Sam had followed cheerfully in his footsteps.

"We found 'er. Sam, he give me this for yer." The girl grinned, showing missing front teeth, pushed a grubby bit of paper into my hand and darted off, disappearing as if by magic among the patients and hospital staff.

As soon as I had leisure, I took it to show Selina.

"You know," I said with a touch of disapproval, "I'm not sure about Sam using girls in the Irregulars."

Selina arched an eyebrow. "What, Doctor? You consider them inferior to boys?"

"No, of course not. It's just that — well, they're more vulnerable, I suppose."

"Nonsense."

"It gives you more freedom when you're dressed as a man," I pointed out a trifle smugly.

"And a small girl can wheedle things from housemaids better than none. They're a team, Doctor. Male and female."

"We guessed they'd have more luck than the Police in finding someone who doesn't want to be found," I said, "and it seems they've come up trumps. Let's pay Miss Mason a visit and see what she can tell us."

Young Aggie wasn't as young as I'd pictured her. I'd thought of her along the lines of the childish Doris, but she was in her early 20s. The household in which she had taken refuge employed her as a maid-of-all-work and she looked both exhausted and frightened when we knocked at the back door and told her the reason for our presence.

"I can't tell you nothing, Doctor. Honest." She twisted her hands in her apron. "Didn't the missus die natural, then?"

"I'm afraid not," I said gently. "What we'd like you to tell us, Aggie, is if anyone gave you anything to put in her food or drink?"

She shook her head, but I was sure she wasn't telling the truth.

"You didn't eat any of the stew yourself?" Selina asked

"No, Miss. She ate it all."

"Well, Watson, I think we need trouble Aggie no longer." I concealed my amazement and followed her out of the house. As soon as we reached the top of the area steps, Selina turned to me, her eyes gleaming.

"Did you notice, Watson?"

"She knew it was the stew and not the fish that held the poison." "Precisely."

"But why should she kill Mrs Hogan?"

"As to that, I may have a little notion but proving it will be another matter. Our first move must be to speak to Mrs Blackwell again and then..."

But she wouldn't tell me what she had in mind.

"I don't like to speak ill of the dead." Sarah Blackwell pressed her fingers to her lips.

"If there is ill to speak, then we must hear it," Selina said sternly. "It may have a bearing on the reason your aunt was killed, but you needn't be afraid. It was not your husband who brought about her death."

"Of course it wasn't." She sprang to her feet and began to pace the room. "That was why I asked you to take this case. I knew the shadow of suspicion would hang over him for ever if it wasn't solved. Because he hated her, Miss Holmes. Stephen and Phyllis lived with her when their parents died of the cholera. She cowed them, both with the rod and with words. And for Stephen, it was the words that hurt most. He could never please her. But in fairness, it was pushing himself to gain one small word of praise — which she never gave him — that made him the success he is. And why he made the one unwise investment that nearly crippled him."

"Poetic justice," murmured Selina, "that it was her money that saved him."

"But he mistreats you," I said, pointing to the bruise faintly visible on her cheekbone.

"No," she said with a shaky laugh. "That was Phyllis. She's far more like her aunt than he is. He's a good man, Doctor. That's why I couldn't bear for him to live with mistrust. She won't try hitting me again but..."

"No," Selina interrupted. "It wasn't her either. Your sister-in-law may be as unpleasant as her aunt, but she's no murderer."

"Thank God!" Sarah said.

"But who...?"

"That's what we still have to discover."

"Tell me again why we're here?" I hissed in Selina's ear.

"Ssh!" She pulled me down further behind the wall. "Wait!"

The trouble was, I didn't know what we were waiting for. What could Selina hope to prove by



Sam followed cheerfully in his footsteps





Selina rummaged in the basket and held up a fungus, beautiful in its white purity.

Aggie gasped and her cheeks flushed a hectic red. "It's a lie!

I never picked no Death Caps. There weren't none. You put that there yourself."

"But you know what it is," Selina said, twirling it in her fingers. "The same as the ones you put in Mrs Hogan's casserole."

Someone gently put me aside as he stepped into the now crowded room.

"Liza-Jane Smith, alias Agatha Mason, I arrest you for the murders of Madeleine Hogan and Albert and Lily Freeman."

I just had time to realise that Selina was not as taken aback as I was when Aggie snatched a large knife from the drainer and slashed at her. Selina skipped back nimbly and Aggie stood at bay, holding the blade in front of her.

"They think, just because their fathers had a bit of money and mine drank all ours away, that they can treat me like I'm a bit of dirt beneath their shoe. Well, they can't and now they know it. 'Cos the one thing he did for me, he taught me about mushrooms!" Her eyes held an insane glint and Inspector Rowlands' voice was very gentle.

"Come now, Liza-Jane. Give me the knife. You don't want to hurt these ladies."

But she lunged forwards. The Inspector swayed out of the way, so that the knife aimed at his heart sank into his shoulder instead. He fell against me, his weight pinning me against the doorframe but Selina grabbed her wrist, twisting with all her force. Liza-Jane screamed, a shrill wordless siren of hate, but she let go of the haft and turned on Selina, her hands like scratching claws. As Selina drew back, she plunged through the door and I heard her scabble up the area steps. Rowlands blocked the doorway to prevent us following.

returning to the house where Aggie Mason lived? If that was her name.

"She don't call 'erself Aggie no more," Sam had told us. "Young Susie, she 'eard the woman what employs 'er yellin' for Liza-Jane."

Susie wandered past, and gave us a gap-toothed grin before skipping off down the street. Selina gripped my arm warningly. A young woman hurried down the road, a basket on her arm, and turned into the area. As she opened the door, Selina followed her into the kitchen.

"Hello, Aggie. Mind if I look in here?"

She pulled the basket from Aggie's arm. The girl lunged to seize it back, but stopped when she saw me coming through the door. Selina peeled back the cloth that covered the contents. Below it was a selection of mushrooms.

"Picked from Epping Forest," Selina said, showing them to me.

"What of it?" Aggie folded her arms and leaned back against a sink that looked as if it had never been scrubbed. "I often go to get them. They're free."

"And you can pocket the difference from the bought ones."

"There's no law against it." She was recovering her poise.

"No. But you might pick the wrong one. Like this."

"Leave her. She won't get past my constables and, thanks to Miss Holmes, she's no longer armed."

I drew a shaking breath and saw blood oozing from between his fingers.

"Let me take a look at that."

He offered no resistance so, with Selina's help, I got his jacket off and exposed the wound. I cleaned and bound it with strips of his shirt, very aware of his face inches from mine.

It was nasty enough, but could have been so much worse. And he had the nerve to complain about me putting myself in danger, when he did so every day!

"There, that will serve until you can see the Police Surgeon."

"Thank you, Doctor," he said with suspicious meekness.

"And now perhaps you'll tell me what you're doing here?"

"I asked him to come," Selina said.

I couldn't believe she'd do that. "And you didn't tell me?"

"Wasn't time. When Sam brought me word that Liza-Jane had gone foraging in the forest, I sent him off straight away to fetch the Inspector. I hoped, when I showed her the Death Cap, that she'd incriminate herself, and we needed someone in authority to witness it."

"So you did plant it!"

"Yes. I couldn't guarantee she'd bring one back — they aren't easy to find — and we had very little to go on. We had to shock her into an admission."

But why bring Inspector Rowlands into it? As though she'd read my thoughts, Selina continued. "Death Caps are rare and unusual. I had a little notion that she had used it before. And then Susie heard the woman we knew as Aggie called Liza-Jane so I asked the

Inspector if any similar cases had been heard of."

"And I found a case where the Coroner had delivered a verdict of accidental death on an elderly couple, Bert and Lily Freeman, whose cook-maid had been a Liza-Jane Smith."

"But it's all circumstantial," I said. "We have no proof that would stand up in a court of law."

"I think it won't come to that," Inspector Rowlands said as we mounted the area steps. Two stout police constables were endeavouring to get a spitting, screaming Liza-Jane into a carriage. "I think she'll be committed to the Asylum."

"Poor girl," I said.

"Cheer up, Watson. She won't hang and we've saved the people who live here from a horrible death. And maybe others, because we know it would have escalated. Her paranoia would eventually prompt her to kill anyone who spoke crossly to her."

"You're right, Miss Holmes."

Rowlands took my hand in his. "Thank you, Doctor. Might I request that I pay you a visit in the next few days — just to make sure your handiwork is holding up?" He grinned, tipped his billy-cock hat to us and walked off before I could think of anything to say.

"Very satisfactory," Selina remarked. "Now all that remains is for us to pay a call on Mrs Blackwell, to set her mind at rest and claim our fee."

"We'll set her mind at rest on one condition." I was still ruffled, but I'd been thinking about this a lot.

"Oh? What's that?"

"That she writes Mrs Ferris a rattling good reference!"

THE END

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# If Wishes *were* Horses

I can't tell her I can no longer afford to fill up the car, any more than I can tell her I've got a thing about buses. It's more than a thing, if I'm honest

**M**

**Monday**

My mum used to say that if wishes were horses, my dad wouldn't have to buy fertiliser for his allotment, but that doesn't stop me wishing that the bus doesn't come.

I usually pick Effie up on a Monday and drive her to the gym. Afterwards, we blow all the calories we've burned on lunch, then I take her shopping.

I used to work with Effie and we were both made redundant at the same time.

"Pick me up on Monday," she said as we left the office. "You can drive us out somewhere."

It was the last thing I wanted to do. The one good thing about losing my job was that I wouldn't have to run errands for Effie any more.

"I'm not sure I'm free," I said.

"You've just lost your job, of course you're free. We can join the gym, then have lunch."

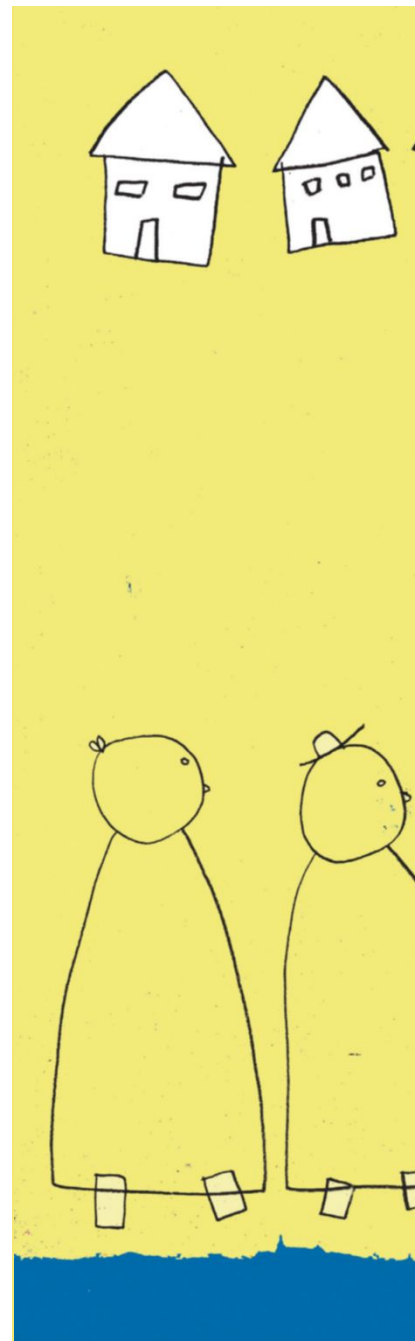
When I moved house, Effie said, "I hope you're not planning to stop picking me up on Mondays now you're living out of town."

Actually I was hoping for an excuse to stop, but I said, "Of course not."

For some reason, I always feel more down after a Monday with Effie than I did before.

I haven't had any success getting another job.

My life is an endless round of gym, job centre, and home with the occasional job



interview thrown in to make things interesting.

Here comes the bus now. Oh, look, what's that in the bush down there? I must check it out. Ah, just an empty crisp packet, but will you look at that, I've missed the bus. It's only gone and driven right past. Never mind, eh.

I stand under the swooshing branches of the horse chestnut trees and call Effie.

"I missed the bus," I say. "I'm so sorry. I won't be able to make it, after all."

I had every intention of getting on the bus, or at least trying to.

"How did you miss the bus? The stop's at the end of your road."

"I was late leaving home," I say, crossing my fingers. "Sorry, Eff."



"Sorry? Well, how am I going to get my shopping?" Effie says. "What about next week? Are you going to let me down then, too?" "Hopefully I'll have my car back. They're waiting for parts. They said it could take some time."

So it's come to this. I hate myself for lying, but I can't tell her I can no longer afford to fill up the car, any more than I can tell her I've got a thing about buses. It's more than a thing, if I'm honest. I haven't been on one for years and last time, I had to get straight back off again before I had a full-blown panic attack.

Effie huffs down the phone. "To be honest, I'm not bothered about the gym. I'm not going to renew my membership.

I'd rather spend the time with my grandchildren. I've been thinking of cancelling Mondays anyway, Sharon."

"I wasn't planning to renew my membership either." That's the truth. I couldn't afford to renew it.

Oh, well, onwards and upwards. I can keep fit by walking everywhere. As if in reply to that thought, a black cloud passes overhead, the wind throws the branches of the horse chestnut trees about and rain lashes down.

I pull the hood of my jacket up and decide to stay put for a minute or two. The trees offer some protection from the rain and I've nothing to hurry home for.



I have to step out of the way when a woman joins me under the trees. She's pushing a buggy and has a small girl walking beside her.

They live on my estate and I've seen them walk past my house a few times, but never spoken. She always seems to be in a hurry and often looks stressed.

"I told you you'd need your coat today, Kimberly," she says. "You're going to get soaked."

"It's fine," the small girl replies with an exasperated sigh. "It's only a bit of rain."

"Only a bit of rain," she mutters as she puts a rain cover over the toddler in the buggy. "Hopefully you'll have indoor play and won't need it."

She stops her scolding and looks at me. "I'm sorry, I didn't see you there. I'm afraid you've missed your bus. It passed us a couple of minutes ago."

"Did it? Oh, dear. Never mind." "I think they run every hour." "Thank you."

# If Wishes *were* Horses

The rain comes down harder. Even the canopy of the trees doesn't offer much protection now. The young woman takes off her jacket.

"You'll have to wear this," she says. "You can't sit at school all day in wet clothes."

"Mu-um! I'll look stupid."

"Perhaps next time you'll listen when I tell you to wear your coat."

"You can borrow mine," I say.

"I don't have far to go, just around the corner."

"I can't do that," she says, but I'm out of my jacket and handing it to her.

"Please," I say. "Take it. You can drop it in on your way past tomorrow. I live at 32 Hornbeam Avenue."

"That's so kind, thank you. I thought I recognised you. We're just around the corner in Birch Close."

I watch them hurry down the road towards the school. I suspect if she wasn't running late, she would have argued about the jacket. I'm glad she took it.

I wait a few minutes for the rain to ease off, then I break cover and run for home. I'm slightly damp and a little dishevelled when I get back, but I'm feeling oddly positive.

## Tuesday

Hannah calls in on her way to school the next morning and hands me my jacket.

"I've washed and ironed it. Thank you again. I hope you didn't get too wet."

I thank her, then step out into the sunshine. There's a bit of a nip in the air.

"I'll walk with you as far as the bus-stop, if that's OK?" I say.

"Yay," Kimberly says and pushes her hand into mine. Golly, it's been a few years since I've held a little hand. I'd forgotten how nice it feels.

We chat about Hannah's strong-willed eight-year-old and Ethan, her laid back two-year-old, and her husband. She hangs around at the bus-stop with me. We seem to

have so much to talk about, but in the end I keep thinking, 'Please go. Please go before the bus comes.'

When it appears at the end of the road, I am practically quaking in my shoes, but Hannah says goodbye and hurries off towards the school and I wave apologetically at the driver and step back from the kerb.

He frowns at me and shakes his head, then he smiles and gives me a wave as if to say no hard feelings.

As he drives away, an elderly man approaches with a small, fluffy white dog on an extending lead.

"Morning," he says.

"Morning," I reply and I stoop to make a fuss of the dog. "Hello, there. You're a cutie, aren't you?"

"She'll take any amount of that," he says.

"What sort is she?"

"Bit of bichon frise," he says.

"Possibly some pug, but it's anyone's guess. You missed your bus."

"I know," I say. "Never mind."

I chat for 10 minutes with Herb before he has to get going. His wife Pat is poorly and he promised he wouldn't be out for long. I give Flossie one last pat and off he goes.

He lives in one of the bungalows in Maple Road. Four months I've lived here without speaking to anyone, and in two days I've met two people and, in an odd sort of way, it's thanks to the bus.

## Wednesday

I'm just going for a walk to get out of the house, a walk which just happens to take me past the bus-stop. I'm almost there when Hannah calls out to me and runs to catch up.

"Kimberly wants to show you her homework," she says.

I feel a rush of longing for the days when I was a part-time teaching assistant at my son's school. When he moved up to high school, I moved on too, to a full-time job in an office.

I thought it was the right thing to do, but I've missed it so much,



especially since he grew up and went off to university.

"We're doing about the Romans," the small girl tells me. "I wrote a diary entry as if I was a Roman soldier."

"Centurion," Hannah corrects her.

"Bless you," Kimberly says.

"Oh, very funny," Hannah groans.

I read her diary entry. Her writing is very neat and packed with humour. She's drawn cartoon illustrations, too. What a talented little girl. She must be an absolute star in her class.

"Right, now you've shown Sharon, can we get moving?" Hannah turns to me and explains, "I'm in a bit of a rush this morning. I've got a job interview and I have to drop Ethan in with the child-minder."

"I don't want to go!" Ethan protests. "I don't like her."

"Well, you'll have to get used to it when Mummy goes back to work," Hannah says sharply, then instantly her face crumples. "It won't be so bad, Ethan. It'll be fun."

I wave them off, but before I can move away the bus pulls to a stop next to me.

It's the same driver as usual and he smiles down at me.

"Er, no, sorry," I say.

"Sure?" he says.

"Quite sure."

He drives off seconds before two women rush around the corner. I've seen both of them around the estate, too.

"I think we've missed it, Barbara," the tall, slim one says.

"Not again," Barbara, the shorter one groans. "For goodness' sake, Alice. You'd be late for your own funeral."

"Well, thanks for reminding me I'm not getting any younger," Alice sniffs.

"That's not what I meant and you know it."

"Did you miss the bus, too?"

Alice asks me and I nod. More lies. Honestly, I don't know how I sleep at night.

"Well, that's it then," Barbara throws her hands in the air. "We'll miss the film again. It's special-offer day for seniors and I've been looking forward to this all week."

"I can run you to town," I say. I've got a teaspoon of petrol left in the car. Well, more than that obviously, but enough for life or death situations and as Barbara looks as if she'd like to strangle Alice, I think you could call this an emergency.

"We'll pay for your petrol," Alice says.

"You'll do no such thing," I say. "I need to get some shopping in anyway."

Even so, they insist on giving me what they would have spent on the bus fare and I hang around in town for them so I can take them home after they've seen the film.

They also insist on buying me a coffee before we leave town. I'm feeling very spoiled and also a bit loose-lipped.

"I don't like buses," I blurt out.

"Can't say I'm keen myself," Barbara says.



"I mean, it's a proper fear with me," I say. "I get palpitations and sweaty palms and I feel I can't breathe."

"I get like that with spiders," Alice says. "Don't I, Barbara?"

"You do, Alice. With me, it's peanut butter. Don't laugh. It's called arachibutyrophobia. I can't even look at a jar of the stuff without my knees turning to jelly. But Alice has helped me with that. I bought a jar the other week for when my son came to stay."

"And Barbara's shown me how to catch a spider with a pint glass and a piece of cardboard. Then she gets rid of it for me when she comes around."

"It's what friends are for," Barbara says.

I think of Effie. I could never talk to her like this. Even if I did, she'd turn it into an anecdote about one of her 12 grandchildren. When we were first made redundant, she said, "What a shame you haven't got any grandchildren."

When I said I was moving to a smaller house, she said, "I need to move to a bigger one, for when the grandchildren come to stay."

I did try to tell her I didn't have a lot of spare cash last time we had lunch.

"Not dieting are you, Sharon?" she said when I ordered a salad, the cheapest thing on the menu.

"Economising," I said.



"Wait 'til you have grandchildren. I'm forever dipping into my purse. I love to buy them little treats. It's one of the best things in life. And wine, of course. Grandchildren and wine."

"So," Barbara breaks into my thoughts. "Another coffee?"

"My treat this time," I say. I can afford it this week, after all I didn't have to buy lunch on Monday. It would have been my turn to pay and Effie always picks something expensive when I'm paying. And she has wine.

"You can't have any because you're driving," she'll say as she polishes off a whole bottle all by herself.

## Thursday

"I got the job!" Hannah says as she meets me at the bus-stop. I'm not going to lie and say I was out for a walk or hoping to catch the bus. I came to the bus-stop in the hopes of seeing someone to chat with. "I start on Monday. What I haven't got is a child-minder."

She looks down at her son's little blonde head and sighs. "It's only for three hours a day, but she says that's three hours too long with Ethan."

"What? Really?"

"I know, right? He's so good most of the time. Not your normal terrible two-year-old at all. I think she was hoping to put him in a play-pen and leave him there."

"I could do a little babysitting for you," I say.

"Really?"

"Until you can sort something out. Come around after school this afternoon and we can have a chat about it while Kimberly and Ethan play."

"I'd pay you."

"Nonsense."

"They're opening a nursery at the school soon. He'll be able to go there. They're advertising for staff already, so it won't be long."

That sounds interesting.

"Here comes your bus," she says. "Thank you for this."

"It's not my bus," I say quickly.

"I don't like buses. It's a bit of a phobia. I've met several people standing here these past few days. It's been a nice way to get to know people."

That's torn it. She's going to think I'm a weirdo now. She won't be leaving Ethan with me anytime soon, but she smiles.

"You get lonely?" she asks. "If my gran's feeling a bit blue, she goes

and sits in the park. She reckons she's met loads of lovely people. I do miss her. I've missed all my family since we moved here for my husband's job. I'll see you later, Sharon. I'll pop in the bakery and get pastries for us."

The bus pulls up beside me. The driver looks at me and smiles.

"Yes? No?"

"No," I say.

"OK," he grins. "Was it something I said?"

I laugh. "No. I'm scared of buses."

"Ah, well Charlotte is a very friendly bus. She won't hurt you."

He gives the steering-wheel a little stroke.

I hear a ripple of laughter from his passengers. He touches his finger to his forehead in a salute and drives away, just as Herb arrives with Flossie.

He looks flustered and upset.

"I hate leaving Pat on her own," he says. "But she insists Flossie has a walk."

"How is she?"

"On the mend." He brightens a little. "But the better she gets, the more she wants to do. I'm terrified I'll get home and find she's had another fall or something. When I got back yesterday, she was standing on a chair doing the



windows. She reckons I left them all smeared when I cleaned them."

I'd offer to walk Flossie for him, but I sense he needs to get out and about.

"I'd be happy to sit with Pat while you go out with Flossie," I say. "I could do your windows for you."

"You would? We haven't made any friends since we moved in. It would be different if Pat was well, but there hasn't been a chance."

"I'd love to."

"I'd pay for your time."

"Certainly not," I say.

"What about your bus?"

"I don't ever get on it," I admit.

"I don't like buses, but I do like the people I meet at the bus-stop."

He laughs. "Well, it's as good a way as any."



## Friday

I had a lovely time with Pat this morning. Herb went out early with Flossie and was back in time for me to get around to the bus-stop.

Pat's taken me on as her cleaning lady. She's been trying to persuade Herb to take someone on for ages, but he didn't want a stranger coming into their home.

She says I'm different. Herb knows me. I'm not a stranger and I only live around the corner.

I'm going to look after Ethan for three hours every morning until he can start at the nursery. Hannah insists on paying me what the child-minder would have charged. Ethan seems very happy about it, and that's the main thing.

I'm going to send my CV to the local schools, just in case they get any teaching assistant vacancies. And I've applied online for a job at the new nursery. I do have some qualifications, but I can get more if I need to. Yes, I can! I can do anything I set my mind to.

I stand in the shade of the horse chestnuts, my breath misting on the cool air. The leaves are starting to change colour. A few have already fallen, blown down by the wind and rain the other day.

I could say something poetic about the wind of change, but that would just sound cheesy, wouldn't it?

Now I have to get on the bus. I can't miss my appointment at the job centre, but I can tell them I've found some casual work and that I want to go back to working with children.

The bus comes into view and the driver slows down.

It's him again. He has a nice, friendly face with a dark beard and sparkly eyes.

"Are you coming aboard?" he asks.

"If I get on, do you promise to stop if I want to get off?"

"Of course," he says with a wink.

"I never hold any passengers against their will."

I feel a hand on my arm.

"Come on, Sharon. We'll sit with you."

It's Alice and Barbara. I'm on the bus before I know it, sitting on the seat nearest the door so I can escape quickly.

Alice sits beside me and holds my hand. Barbara sits behind us.

I feel the panic welling up, my heart crashes behind my ribs and I break out in a sweat.

"Nice deep breaths," Alice whispers. "And start counting to 600. That's how many seconds you'll be on the bus."

"What?"

"Do it," Barbara says. So I breathe deeply and close my eyes and start to count, but I keep losing my thread as my mind wanders, but it isn't wandering to my fear, it's going off to the future.

I've got as far as 400 when the bus-stops and Alice gives me a nudge.

"Our stop," she says.

"See you again," the driver calls as I get off the bus. My legs are shaking, but I feel a sense of euphoria.

"I think you will," I say with a jolly little wave. "Thank you."

I promise to meet Alice and Barbara later for coffee and I'll be going home on the bus with them. I see Effie over the road pushing a double buggy with another tot walking along beside her.

She looks happy. I call out and wave, but she doesn't hear or see me so I square up my shoulders and head to the job centre, hurrying along to the next stage of my life.

THE END

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I am sitting in a hotel in Islington with novelists Katie Fforde and Judy Astley. Tomorrow, we are journeying to the wonderful Chez Castillon in south-west France for a “writing retreat” (they are going to write while I, still in post-finishing-novel slump, am thinking long lie-ins and getting my nails done) and we are going for the full-relaxation option and taking the train. Our Eurostar leaves St Pancras at 9.24 and, as self-appointed ticket monitor, I am fully on top of the detail.

“We check in 30 minutes before,” I announce, “and it’s only a mile up the road. Cab at 8.30?” Judy’s eyes widen. She and Katie share “travel anxiety” — a morbid fear of being late with which I struggle to empathise. “Or 8,” I add, to be on the safe side.

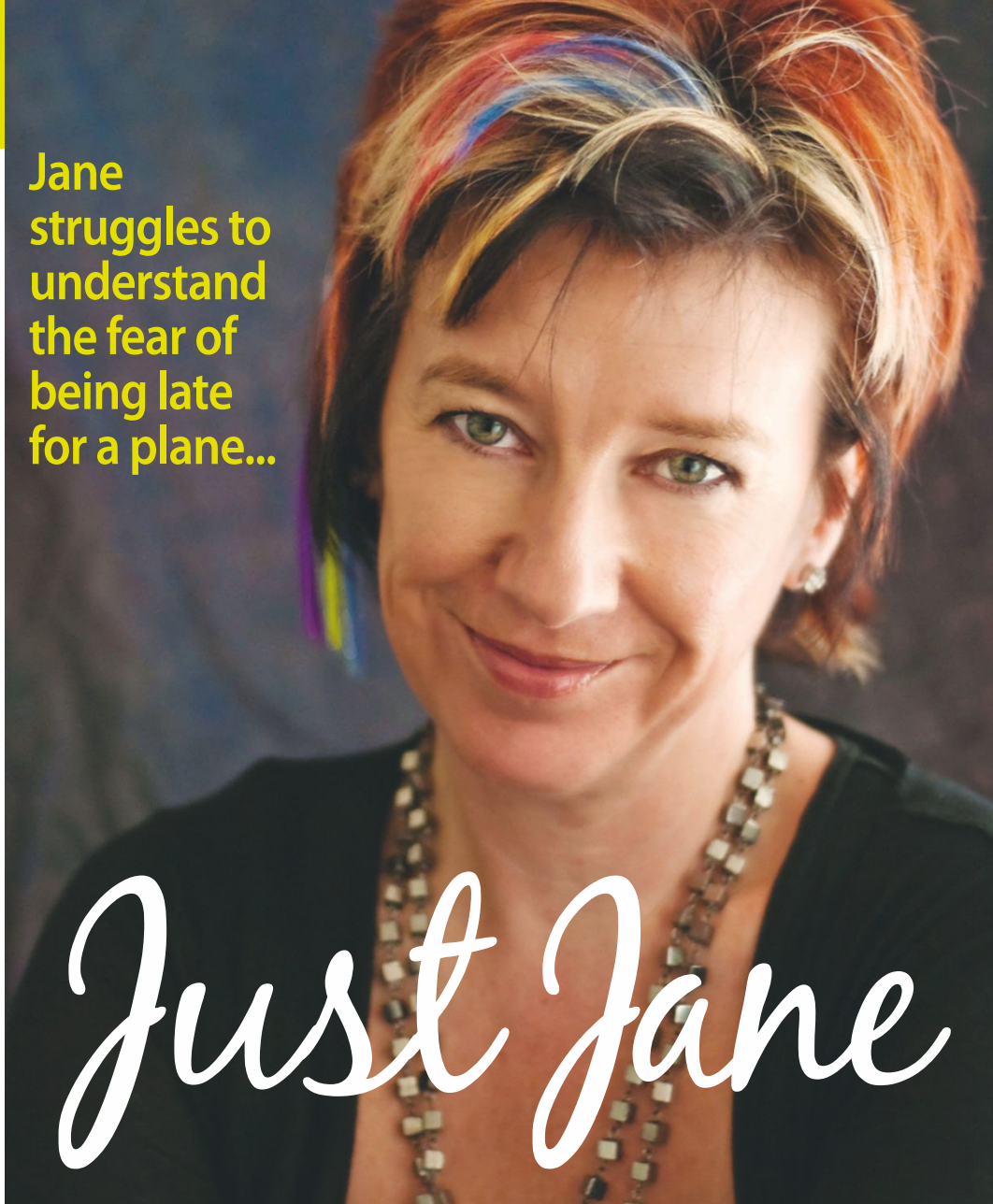
“7.30!” they chorus.

At 7.02 am, Katie texts to say she is in the foyer and the car is already on its way. She will be spending the week editing a manuscript the size of four telephone directories and needs to warn the driver he might get a hernia. He winces as he heaves her case into the boot.

We are at the station so early, we are forced to have a pre-breakfast and undergo some comprehensive impulse shopping. When the barrier opens for our departure, Katie’s case gets stuck in it and my passport won’t scan. We are eventually rescued by officials various and Katie dispenses her special calming hand-cream, using so much on her own hands that the suitcase handle slips from her grasp and crushes an unsuspecting foot. “And we’ve not yet left London.” I say cheerily.

Soon, we haven’t left Folkestone either. We’re delayed outside the Tunnel until it’s clear we will miss our connection. Katie produces more hand-cream. I hand Judy my lavender oil. Janie, our hostess, rings for an update. “Have a bottle of fizz when you catch the next one,” she advises. At Gare du Nord, we fill Judy’s handbag with mini quiches to go with it and stare at

## Jane struggles to understand the fear of being late for a plane...



# Just Jane

the departures board while she searches for the loo.

“What would we do if she never came back?” I say conversationally.

“Get more food,” replies Katie.

We have just formulated a plan that involves the local gendarmerie and taking over the tannoy, when Judy returns,

### ‘What would we do if she never came back?’

the platform numbers flip over and she is off towards the gates like a scalded rabbit. On the train, disaster has struck. There’s been no delivery, the catering chap explains, so the bar is closed. “*C’est terrible!*” I say experimentally, attempting to peer in the cupboards in case he has spare bottles stashed. He shakes his head sadly.

A week later, we are flying home and I have organised this too. Our plane leaves at 10 and

the airport is under an hour away. Andy, our driver, however, is a man after their hearts rather than mine. “He wants to collect you at 6am,” Janie tells us, “in case of traffic.”

“Keep quiet about that,” I say.

We leave at seven. There are roadworks, temporary lights and an accident involving sirens and

passenger, Jo, hands me her phone. There is a map of further hold-ups on the screen, indicating an arrival time shortly after check-in will close. I gesture with my finger across my lips. And send up a short prayer.

We catch the plane, Janie sends further instructions to purchase something bubbly and we

are in jolly mood as we land.

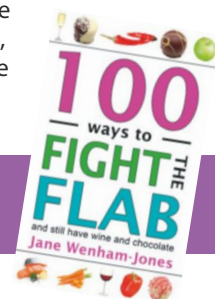
“Next time —” I begin, when we have accosted another beefy male to manhandle Katie’s case from the conveyor. I stop as she and Judy exchange glances. Next time, I suspect, someone else will be in charge...

queues. By 8am, we are at a standstill miles from Bordeaux.

“Oh dear,” I chirrup, poised to highlight the random nature of such delays and their inherent unfeasibility to predict.

“That’s why,” says Andy. “I suggested leaving at six.” Judy and Katie are stunned into reproachful silence. Our fourth

**100 Ways To Fight The Flab And Still Have Wine And Chocolate** by Jane Wenham-Jones is published by Accent Press. Out in paperback and e formats.





## Seeing Julie laughing with the others, Christine wondered if she was really needed there

Sinking back onto a sunbed, Christine wondered why she'd been persuaded to come along. She only hoped the reservations she felt were down to tiredness.

"It's my big 4-0, you're my oldest friend. You HAVE to be there," Julie had argued.

"Glass of sparkle, anyone?"

Anita held out a bottle of fizz and some glasses.

"No, thank you."

A glass of wine now would ensure a headache, especially in the heat of the day, and then she'd need to sleep, and they were due to go shopping or something this afternoon.

Christine and Julie had been best friends since the first day at school, when they'd sat next to one another just by chance. That's how friendships often start, isn't it?

"I'm your friend, I am," Julie had announced in a loud whisper. "I'm going to be your friend forever."

Forty-year-old Christine might have perceived this as a vague threat and been somewhat wary, but five-year-old Christine was delighted to have a friend on her first day at school.

"Come on, spoilsport, it's party time. We're free, for a few days anyways." Anita again. Dancing this time, sashaying her way around the sunbeds.

Christine feigned sleep, although she doubted she was convincing anyone.

Six friends of Julie's, picked up at various points over the years, were sharing a villa in Majorca.

Christine glanced at her phone. Lunchtime for the kids, Alec and Luke. They'd be reading the sappy notes she'd put in their lunchboxes about now. At 11 and 13, she wondered if they'd be mortified.

She missed them. It had been an early start. Before being picked up by the taxi at 5am, she'd crept into their rooms, given them a quick peck on the cheek.

"It's here." Richard whispered. She missed him, too. Morning cuddles weren't going to happen for the next few days. She thought of prising his arm from around her waist when the alarm went off. Her stomach tightened.

"You're awake. I can tell," Anita nudged her. "Not missing the kids, surely?"

She was persistent, you had to grant Anita that. "Sometimes you click with your friend's friends, don't you?" Christine thought. "Sometimes not."

"I'll have a small glass, thank you," Christine replied, avoiding Anita's question.

"Wahay, she says. Yes."

Anita handed Christine a brimming glass, moving onto Julie, who accepted hers with a cheer.

She and Julie had remained close, even though they now lived miles apart. They chatted on

the phone, and met up often, still having loads to talk about. Anita had been at Julie's the last few times Christine had visited, staying with her daughter Alisha. She was a newish friend on the block.

"I'm lodging," Anita announced. "Whilst Alisha's dad finds himself."

Christine couldn't decide about Anita. She hoped she wasn't feeling friendship envy. Surely she was too grown-up for that?

Anita had arranged the trip. "You have to come, Julie needs you there," Anita had urged Christine when she'd expressed doubts. "It's a steal, what with Lizzie's mum lending us her villa. Bargain-basement flights. What's not to like?"

Seeing Julie laughing with the others, Christine wondered if she did indeed need her there. But, hey, feeling sorry for herself wasn't going to get her through, was it? She'd have to pull herself together. Maybe after a little nap. The wine would help. She drifted.

She woke up with a start. She'd dreamt about Richard and the boys. Had that helped? Not really. The area around the pool was empty. Had they gone out without her? She padded towards the patio doors. Her phone beeped. A text from Richard.

*Love you. Miss you. Have fun.*

Well, that was it. The tears came. Her room. She needed to find her room. She wanted to hug her kids. To hold them tight. And Richard too.

"Hey. That was nearly a head on collision."

Anita. Brilliant. Why wasn't she shopping? Coming through the patio doors, making for a sunbed, no doubt. The reflection on the glass had hidden her. All Christine needed was to bump into her, beautifully groomed Anita, when her cheeks were tear-stained, her eyes puffy.

They paused, in that way you do when you don't know which way to go to get past someone on a narrow pavement.

"Julie said not to wake you," Anita said, looking into the distance. "She figured you needed the rest. Catch you later," Anita finally made a swift move past Christine, giving her a half smile, no longer dancing.

So Julie had noticed she was there. And she was spot on about Christine's need for rest.

Maybe with Anita it was all for show, Christine thought, pouring herself a coffee in the kitchen. Some people are like that, aren't they? Putting on a performance around others. She wasn't like that. Although no shrinking violet, she tended to go quiet at times. Especially at first. Maybe later she'd be more lively, refreshed after her nap.

But the coffee having given her an extra kick, and she was ready for a chat if Anita was up for it. They had to spend the weekend together — be best if they got on, and Anita had made an effort earlier, hadn't she? Even if it hadn't been Christine's cup of tea. Or glass of fizz.

"Lovely view, eh?" Christine said.

Anita was on the balcony, looking out to the sea. She didn't turn around.

"You OK?" Christine asked.

Anita didn't answer. She sniffed instead.

Christine thought of her boys, and of Anita's daughter Alisha. Of them being so far away. Of bravado and a brave face.

"Need a hug?"

A pause. Then Anita nodded. Dead awkward at first, the two women leant against each other. Not a full-on, full-body bear-hug like you got with the kids, but some physical contact at least. Some comfort.

"You missing yours as much as I'm missing mine?" Christine asked.

"Yup. Already."

"It's going to be fine, you know. We'll have fun with Julie and they'll be there for us when we get back. All the happier to see us after a break. Especially if we bear gifts."

Anita smiled. "Alisha gave me a list."

They laughed, then were quiet for a few moments.

"It's the calm before the storm of the others getting back," Christine said.

"Brandishing bagloads, no doubt," Anita replied.

"Funny how friendships begin, isn't it," Christine thought. By chance, like with her and Julie. Sometimes finding common ground. Like the need for a hug. Simple as that.

THE END

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# A Brave Face



# A Little Shabby Chic

Ann wished that Vince would look at her the way he looked at the little bookcase he'd just hoisted out of the skip...

“Stop the car!” yelled Vince. Ann did just that. They both rocked forwards as the car halted, right at the end of the drive of number 40. She knew exactly what Vince had seen — the big yellow skip on the lawn. “Won’t be a moment,” he said, climbing out.

This had happened an awful lot since they’d first met outside the butcher’s on the high street; him smiling gently, her blushing at the attention. “I don’t suppose you’d like to come around and share a bit of roast beef?” he’d asked after they’d chatted for a while in front of the window display. “I do some lovely roasties and I won’t expect you to wash up.”

Ann had lived alone for a very long time. She didn’t get offers very often and he’d seemed very nice. Plus, his blue eyes made her stomach do little flip-flops, like a fish on dry land. “I’d love to come around for dinner,” she’d told him. “But I will wash up. I don’t expect anyone to run around after me.”

She did check with a few friends in town, just to make sure he wasn’t a serial killer before she walked to his house on Sunday. Vince owned a nice

little place. It had a tidy garden and a lovely little white fence. Plus, as Ann rang the bell, delicious smells wafted out of an open window.

When Vince answered the door, he grinned, “There you are. Come in. Come in.”

He plied her with wine in the kitchen. Both she and the walls started melting in 10 seconds flat. They chatted for a while about her plans for a holiday and how she’d got used to going all alone. Then, with

a flourish, Vince pointed to the rack holding two sieves and the potato-masher on the wall. “I made that myself out of reclaimed timber and some emulsion. Did you see the table in the hall? I made that out of an old crate. My poof in the lounge, I reupholstered with the material from an old sofa somebody had thrown in a skip. That’s my hobby, you see. I’m a bit of a skip-diver.”

“Sorry?” Ann blinked. “You’re a what?”

“A skip-diver. I swear some of those skips are like entering the Great Barrier Reef. You never know what treasures you’ll find.” He tapped at his skull. “You need a bit of imagination, of course, and a bit of cheek. I always ask before I take anything. It’s only polite. Come on.” He took her hand and tugged her down the hall, then right up the stairs. Her heart thudded against her ribs all the way. ‘Oh, Lor, I haven’t done this in ages. Is this how fast it happens these days?’

In his bedroom, he pointed to a cabinet. “I repainted that. Now it’s... what do they call it... shabby chic? The bed, I re-sprung myself. Now, that was a bit of a job. Still...” He sat down on the



He took her hand and tugged her down the hall

edge of the duvet and bounced. "She doesn't squeak. My neighbours never complain."

"No..." Ann agreed breathlessly. She did find him increasingly attractive, a cross between Paul Hollywood and Paul McCartney. She'd always dreamed of being seduced by a virtual stranger, of chaste kisses growing hungrier and hungrier.

Only, Vince was walking out the door now and heading towards the bathroom. "My entire bathroom suite came out a very, very exclusive skip. It sat outside a big house on Morris Street." She nodded, knowing it was the town's poshest address. "There was nothing at all wrong with the bath, the sink or the loo but that's people for you these days. The colour's wrong or it's out of style — so out the door it all goes."

"It's all very lovely," Ann admitted on the threshold, admiring his shiny taps, then the way the hair curled on the back of his neck.

"Let's get back to our dinner," he said.

Ann bit her lip. Isn't he going to kiss me? Not even once? Is he just looking for a friend? She had to admit, since they'd first met outside the butchers, the more they'd nattered on about her neat little bungalow, her late husband, her grown-up children, her sound financial planning and her holidays, the cooler and cooler he'd become.

Perhaps I'm just too boring for him?

Now, in the street in front of the skip, Ann climbed out of her car. They'd just been out to pick up paint for another of Vince's little projects.

"Hello!" He almost did a bow on the doorstep before the young woman who'd answered his knock. "I wondered if I could look through your skip for anything I might find useful."

"Yes, take whatever you like. It's all going to landfill." The woman smiled.

Vince didn't hang about; he leaned over the edge of the skip and started to rummage this way and that. "Well, look at this!" Ann wished he looked at her the way he looked at the

little bookcase he'd hoisted up. "She's a neat little beauty. Still, she'll need to be stripped, I think."

Ann's mouth went dry at the thought.

"Yes, I'll strip her down. She'll look amazing when I'm finished. Do you think she'll fit in the boot with the paint? No, the back seat might be safer. You don't mind, do you, Ann?" She'd been seeing him on and off for almost two months now. Since they'd met, he seemed to have rescued, sanded and glossed a hundred different items. He'd made a lovely job of them, too. He had such gentle hands and such a good eye for detail and yet whenever he looked at her, his gaze slid right off.

"She'll be fine in the back seat, Vince. Do you need a hand?"

Back at his house, with the bookcase off-loaded safely into his workshop, he offered her tea and cake, then he jiggled from foot to foot. "I can't wait to get started. I'm always like this before I begin a new project." He waved at the door. "Do you mind if I just go and make a start? You can have more cake, if you like; I'm sure you won't miss me"

"No, no, you go if you like."

Off he rushed without a backward glance.

'I'm doing something wrong here,' Ann thought. I haven't needed to flirt with a man since I was 17. No wonder I'm a bit rusty. At 63, she had to admit she felt a bit lost. Unrequited love is a terrible thing. Her shoulders sagged until a sudden idea exploded like a firework in her head and snapped her spine rigid.

Maybe the trick is not only to show an interest in what he's doing — but to join in?

'Oh, it's obvious now I've thought of it. Isn't that always the way?' She grinned, left her seat then hurried in Vince's wake.

In his workshop at the bottom of the garden, the smell of sawdust greeted her and she stifled a sneeze.

Vince had already removed the bookcase's shelves. He had her canted over as he worked his sander up and down her side. Over the keening buzz of the

machine, Ann said loudly, "Vince, do you think I could have a go?"

"Sorry?" came his muffled reply from behind the white dust-mask he wore over his nose and mouth.

His noisy sander stopped and Ann smiled, wide and bright.

"I said, could I have a go?"

"You're not really dressed for it, Ann." Vince motioned to his blue coveralls. "You had your hair done today, too, didn't you? The dust will ruin your make-up."

"Oh, I'm sure I won't get that dirty. Come on; show me what you're doing."

He pulled another mask down from a shelf and handed it to her.



"All right then, but protect your lungs at least." While she settled the mask over her face, he stroked the bookcase. "All I'm doing is sanding off the varnish so the paint will stick. Here, you pull up on this lever to start the sander. Just follow along with the grain of the wood."

Ann set to. After a while, she found the sander's endless buzz soothing. Plus, she liked the way the peeling varnish disappeared and exposed the swirl of the wood's grain beneath. She finished one whole side as, over the noise, Vince explained his plans to paint the case a chalky white and talked about the other items waiting for attention in his shed.

Ann scraped a hand through her gritty hair. By now, dust smothered her cheeks, her blouse and her skirt. 'Oh, well, don't get upset; you can't make

an omelette without breaking eggs.' She glanced up to Vince. Something new lurked in his gaze — something she'd never seen before. The tension in his shoulders made him look like a cat about to pounce. "So, how am I doing?" she asked.

He cleared his throat. "Good. Very good." He pulled his mask over his head. "Only... you're all messy now, Ann. You look like you need... a little refurbishment yourself."

She frowned at the sultry timbre of his voice. 'Oh,' she thought. 'Oh! I'm covered in sawdust, my brow's all sweaty. He can see there's work to be done now and he's getting all... excited.' She messed up her hair a little more. She held the sander so it would blow more dust all over her skirt and skin.

She'd realised then where she'd actually been going wrong. 'I've been coping on my own for so long and coping very well,' she thought. 'Perhaps he's never got past wondering what an earth I really need him for.'

She stopped sanding and pulled her mask down. "Oh, look at the state of me. I can't go home looking like this, can I? I was going to invite you out tonight as well. I thought we'd go to a restaurant. I need some advice, you see, Vince. I do on... on conservatories... and on plumbing, too. Do you think you can help me out?"

Vince never did do a single thing without asking permission first. "To be honest, I'd really like to help by kissing you now, Ann. If that's all right?"

"Oh, I think I'll cope."

He swept her into his arms, just like he'd swept up the little bookcase. He kissed her and she shed a great big pall of sawdust. "I think I need to take you inside," he whispered breathlessly when they parted. "You need cleaning up a bit. I might even need to... to strip you down."

"You can strip me down all you like, Vince. Please go ahead, renovate me."

Vince grinned. "That is my speciality." He took her hand and led her out towards the house.

THE END

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THE CARTERS HAD NO ONE TO ORGANISE THEIR ANNIVERSARY PARTY, SO IT SEEMED FITTING THAT WE, THEIR NEIGHBOURS, SHOULD RISE TO THE OCCASION

# The Last Waltz

**F**rank and Mary Carter, who live next door, have been married for 59 years. In March, they will celebrate their diamond wedding anniversary. "Imagine," said Miranda, wide-eyed, "being with the same person all that time!"

Miranda, who lives next door on the other side, is 35 and has, by her own admission, had quite a number of relationships both before and after the brief marriage which produced Henry, her seven-year-old son.

"How do they manage not to get on each other's nerves?" asked Miranda, whose nerves seemed to be easily got on, especially by Henry who, for this reason, spends as much time in my house as he does in his own.

He was tugging at her sleeve. "Can I? Can I?" he said.

"Can you what?" she asked impatiently.

"Go to Auntie Jo's for my tea?" he replied, eyeing the processed food that awaited him with something less than enthusiasm.

"You'd better ask Auntie Jo," said Miranda.

"Can I?" he asked me. "And can we have roast beef and Yorkshire pudding?"

I'd been under the impression that today's children were addicted to junk food and remembered that my own son, when young, had refused to eat anything other than spaghetti hoops for so long that I'd thought he was in danger of developing scurvy. Henry was most definitely the exception that proved this rule.

Miranda turned to me. "Actually," she said, "you'd be doing me a favour. I've a heap of work to get through before tomorrow."

Miranda runs a recruitment agency and does very well out of it. Henry's clothes sport designer labels, he is taken on holiday to exotic destinations and what I have learned to call his "devices" are state of the art. But in order to satisfy his desire for roast beef and Yorkshire pudding, he has to come to my house.

However, on this occasion there wasn't time to prepare that particular meal so he had to be content with lamb chops.

"I could live here, couldn't I?" he said as he chased the last chunk of pineapple around the edge of his bowl.

I refrained from saying, "You practically do," but told him instead that his mother would miss him.

"She wouldn't," he said, licking his spoon. "I'm a nuisance." And then he said, "I could be a big





and cornices, solid oak doors and staircases, marble fire surrounds, but they tend to fall short when it comes to convenience and ease of maintenance. Until persuaded to invest in a gas fire, Frank was hauling buckets of coal up the cellar steps on a daily basis, and cleaning the windows in those high-ceilinged rooms involved the precarious ascent of step-ladders. As for the kitchen... Miranda, standing in her own pristine version of the same, where cooking mostly consisted of perforating the film on ready-meals and bunging them in the microwave, was often seen to shudder. "That oven! It should be in a museum. And it's a wonder they haven't electrocuted themselves with all those adaptors and wires trailing about the place."

"That house is spooky," Henry had said and its kitchen, according to Miranda, is both a health hazard and a death trap. But the food that Mary produces out of such unpromising conditions would surprise them both: soups and stews and cassoulets that make the mouth water, pastries that crumble within it, and that

when anyone referred to them. That and "private"; they were private people, kept themselves to themselves. All that others knew was that they were the most long-standing residents of the road. The occupancy of every other house had changed innumerable times since Frank had, possibly, carried Mary over the threshold.

She was still a pretty woman, even in her ninth decade, with a face that was relatively unlined ("That's 'cos she never had any kids," said Miranda with feeling) and hair that, though white, was still thick and lustrous. And the odd photograph that was displayed showed a young woman whose looks would undoubtedly have turned heads. Frank too, despite the brutal haircut and the Brylcreem, had, in his heyday, obviously been a fine figure of a man.

Now, he was bent and arthritic, as was she. They'd assist each other along the road when they pushed their shopping trolleys to the bus-stop. It was a heart-warming sight and caused many observers to think wistfully about

But when it came to the marking of anniversaries, there was no doubt that families came in useful. In the Carters' case, who was there to organise even the most modest of celebrations? To the best of our knowledge, had they ever had siblings they and their offspring were either long gone or no longer in contact. "We should do something," Miranda said. "Arrange a party for them."

"I'm not sure they're party people," I said.

But once the idea had taken root, Miranda was determined on it. "But who would you invite?" I asked.

"Oh," she said, "us, everybody who lives in the Crescent. A sort of street party, only not in the street. Leave it to me."



So now we, Miranda, myself and most of our neighbours, are waiting in a function room of the Claremont Hotel. It is adorned with balloons and streamers and the tables are laden with the most superior sorts of foodstuffs, because Miranda has a professional connection with a high-class purveyor of comestibles.

The lights have been extinguished. We are waiting for a phone call from the duty manager to tell us that the guests of honour have arrived and then, as they are about to enter the room, someone will flick the switch and we'll all shout, "Surprise!"

Mary and Frank have been lured here on the pretext that there is to be a residents' meeting to discuss plans that have been put forward for a new housing development on spare land behind the road. (There had been some talk of such a plan, but it had come to nothing.)

"But we've had no letter from the council," Frank, greatly perplexed, had remarked to Miranda when she informed him of this meeting.

Miranda had replied that it was all very hush-hush. "You know how these things are decided," she'd said, "discussions in smoke-filled rooms — well, they wouldn't be smoke-filled these days, obviously, but we need to be vigilant, I'm sure you agree."

"We don't usually go out in the evenings," Frank had said.

"We'll send a taxi," said Miranda. Now we are poised for their

help. I could fix your computer when you mess it up and I could wind the clock and, and... I could put Corky into his carrier when he has to go to the vet."

When faced with the prospect of that journey, Corky the cat turned into a biting, scratching fury, except at the approach of Henry, when he became the epitome of compliance.

But Henry performed all these tasks anyway, without taking up residence; it was like having a mini handyman on site. I had mentioned that he might care to provide a similar sort of assistance to Frank and Mary who were far more in need of it than me. He'd wrinkled his nose. "That house is spooky," he'd said.

The road we live in has undergone a certain amount of gentrification: loft conversions, kitchen extensions, garden rooms and conservatories — with the sole exception of Frank and Mary's house, which has escaped the addition of electronic gates, hot tubs, bifold doors or mock-Georgian porticos. The Carters' house is a solid Edwardian villa, unchanged in any significant respect since it was built and, ironically, many of the internal features — the roll-top cast iron bath, the Belfast sink, the encaustic tiles — are precisely those for which the neighbours search so diligently among the contents of reclamation yards.

Edwardian houses contain much of what is both beautiful and desirable: stained glass in glowing colours, intricately carved corbels

favourite of Henry's: roast beef, so succulent and tender that neither Frank nor Mary would need their false teeth to chew it.

When I compliment her on her culinary skill, Mary says, "Well, I've had a lifetime's practice."

Home-making: that which was once considered to be a woman's prime function. Mary had never attempted more than the odd part-time job in a shop or a café, and that only in the early years of marriage, "Just until the children came along."

But the children didn't come along. "It wasn't to be," she said.

I wouldn't have dreamed of asking why, or with whom the fault lay. Whatever the reason, it meant that she had devoted herself to Frank and he, as far as we knew, to her. "Devoted" was the word that was always used

concepts such as loyalty and constancy. Concepts which, in a great many cases, were signally lacking. As the older residents moved out, or were carried out, feet first, so the houses became occupied by a new generation, many of whom were on to their second or even third marriages. Step-parents and children and in-laws abounded, fathers waiting in cars on Fridays to collect their children for the weekend or drawing up on Sunday evenings to disgorge them, fractious and weary from too much enforced amusement. Conversations were often entered into on the subject of whether children drew you together or drove you apart. If Frank and Mary were anything to go by, it was said, then their absence certainly had no deleterious effect.

*Neither Frank nor Mary would  
need their false teeth to chew it*

# The Last Waltz

entrance, the chap from number 10 with his finger on the light switch, the woman from 32 ready to press the button on the CD player, from which should emerge the strains of the *Anniversary Waltz*.

There was a false alarm: somebody's mobile ringing for an entirely different reason, and then the expected call came and, eventually, having slowly ascended the stairs, Frank and Mary entered to a chorus from us.

They looked more disconcerted than delighted. Mary's first words, when she'd stopped blinking as the lights were switched on, were, "I don't care for gatherings".

"You'll be fine," Miranda said. "You'll enjoy yourselves. Come and sit down and have a glass of Champagne."

She'd alerted the local paper and eventually a photographer arrived to record the occasion. But the happy pair, sipping cautiously at their Champagne, seemed none too happy to have their photographs taken. Miranda, who was compensating for the Carters' abstemiousness in the matter of champagne-quaffing, had to persuade, cajole, and finally bully them into posing, hands clasped together as they sliced into the cake she had ordered.

And then, a speech having been made by Richard Crawford from number 44, who was a headmaster and therefore accustomed to making speeches, congratulating the Carters on their long and successful marriage, somebody removed the CD of muted background music and replaced it with the one that featured the waltzes, whereupon Frank and Mary, though initially professing reluctance, were prevailed upon to take the floor.

And arthritis suddenly seemed to have relaxed its grip. They moved as effortlessly and fluently as though 60 of their 80-odd years had melted away. A few jaws were seen to drop at the spectacle of such an accomplished performance. "It's like watching

Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers," someone remarked as Frank guided Mary around the floor, their steps in perfect synchronisation, to the tune of *Wine, Women And Song*. "Surely inappropriate in view of their blameless lives," someone else murmured.

One dance was sufficient a test of their stamina. They sank creakingly into the chairs provided and, when they got their breath back, explained that once upon a time they'd done a lot of ballroom dancing.

"Well, you are a pair of dark horses," said Richard Crawford. "What else haven't you told us about?"

Frank had to recover from a bout of coughing before he could get the words out. "Oh," he said, "you'd be surprised."



"I'm just so glad we had that do," Miranda said. She'd come to drop off Henry, his devices and his pyjamas for the night as she had

a meeting in Manchester. "At least they had a good send-off."

Henry looked up from killing some blue gremlins on his tablet. "What's a send-off?" he said.

Miranda shot me a look. "It's what you give someone when they're going away," she said.

"Oh, you mean when they're dead?" he said without much interest and resumed his dispatching of alien creatures.

We had seen the ambulance draw up and the paramedics running along the drive and we had seen them emerge carrying a stretcher. "It's Mary," someone said and, later, someone else reported that she'd had a stroke and been taken to hospital.

No one was unduly surprised. What did surprise us was the sight, the very next day, of another ambulance, another stretcher.

"He seemed perfectly all right," said the woman from number 32.

"Well, apart from being worried about Mary. I was going to give him a lift to the hospital tonight after work."

They died on the same day. It seemed fitting. "They wouldn't have wanted to carry on without each other," everyone said. "Best thing, really, in the circumstances."

Someone enquired about the funeral arrangements and found that everything was in hand, Frank and Mary having availed themselves of pre-paid plans years before.

"Shall I be going?" Henry asked.

"No," said Miranda.

"Why not?" he said. "I've never been to a funeral."

"You'll be at school," said Miranda.

But the funeral happened to coincide with an inset day and, as the majority of the neighbours who weren't at work would be attending the funeral, she had no one to mind him therefore, dressed in his best and warned on pain of dire consequences to behave himself, he accompanied us to the crematorium.

The rain was relentless. Clustered

and Miranda wasn't one to let an opportunity pass her by. "You've plenty of games on your tablet," she said, brushing him away as though he'd been a bothersome fly.

But his tablet had run out of charge. For a while, he wandered around the room, hovering up the odd sandwich or slice of fruit cake that was left on a plate, and then he disappeared. Though it was a while before his absence was noted and only then because the woman from number 32 had come over to break up the cosy chat between Miranda and her husband. "That child!" said Miranda. "Where on earth has he got to?"

He was nowhere to be seen. Miranda and I traipsed through the hotel's corridors, opening doors en route, occasionally interrupting some important-looking board meeting. We were just about to alert the management when he reappeared, looking quite nonchalant.

"Where have you been?" asked his mother, shaking him vigorously.

He wriggled free of her grasp. "I've been exploring," he said. "They've got a swimming pool. And a games room. And a great big, huge, ginormous cinema screen in the basement."

"That hasn't taken you all this time," said Miranda. "What else have you been up to?"

"Oh," he said, "I was just talking to this man..."

"What have I told you," she said, "about talking to strange men?"

"... and this lady," he continued.

We knew that, sometimes, women could be as dangerous as men, and Henry had been warned accordingly. "It's all right, it's all right," he said rapidly. "It was the man and the lady who were at the funeral."

Miranda said, "You mean a couple of the neighbours?"

"No," he said scornfully, "I know who all the neighbours are."

"So what were you talking about?" I enquired.

The interrogation had lasted long enough. He began to fidget in earnest. "Just about the dead people," he said. "Can we go home now?"



Sometime after the funeral, Miranda and I and a few of the other neighbours received letters



*A different room this time and  
a rather less sumptuous spread*

under umbrellas, we inspected the flowers in the Garden Of Remembrance. It had been a short humanist service (apparently the Carters had had no known religious affiliation), consisting of generalities because no one knew enough about their lives to provide much history. Though the celebrant, having been tipped off by Richard Crawford, did include a mention of their ballroom-dancing expertise.

Afterwards, we repaired once more to the Claremont Hotel. A different room this time and a rather less sumptuous spread. (There was a limit, people said, to just how much we could be expected to fork out.)

Henry, having wolfed down a batch of vol-au-vents, several slices of quiche and some sausage rolls, declared that he was bored.

Miranda was deep in conversation with the husband of the woman at number 32. He and she, we'd heard, were in the process of detaching themselves from one another,

from a firm of solicitors. On the instructions of the late Frank and Mary Carter, in consideration of the help and kindness shown to them during their lifetimes, we were invited to accompany one of the firm's representatives to the house to choose a memento.

"Wasn't that a kind thought?" I said. Miranda wrinkled her nose in exactly the same way that Henry wrinkled his. "With respect," she said, "I wouldn't think there'd be anything there to which I'd want to give your house room."

I remembered china cabinets stuffed full of knick-knacks, ornaments perched on top of sideboards, a kitchen full of jugs and basins, not to our taste, perhaps, but of interest to some canny antique dealer.

That thought had obviously occurred to Richard Crawford as, on the appointed morning and assembled in the Carters' house under the watchful eye of the representative of Messrs Hawkins and Twist, he was seen to be examining various artefacts very closely, checking for makers' marks and cross-referencing them in the *Miller's Antiques Guide* he'd brought with him.

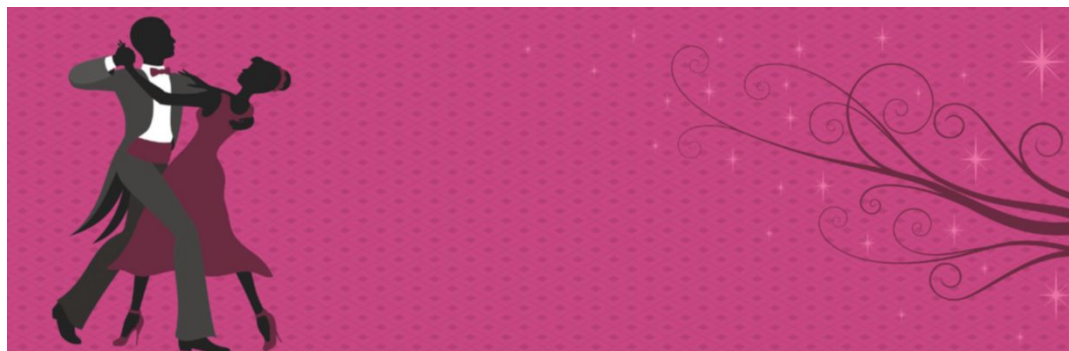
"Some people!" said Miranda. We were upstairs in the master bedroom, where the dents made in the pillows on the matrimonial bed by its late occupants were still visible.

A small silver box with a mother-of-pearl lid caught her eye. "Pretty," she said. "I think I'll opt for that. Unless you want it?"

I shook my head. I'd already chosen: a very-much-after-Clarice Cliff vase. It was chipped but I thought that, filled with marigolds, it would brighten up my kitchen.

Carrying this booty, we made our way downstairs. Richard Crawford was deliberating between a tarnished gravy boat and a china shepherdess. "I suppose everything else will be sold up," Miranda said, "and donated to the Cats' Home, or whatever charity they've opted for."

The representative of Messrs Hawkins and Twist was busy ticking off the items we'd selected from his inventory when his phone rang. He answered it and we saw his expression change. After a brief conversation, he switched it off and turned to us. "I'm sorry," he said, "there's a problem. I'm afraid that I'm going to have to ask you to replace any items that you may have chosen. For the time being."



Muted muttering was heard. Richard Crawford, however, appointed himself spokesperson. "Just what is the problem?" he said. "I'm not at liberty to disclose it," the solicitor's man replied. "Now, if you wouldn't mind..."

Richard Crawford did mind. The china shepherdess almost had to be wrenched from his grasp. "I'll get to the bottom of this," he told us, "make no mistake."

And, having friends, if not in high, then certainly in appropriate places, he did. The Carters' will, we discovered, had been contested. Any bequests authorised in that will had been frozen, including the proceeds of the sale of the major asset, the house. All beneficiaries would be duly advised of this.

"And that house, even though it's a bit dilapidated, will be worth a fair few bob," said Richard Crawford.

He was right; we'd seen the value of our properties escalate rapidly over the last few years. "Someone's due a nice little windfall," he said. He also said that

doctor when he'd examined Henry. "No," said the doctor, "it's most likely this virus that's doing the rounds. Plenty of fluids, rest, and give him some Calpol when he can keep it down."

I stepped into the breach. Which didn't require much of me, since Henry appeared to be quite recovered within the space of a couple of days. "I can't go to school, though," he declared. "In case I pass it on."

He looked up at me, his expression suggesting that I should be impressed by such selflessness. "Besides, I need fresh air," he said authoritatively.

So I accompanied him to the park, where his death-defying exploits on the swings and the climbing-frame argued against any protests of invalidity.

Walking back, discussing what I might prepare for our evening meal, we noticed two people, a man and a woman, in the front garden of the Carters' house. Henry came to a halt, leaned over the wall and shouted, "Hello."

They both turned round, looked

whose garden they were standing. A younger Frank stood beside a younger Mary. My first thought was that they must be brother and sister, though they didn't look remotely alike.

To say that I was intrigued would have been something of an understatement. I sought for some question that might provide information without sounding either rude or overly inquisitive. Eventually, I had to settle for, "Can I help you? I live next door."

"So you'll have known the Carters," the man said.

"Indeed," I said and proffered my hand and my name in the hope that he'd volunteer his own.

"Keith Fraser," he said. The handshake was reassuringly firm. "And this is Margaret Shaw."

Margaret Shaw seemed rather more wary, merely nodded politely in my direction.

"We're just having a look at the place," said her brother — if he was her brother.

"I imagine that it will be on the market before long," I said, as though I assumed them to be potential purchasers.

"It might well be," said Keith Fraser.

At which point, I couldn't help myself. I said, "Your resemblance to Mr Carter is astonishing."

He produced a wry smile. "Not surprising," he said, "since he was my father."



"I invited them in for a cup of tea," I told Miranda. "I thought at first that they'd refuse but they'd come a long way and I think they were just glad of a sit down and some refreshment."

Henry was in the garden, repeatedly throwing a toy mouse stuffed with catnip which Corky was supposed to retrieve. Corky's response to this invitation was a disdainful stare.

"So: this couple; Mary and Frank's offspring, I presume?" said Miranda, and when I shook my head, she said, "Gosh, it's like

*I remembered china cabinets  
stuffed full of knick-knacks*

he'd find out more during his next game of golf.

As it turned out, we didn't have to wait that long.

◆◆◆  
"Why now?" Miranda wailed. "Oh, why now?"

Two days before she was due to leave for a week-long conference in Dublin, Henry woke up and was promptly sick all over his Scooby Doo duvet cover. Further investigation showed the presence of a rash. Miranda had panicked. "Is it meningitis?" she'd asked the

at him enquiringly. "It's me," said Henry, who was not a reticent child. "In the hotel. We were talking about the dead people."

"Oh, yes," said the man slowly, "I remember you." And the woman said, "Harry, isn't it? Henry!"

I judged them to be middle-aged. It was only when they came closer that I realised that they were probably older than that. And it was only when they came closer that I noticed the resemblances, his in particular, to the previous occupants of the property in



# The Last Waltz



an episode of *Who Do You Think You Are?* Come on then, spill the beans."

"He, Keith," I said, "is Frank's son and Margaret is Mary's daughter."

"Run that by me again," said Miranda.

So I explained: "The children of their marriages."

"You mean their first marriages?" said Miranda.

Once again I shook my head. "Their only marriages," I said.

"What!" said Miranda and then listened, agog, while I related to her what had been told to me.

It was Keith, I said, who, when he grew old enough to be curious and want answers, first started searching for the father who'd abandoned him. Somewhere along the way he came across the existence of Margaret Shaw nee Appleton, a fellow abandonee. After that, they liaised, attempting to track down his father, her mother. This eventually involved employing a private investigator. But, Keith said, when contact was finally made, Frank and Mary didn't appear to be interested. "They were pleasant enough," he said, "but we might have been mere acquaintances, strangers even, and they certainly didn't give any indication that they wanted to keep in touch. It seemed that the lives which had once included us had been totally erased. They were pleased that we'd done well for ourselves but that was as far as it went."

So now both he and Margaret, virtually renounced in their parents' lifetimes, had decided to put in a claim for what they considered to be rightfully theirs.

"Hang on," said Miranda. "So you're saying that the Carters weren't ever married?"

"They weren't even the Carters," I said. "That was the name they chose. You can, actually, call yourself anything as long as you inform people that that's the name you wish to be known by."

"I'm confused," said Miranda. So I explained: "Frank Fraser, aka Carter, and his wife," I said, "had a son called Keith. And Mary Appleton, aka Carter, and her husband had a daughter called Margaret."

"Gotcha," said Miranda. "The Frasers," I said, "lived in the north of Scotland and the Appletons in South Wales."

"That's a fair distance," said Miranda. "How did they meet?"

"They might not have done," I said, "but you know that old saying, 'Love will find a way?'"

She didn't. "Anyway," I continued, "it didn't need to try too hard because they were destined to meet, brought together by their mutual interest in ballroom dancing. They fell into each other's arms midway at a competition in the Tower Ballroom, Blackpool."

"And love blossomed beneath the revolving glitter ball?" said Miranda.

I said, "I think it took a few more foxtrots and Argentinian tangos before they both upped and left their respective spouses and their respective children. Just vanished into the blue, according to Keith. I believe that Mrs Fraser and Mr Appleton made some sort of attempt to pursue them but, from what I gathered, they'd fled abroad, where they stayed for quite a while. And by the time they returned, the deserted pair had, by then, met other partners."

"So why didn't Frank and Mary marry?" said Miranda.

"I've no idea," I said. "Perhaps at first they weren't free to do so and afterwards, after lying low for so long, they were disinclined to raise their heads above the parapet. Perhaps the notion of living over the brush..."

"What is 'over the brush'?" said Miranda.

"Illicitly," I explained. "Perhaps it seemed more romantic and they thought that if they married, the magic might be lost."

"Well, yes," said Miranda, "I've known people who've lived together for years perfectly happily, then they get married and before you know it they're in the divorce court. But all that pretence!" she said. "Diamond anniversary, my foot!"

I thought it was possible that if you pretended for long enough, then that pretence sometimes became reality.

Miranda was looking out of the window. She then went to the door and called, "Henry, stop tormenting that cat!"

Both Henry and the cat ignored her. She turned back to me. "What I don't understand," she said, "is how on earth they could just abandon their children like that."

This from Miranda who had told me that Henry had been an accident and that she didn't think that she was cut out for motherhood.

Now she called to him again: "Henry, come here this minute!" And when, reluctantly, he obeyed, she took hold of him and hugged him so tightly that she almost squeezed the breath from his body. "I'm going to do you a special tea," she said.

He recovered quite quickly. His eyes lit up. "Roast beef and Yorkshire pudding?" he said eagerly.

"Well," she said, "I could try."



We discovered later that the Carters had been canny than perhaps we had given them credit for. Some clever arrangement had been made so that each inherited from the other without let or hindrance. Various charities had been named in their wills, but now, we assumed, the bulk of the estate would go to their only legitimate heirs. What was certain was that Richard Crawford never got his hands on the china shepherdess.

I remembered that among those effects from which we'd been invited to choose a keepsake there had been a plaque bearing

the motto: *Amor Vincit Omnia*; I'd translated it for Miranda: *Love Conquers All*.

Maybe that was true. But if so, sometimes it came at an enormous cost so, as I told Miranda, I was surprised when Keith Fraser said that Frank and Mary had actually done himself and Margaret a favour. "Blood is supposed to be thicker than water," he said, "but we were very young when they left and we hardly remembered them and afterwards we were lucky enough to have step-parents who really loved us and cared for us. We've had good lives, happy lives. That may well not have been the case if they'd stayed put. I don't think that child-rearing would ever have been their thing."

I thought about Frank and Mary waltzing together that night, close and in perfect harmony, oblivious of everything and everyone except each other and obviously still as much in love as they were when they twirled in tail-suit and sequins beneath the glittering lights of the Tower Ballroom.

Lovers first and foremost; children, as Keith Fraser had implied, would have come a very poor second.

Which made it all the more laudable that those same children, we later discovered, had carried out their parents' last wishes — expressed in a codicil to that disputed will. Blood had, perhaps, proved to be thicker than water. Or perhaps both had a strong sense of duty. Whatever the reason, they took Frank's and Mary's mingled ashes and scattered them off the end of the North Pier in Blackpool, background, we supposed, to where they had first fallen in love.

"Very noble," Miranda said. "More than they deserved."

Perhaps it was as well, I told her, that we didn't always get what we deserved.

THE END

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More Tales From The Woodlands

The Robin family



Illustration: Martina Farrow/New Division

Please To Remember

"Please to remember the Fifth Of November!" sang Dr Robbie Robin.

Mrs Rosabelle laughed. "I'm surprised you need to remember that after what you've been doing this afternoon," she said, for Dr Robbie and other grown-up Woodlanders had been helping Mr Rabbit prepare for the Woodland Firework Display on Sunday evening.

By five o'clock on Sunday, the school meadow was thronged with Woodlanders,

all eager for the firework display to begin. And much to the delight of his friends, little Donald Dormouse and his parents were there, wrapped up against the chilly evening.

"We put our alarm clock on to wake us so we could come," Donald said, "and then we'll go back to sleep until Christmas Day."

At that moment, Roley Robin suddenly had a marvellous idea and scampered off to suggest it to Mr Rook, who listened and then nodded approvingly. "Now that is an excellent idea," he told the little Robin.

"So why don't you go and ask Donald if he would be kind enough to come and light the bonfire, and then start the display by setting off the very first firework?"

The little Dormouse was delighted. "Me?" he squeaked in surprise. "I'd love to! Oh, what fun!"

It certainly was and as the bonfire's dancing flames lit up the night sky, everyone clapped loudly. But when Donald carefully set off the very first firework, someone clapped even louder — baby Rowena Robin, for the first firework was her favourite!

A Basketful Of Logs

"Well, that's enough for one morning!" announced Wilberforce Weasel as he and Blakeney Blackbird unloaded their last barrow of neatly-chopped logs into the log-store that stood outside Jack Daw's Stores. "Besides, I don't think we'd get any more in, even if we tried!"

"It's perfect," Jack Daw told him, "because I know I'm going to have plenty of customers, as it has turned so cold. There was a heavy frost this morning!"

And all that day, Jack Daw and Jemima Starling were busy taking orders for logs.

"I'll make sure Mrs Wood-Mouse knows," Mrs Rebecca Robin promised them when she called in to buy the things she needed to make her Christmas puddings, "and I'll also tell Mr Vole and Mrs Shrew-Mouse as well."

"Why don't Rosemary and I carry Mrs Wood-Mouse's logs around to her?" Roley said to his mother that evening.

And when their school-friends heard what they were planning to do, they were eager to help. It didn't take long to fill a basket full of logs, but it proved much heavier to carry than they had realised, so Mr Rabbit offered to lend them his wheelbarrow, and came along to help the little Woodlanders load it up as well.

"Make way for the Woodland

Busy! Busy! Busy!

"Where has the year gone?" wailed Mrs Sparrow when she met the two Mrs Robins and Mrs Mouse. "I can't believe Christmas pudding-making time is here again!"

"Nor can I," Mrs Mouse agreed. "Not only that, Molly and Morris keep disappearing off to make mysterious lists and I have to pretend that I haven't noticed!"

The two Mrs Robins laughed and agreed that now it seemed everyone in The Woodlands was busy getting ready for Christmas. The shops were filled with all sorts of tempting gifts, and Anthea Rabbit had decorated her flower shop with sprays and garlands of holly and ivy, spangled with silvery glitter — all so delightfully Christmassy that when the Woodlanders went in, they felt they had stepped into Father Christmas's magical grotto.

"And even though he is busy, busy, busy, he has promised me he'll be dropping in for a visit," Anthea told her very youngest

customers, and couldn't help smiling at how pleased they looked at the thought of being able to meet Father Christmas.

Then, a few days later, as the two little Robins came home from school on a cold, grey afternoon, Rosemary stopped at the gate of Tree Stump House and sniffed appreciatively.

"Roley, I think I can smell Christmas puddings!" she chirruped.

And she was right, for Mrs Rebecca had spent the day preparing her Christmas puddings, and now a big bowl of the dark, deliciously spicy mixture was waiting to be stirred so that the Robin Family could make their Christmas wishes.

That evening, their homework finished, Roley and Rosemary shut themselves in their bedroom and settled down to write out their Christmas present lists. They proved to be quite long but there were, of course, several things that the two little robins did not write down and were careful to keep very secret...

log-deliverers!" they called as they trundled it briskly along.

Their elderly customers were delighted — especially old Mr Vole, who had just realised, much to his dismay, that his log-box was almost empty.

And the following afternoon, he was able to entertain Mrs Wood-Mouse and Mrs Shrew-Mouse to tea in front of a glowing fire that was, he told them with a smile, all thanks to the Woodland log-deliverers.

# The Guide

BOB HAD ALWAYS BEEN THE HECKLER — BUT NOW HE COULD SEE HOW HIS VICTIMS WOULD HAVE FELT

Bob stood in the middle of the square, outside the cathedral. His knees had started to knock together and his hands were shaking. The last time he could remember that happening, he'd been about 10 and had to stand in front of the class and give a talk. He'd worn short trousers then and had been sure everyone would notice him quaking. As usual, he hadn't done his homework so he did what he'd always done when he found himself in that situation. He told a silly joke, performed his monkey impression, made everyone laugh and then sat down again. Miss Harris had glared at him and put him in detention, but he thought he might have seen the corners of her mouth twitch.

He felt for his crib sheet inside his pocket. It was like a security blanket, with a list of all the things he needed to remember about the cathedral.

"Try and tell a joke, for starters," the man who did the training suggested. "Gets them warmed up. Makes them laugh." Bob had even managed to find a joke about William The Conqueror. That was on his crib sheet, too.

"You'll sail through it," Betty said when he told her he was training as a cathedral guide and he'd got the final assessment this morning. Retirement was hanging heavy on his hands and he'd never been one for golf or gardening. "It'll be just your thing. You love talking. You're always starting up conversations with people wherever we go." He nodded. She was right. But he'd

got himself into a bit of a state this morning. Butterflies were turning somersaults inside him.

"After all," went on Betty, "remember what a little timid scrap Archie Medlar was at school. He does after-dinner speaking nowadays and there's talk of him standing for mayor next year. You were always much more confident than Archie."

"Was I?" Bob asked himself. "Was I really?" Maybe he was when he was in a group of lads like himself, but that was just bravado. Real confidence came from something else, he suspected. By way of a reply to Betty, he waltzed her round the room. He never wanted to look too closely at himself.

It was true, Archie had blossomed as he got older. Today, he could hold an audience in the palm of his hand, always ready with an appropriate anecdote. But Bob recalled clearly the day Archie did his talk at school. He was telling them about his grandad who fought and was killed in the First World War. His stammer got worse because he'd been so full of emotion, Bob realised now. Of course, then they'd been a crowd of young ruffians and poor Archie was an obvious target. The sound of "Sp-sp-speak up, we can't hear you,"

echoed around the classroom all day, despite icy glares from Miss Harris.

She must have been recently out of college in those days, but she seemed to know instinctively how to deal with his crowd. When to be stern and when to give encouragement. "You'll do well, Robert Goodwin, when you learn to be quiet and listen to other people," she said, making him go through a talk on garden birds when he was in detention. Bob had always been interested in birds but was afraid to admit it in front of the class, in case he was called a cissy.

Miss Harris had made sure everyone quietened down and listened to Archie. They could see he was nervous. He'd turned pale and the paper with his notes jiggled about in his hand. Miss Harris fixed him with her gaze and took a deep breath. Archie did the same and she smiled encouragement. When he spoke too quickly, she moved her hand up and down as if telling him to slow down. When some of it came out all muddled because he stammered and got his words tangled up, she said, "Just repeat that bit, Archie. It was so interesting. I want to make sure everyone's heard." She'd glared at Bob then.

At one point, two silent tears rolled down Archie's cheeks when he spoke of his grandfather's death at the

battle of Loos. "Well done, Archie. You let the emotion shine through." A few of the boys had moist eyes too, but would never have admitted it. They horsed around at playtime, pretending to shoot each other with invisible guns, mouths stuffed with gobstoppers.

"Have you got a few tips you could give me?" Bob asked Archie when he met him in the pub a few days ago.

"I think I owe my success to you lot," said Archie. "I can deal with anyone difficult nowadays after the heckling I used to get from your crowd. But prepare what you're going to say. You can't always fluff your way through." Bob laughed. He thought Archie was joking, though he also felt a pang of guilt. They hadn't been kind to him when they were boys and Bob was often the ringleader.

"You'll be OK, Bob. You're good at talking." People kept saying that. Why didn't they understand? He was a good talker when it meant clowning about, but when he had to be serious, he tended to clam up.

It was early, not quite 10 o'clock. The tour didn't start 'til 10. He glanced around, wondering if any of the people sitting on the benches or feeding the pigeons were waiting for him and if he could spot the person who would be assessing him. "They'll remain anonymous 'til after the tour," the trainer had said. Perhaps he should sit down. It might make him feel more relaxed. He wandered over to one of the seats, partly



They hadn't been kind to him



occupied by an elderly lady in a pink sun-hat, and tried to make himself feel calmer.

"So you're the cathedral guide." The old lady uncurled herself and turned to look at the badge pinned to his chest.

"I am," Bob replied.

"Well, I hope you're not just starting with the Normans. There was a church here before they arrived," she said, fixing Bob with her bright eyes.

"Really?" Bob hadn't realised that.

"Most definitely. Saxon. Made from wood, so that's why there's nothing remaining. Bob's heart sank. He hadn't started yet and already he'd got it wrong.

"You'll always get one," the trainer told them. "Someone who'll point out something you got wrong. Just be ready for them." Was this old lady one of those? She looked too harmless to be a troublemaker and perhaps too old to be the assessor.

"You've just time to check it out," she said. "Look in one of the history books in the cathedral shop." It must have been the way she said it. Bob didn't hesitate. He got up and dashed inside.

When he emerged, a small group of 12 people was waiting for him. He looked at them closely to see if he could spot his assessor. It wouldn't be the lanky man with a long, pale face who looked as if a breath of wind would blow him away. Maybe the stocky man with a bushy beard and a tweed jacket? Bob decided to try his joke first.

"What do you get if you cross William The Conqueror with a power station?" he asked.

"An electricity bill," croaked an elderly voice. Bob looked around to see who'd stolen his punchline. A few people tittered. A small smile played about the old lady's lips.

'Is this how it was for Archie?' Bob asked himself, beginning to feel wretched. His stomach began to twist over again.

He went on to talk about the spectacular front of the cathedral and the statues standing on either side of the main entrance. He knew he was starting to gabble but he couldn't slow down. He wanted the words to gush out and get it over with.

"I'm sorry, I can't hear," someone said. "Can you repeat that last bit?"

"Slow down a bit, mate," said another. But Bob couldn't slow down. He looked across at the old lady. Her chest was puffed out like a pigeon's as she took deep breaths. Her hand was moving up and down as if she was waving to someone. Eventually, he realised what it meant. He took a deep breath and slowed down. Her eyes twinkled at him. Now, he kept his eyes fixed on her as he spoke.

The little group tramped inside, where they looked at the painted ceiling and the effigies of lords and bishops from the Middle Ages. Bob was starting to feel more relaxed. If he did falter or lose his confidence, he just glanced at the lady's face, smiling encouragement. 'Where have I seen her before?' he thought, studying her face.

"And this is one of the most beautiful features of the cathedral, to my mind." They'd stopped in front of the stained-glass window that was also a memorial to local men who'd died in the two World Wars. There, in the list of names, was Leonard Medlar, Archie's grandad. Bob told them the story Archie had recounted, about how, in the heat of battle, his grandad had turned back to help some of his friends who were wounded and in doing so lost his life.

"Very moving," he heard someone in the group mutter. "What a hero."

"Not too bad, was it?" the old lady said when he'd finished.

"And it was much better than the effort you made when you were in my class." Bob stared at her.

"You're never —"

"Emma Harris. I knew you'd get there in the end."

"Did you?"

"You just needed to learn that a bit of preparation can go a long way. Much more effective than acting the fool. You needed to believe in yourself. Well done."

Bob felt as if he might float up to the cathedral roof.

Suddenly, he was interrupted by the tall man with the long, pale face who thrust a certificate into Bob's hand. "Congratulations, you're now a fully-fledged cathedral guide." Bob

had never suspected

he was the assessor.

'Sometimes

you shouldn't

judge people

by appearances.

Like Archie,'

he thought.

He turned to

where Emma

Harris had been

standing so he could

thank her but there

was no sign of her. He couldn't see her among the crowds that had entered the cathedral and she wasn't in the square. He'd try to find out where she lived and take her out for tea next week.

Now, he had something else important to do. He'd planned to do this with an ad-lib comedy performance. A bit of

clowning about and a couple of jokes. He would make it up as he went along and hope for the best, but his encounter with his old teacher had shown him that important things needed to be thought through properly and couldn't be left to chance. No amount of acting the fool would mask his nerves and the fear that he might be rejected, because that was what all the show of bravado was about. He realised that now. If he was going to ask Betty to marry him, he was going to do it properly. He'd book a table at the little Italian restaurant off the square and then he'd go to that tiny jewellers in the back alley where they had a ring Betty admired recently. There'd be no putting on a silly voice or pretending to drop the ring in his glass of wine. He knew he didn't need to act the fool to make Betty love him. But when they got home, he might just waltz her around the living room. That would bring a smile to her lips.

THE END

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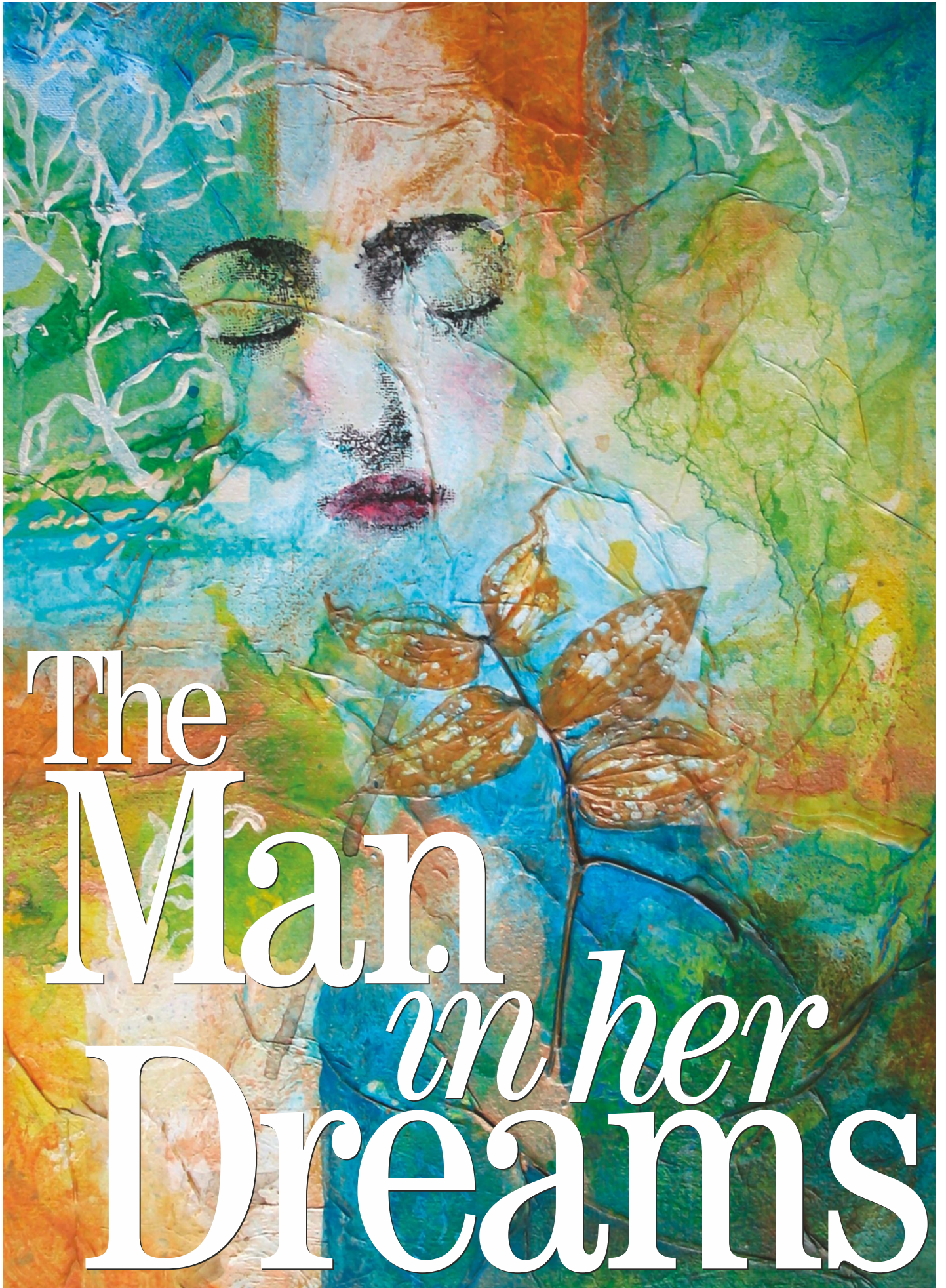
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The  
Man  
in her  
Dreams



# IT WAS ALL HAPPENING TOO FAST — HAD HE BEEN ARRESTED, OR WAS HE MERELY HELPING THE POLICE WITH THEIR ENQUIRIES?

He was, literally, the man in her dreams. And there he was, walking along the pathway. Just striding along, rucksack on his shoulder, some sort of identity card flapping on a lanyard around his neck. His clothes were smart casual. Office clothes, where there were no strict rules and no need for a tie. He looked respectable, with good hair.

He wasn't a stunningly handsome man. Just an ordinary guy, with a fairly ordinary face. Memorable only for the fact that his unremarkable features were imprinted on her brain following the many dreams in which he appeared.

Sally was coming in at a right angle, along an intersecting pathway. She was coming from the visitors' car park, heading across the university campus to the Engineering Department. He was coming down from the shops, heading towards, what... the library? It was obvious that if she kept going and he kept going, they would pretty much collide unless either — or both — took evasive action.

So she stopped, wondering what to do next. She'd wanted to meet this man for six months — ever since he'd appeared in her life for those few brief seconds when everything changed. It was

amazing how one single event could alter the course of your existence. He'd stared into her eyes. He'd touched her cheek. Stroked her hair from her face. He'd told her he was sorry. Then he was gone.

Yes. Some of those dreams she had were nightmares too, the images twisted into horrible shapes, his words transformed into bitter echoes of evil and darkness.

She used to have other dreams. Nicer dreams. About men. About meeting men and falling in love. But not any more. She couldn't think about love now. Not any more.

Sally could feel the panic bubbling up in her chest, constricting her throat, chilling her blood and heating her skin. She wanted to run over and shout and scream and ask him why he'd done what he'd done. But she simply couldn't move.

And the man walked on.

She watched as he trotted up the steps to the library and the automatic doors swooshed open as he approached. And she managed to see, just before the doors closed, that he held out his identity card and walked on through into the innards of the building.

For a while, Sally simply stood there, her mind a blank as the

He'd felt perfectly fine when he left the house. Felt fairly fine all morning. Well, as near as he could get these days anyway — usual borderline hysterical, just about kept buried beneath the surface. But he'd just been up to the campus shops — the bookshop and the stationery place — and was on his way back when he got this incredibly peculiar sensation. Like he was being watched. It was the way the woman suddenly stopped, as though staring at him. Women didn't usually do that. Not to him anyway. Never, in fact.

Student? Almost certainly not a typical undergrad. Not young enough. She didn't have the appearance of a mature student either. More like a professional woman. Staff, perhaps. Or just a visitor. Had she been in the library? He didn't get all that many visitors down in the basement and she didn't look familiar. Yet there was something about her...

He kept his face neutral as he glanced at her, trying to place where he'd seen her before. Then he was past and didn't want to make it obvious he was interested by turning back.

He knew her, though. He was sure of it. And he felt weird, because he couldn't place her.

Unless...

*Every second that passed brought disaster ever closer*

terrible, all-consuming panic gradually subsided. He'd looked her way, but there hadn't been even a flicker of recognition. For him, perhaps, there were no bad memories. He'd moved on and put it behind him.

Perhaps he wasn't haunted by the memory of her.



Alan Draper walked into the university library and showed his pass-card to the scanner, hardly breaking stride. Crikey, he was glad to be inside. His heart was pounding and his nerves were crackling.

The shock hit him just as he placed his hand against the door of his subterranean office. He froze and had a sudden urge to run back and find her and call out to her, stop her disappearing. It was the hair that had confused him. Her hair had been much longer back then and she'd been blonde too. Now her hair was dark and short. And her face was thinner too. And, of course, today there was no blood on her face, either.

But it was, he now realised, the face that had haunted him for the past six months.

He wanted to say sorry. Say it again, properly.

Sorry for leaving her.

Alan remembered crouching over the woman as she lay in the road. She had stared into his eyes, silently imploring him to help her. Her mouth moved, but no sounds came out. It was like she'd lost the power of speech. Concussion, possibly, from the impact? But he was no expert. He knew about books and old documents, not medicine. Although it had been pretty obvious she was in a bad way. He could see one of the bones in her arm sticking out and that was never good. Bones weren't meant to be seen. Compound fracture. He knew that much.

He'd touched her cheek, hoping the sensation, skin against skin, would be reassuring. "You'll be fine," he said. "You'll be just fine." He stroked the hair from her face, where the blood from her forehead had matted it together. "But I have to go."

A cry of pain then. Loud and insistent. But not from the woman. From behind him, in his car. "Hurry!" His passenger calling out. "Please!"

"I'm sorry," he said to the woman lying on the road.

He hated himself, but what choice did he have? He ran back to his car. Time was not his friend today. Every second that passed brought disaster ever closer. He jumped in, wildly over-revving the engine in his haste and panic, and had to manoeuvre awkwardly around the poor woman lying there in the narrow lane — one tyre sliding perilously into the mud at the roadside — before he could plant his foot down and speed away.

Alan Draper staggered into his office and flopped into his chair, gasping for breath and heart hammering, as the memories of the awful events of that day pummelled him mercilessly.

He'd just left her there, on the road...



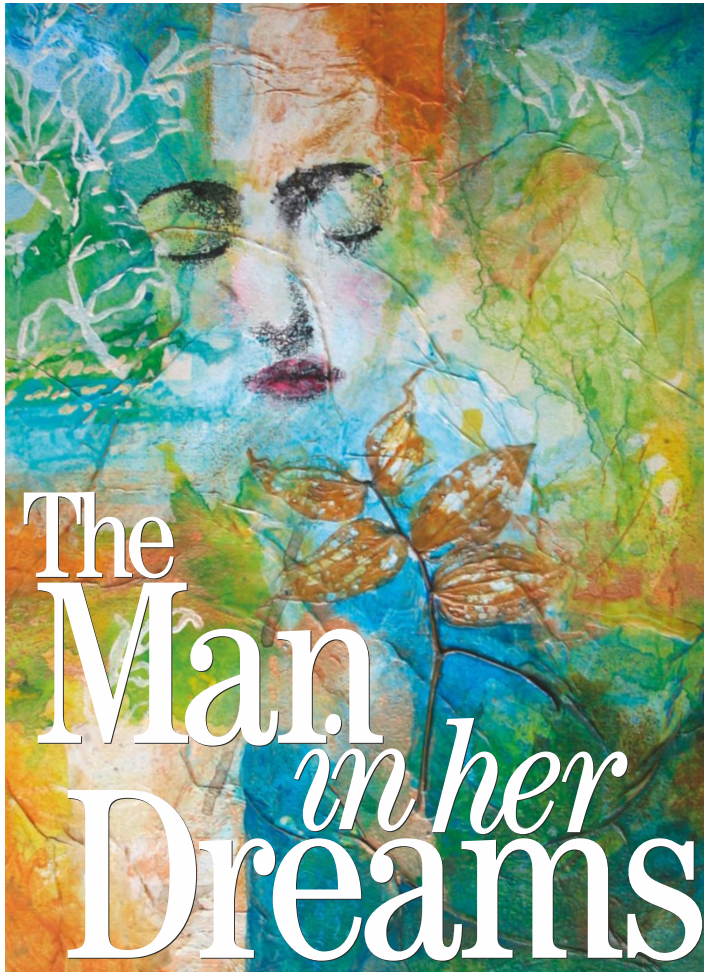
"And you're sure it was him?"

"Positive." Sally could see the man's face as clear as she could see Ellen's in front of her.

"But you didn't go after him?" Ellen said.

"Oh, yes, of course I did." Sally managed a half-laugh. "Excuse





# The Man in her Dreams

me, sir, are you the chap who almost killed me? I could barely remember how to use my legs after he'd gone inside the library. It was all I could do to get here." She'd been trying to explain to Ellen, but it was all coming out in a garbled mess and Ellen was frowning a lot.

They were supposed to be going out for lunch together, two friends catching up. But Sally was now hunched over in a chair in Dr Ellen Fielding's office in the Engineering Department, trying desperately not to hyperventilate or pass out or expire because her heart was on the verge of bursting.

"So you saw the creep who knocked you down and left you for dead in the middle of the road and you let him walk away?"

"When you put it like that..." The scar on Sally's arm — from her compound fracture — was itching something chronic and she raked it with her nails.

"I'd've rugby-tackled him to the ground," Ellen said, "made a citizen's arrest and sat on his chest until the police arrived."

"Yes, but I'm not you, am I?"

Ellen was definitely not the sort of person to get knocked over on a deserted country lane in the first place. She would have sidestepped the impact, chased down the driver and given him several pieces of her mind. Ellen was like that. She attacked the world and gave it what-for.

Sally, on the other hand, sort of let life happen to her instead. And since the RTC — the road traffic collision, as the police called it — since then, she'd been even worse. The doctors in the hospital had said that she'd been very lucky to escape with only a broken arm and minor cuts and bruises. And it was as though knowing that the distance between life and death is sometimes only a fraction of a second or a fraction of

a millimetre had left her afraid of everything now.

It was funny because Sally couldn't recall the actual incident. The memories just didn't seem to exist. She remembered beforehand — walking down the lane — and she remembered some of afterwards — the man crouched over her and seeing his face as he drove away — and she remembered much later — the paramedics, the hospital, the lovely nurses and doctors. But she didn't remember the moments of the accident — the car approaching, the impact, the feelings of horror and pain that must have been there but were now gone.

It was such a stupid way to have an accident, really. Any normal day and she wouldn't have been there, walking down that lane. She was usually safely sat in her office in front of her computer in the Council Planning Office. But somebody needed to go out and check on the access to some fields out in Fradley, make some notes, take some photographs. Normally, this would be down to Andy. But Andy was off, and the job couldn't wait. So Sally volunteered, thinking it would be nice for a change to get out and about in the fresh air.

She made it about 100 metres from the lay-by where she parked, thinking what a lovely view it was and crikey from here you could see the...

... see the sky.

From horizontal scenic view to vertical blank sky. On her back, wondering in a hazy, blurry, pain-befuddled way what the heck had just happened. A man was crouching over her, apologising, touching her cheek and her hair. She tried to speak, but couldn't.

Someone else called out. "Hurry!" A woman's voice. "Please!"

Then the man disappeared from Sally's vision. She heard a car door, an engine over-revving wildly. Her head flopped to the side and the car seemed really close. She saw the man, through the window, driving, looking horrendously panicked. He was leaving her. Fleeing the scene.

"No," she wanted to shout. "NO! Don't leave me!" But the next thing she remembered was another man, a paramedic, asking for her name. Apparently there'd been an anonymous call from a phone box along the road, although someone else had called too, a woman driver, after coming across her and staying with her until the ambulance arrived. Fingerprints were checked in the phone box, but that led nowhere. And there were no traffic cameras anywhere near to help narrow the search for the vehicle involved. And while she had a perfect image of the driver in her head, she struggled to describe him for a police e-fit. And as for the car — nothing. No make, no model, not even the colour.

Which left her, six months later, pretty much fully recovered physically, although emotionally the open-endedness of the situation had left her somewhat adrift. Her arm was still a little weak and she had her scar, but that was basically it, injury-wise. Not bad for someone who'd been thrown several yards, after an impact at over 40mph — so the police told her, after examining skid marks on the road and the distribution of her shoes and phone. She had lost weight too, stress affecting her appetite, and she'd settled on hair that was easier to manage.

The dreams were her biggest problem. The nightmares. And the man who appeared in them. The man she had now seen again today.

Sally could feel the shakes starting to return. "Do I tell the police?"

"You mean you haven't already?" Ellen rolled her eyes. "You ought to ring them right now, actually. If he was wearing a pass-card, he's got to be staff. You'll pick him out easily."

*A man was crouching over her, apologising*

Sally had a number for a contact at the police station. DS Butler. He'd handed it over in case she remembered anything pertinent. Her memory, unfortunately, had failed to provide anything useful and so the number had gone unused. But it was still there in her phone.

Sally dialled it now. She had a sense that her life was changing, right here in this moment. She'd been in a sort of limbo since the accident, concentrating on simply getting by in the early days, with the operations and her arm in a cast. Then she'd been waiting for news, then just waiting, then just existing. The dreams had been virtually the only thing that actually seemed real.

"Hello? DS Butler? This is Sally Cookson, from the hit-and-run. I think I might finally have something for you..."



Alan Draper had half-expected this day would come. He'd known that, somehow, the police might track him down eventually. Through an image, maybe, caught on a camera somewhere and only just now looked at. Hadn't really imagined the woman herself recognising him, though.

She'd appeared momentarily down in the basement, with another woman at her side and a couple of policemen, identifying him from a distance as he emerged from the long-term stacks.

"That's him." She was crying as she said it.

"I'm sorry," he called out, but then she was ushered away before he could say any more.

And now, here he was, being escorted from the library to the policeman's car outside. He should have been more careful with what he said.

"This is about the hit-and-run," he said, "isn't it?" Which sort of landed himself right in it before they even started. But he had zero experience of this sort of thing. "I can explain everything," he added, apparently only making it worse.

"Plenty of time for that, sir," said the detective, "down at the station."

"But I don't really see..."

"Sir, please don't make this any more difficult than it has to be."

Butler, was it? Detective Sergeant Butler. Alan wasn't entirely sure. It was all happening too fast. Had he been arrested? Or was he merely helping the police with their enquiries?

This wasn't him. He wasn't a people person. He liked to keep his head below the parapet. He'd been like it at school — shy and not a particularly social creature — and was still like it as an adult. He'd certainly never met an actual policeman before. Or a policewoman, come to that. And yet, suddenly, here he was, surrounded by them at the police station. And all of them were giving him funny looks, like he was a criminal or something.

But he was a librarian. Librarians and crime rarely mixed in the real world.

He was installed in an interview

shouldn't — too risky, too scary — and he'd loitered long enough to hear a doctor say as much. Broken arm and that was it really. She'd been sitting up in the bed too, and smiling. Which had reassured him. "She was obviously fine."

"And that makes it OK? She escapes serious injury, so it's OK if you knock her down and..."

"Now, hold on." This was exactly what Alan had been worried about. "Have I not explained myself properly?"

"Not really." The detective sighed. "You do realise we have your car? And we have a team examining it for the slightest trace of evidence to link you to the RTC involving Sally Cookson. So you might as well just tell the truth."

"The truth..." It was just one long string of disasters, that was the truth.



It all started with his sister being mugged.

Well, no, really it started with his phone running down to 3% charge after a particularly long phone call from his mother. Alan was plugging the charger into the socket by his filing cabinet when his desk phone rang.

"Al, it's me." Alan's sister, Cara. "I need a favour."

"Oh, yes?" He immediately expected another errand — a regular thing just lately.

But instead Cara said, "Some kid on a bicycle snatched my bag. Took the lot. Purse, cards, cash..."

"What? Are you all right?"

"... house keys. Got my phone too. Yes, I'm fine. Little shaky, but I'll live. I'm using the phone in the florist on Beacon Street. Had to get through to you using the university switchboard. Don't know your mobile number by heart."

No, who did, these days? "But you're fine, though? You and the twins?"

"Yes, not too bad." Cara was pregnant. Doubly so, actually. "Just don't fancy getting the bus back home. Legs a bit wobbly. You couldn't come and pick me up, could you?"

Not for the first time, Alan wished the father of Cara's twins was around to do all this stuff instead. But that man was still married to his wife, with children of his own to look after, so getting him out constantly for errands was a little tricky. Impossible actually, it appeared. He hadn't even been mentioned for months.

"I'm on my way."

"You're a star, Al. Truly you are."

Alan reined in his sigh until he hung up. Luckily, Beacon Street wasn't far away from the campus by car and he was outside, almost having a panic attack when he realised he had to park on yellow lines to get right outside, within 15 minutes. He hustled Cara into the cramped passenger seat and felt more panic when she refused to buckle herself in.

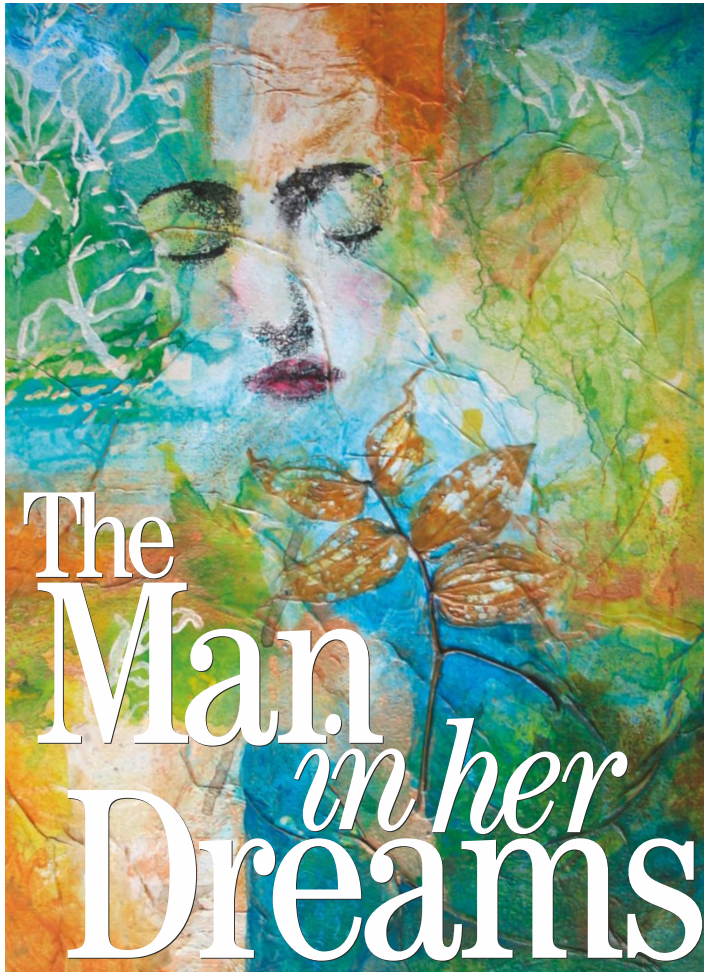
"Over this?" She gestured at her swollen belly. "Anyway, you'll have to get a new car soon." Cara glanced around at the non-existent back seat. "Can't fit baby seats in this."

The tiny two-seater sports car was Alan's only real indulgence in life. It was old and barely scraped through its MOT, but he loved it. Although Cara was right. Quite how he'd run errands for her when the twins were born was anyone's guess.

So, to say Alan wasn't exactly at his best that day would be an understatement. He was stressed for several different reasons and when Cara started having a funny turn too, his fragile nerves took another battering.

She'd been saying he'd have to stay with her until a locksmith came to change the locks, telling him he'd need to get new keys cut and distribute them accordingly to their parents and such like. She'd also need help phoning everywhere to get her cards stopped. Phoning! Which reminded him: in his rush to leave his office, he'd left his





# The Man in her Dreams

mobile phone plugged in the wall. Oh, heck!

"And you'll need to..." Cara paused, wincing and groaning and clutching at her belly. "Need to..." She jerked forward. "Oh, Al, I think there's something wro..."

"Cara!" A horn sounded and Alan realised he was drifting as he stared at his sister. He yanked the steering and braked hard to a stop, causing yet more honking. "Cara, what is it?"

"Hurts. Really hurts."

She'd been having trouble with her blood pressure. Had the mugging caused it to spike? Or had she been injured somehow? He needed to call an ambulance. Except his phone was in his office.

"Cara, give me your..." No, that wasn't going to work either. Her phone had disappeared when her bag was snatched.

Alan frantically looked around. They were in a semi-suburban area. Just houses and fields beyond. He could try knocking on a door and asking for help, but by the time he'd explained he could be halfway to... halfway to where? Cara's house — and hence her landline — was only five minutes away now. She was

renting a terraced cottage on the edge of the countryside. But then he'd have to make the call, wait for an ambulance, and there'd be the journey in the ambulance back to the hospital. But if he cut through the country lanes...

He made a snap decision. Straight to the hospital. And he planted his right foot down hard, squealing his tyres as he set off.

The lane was twisty and some of the bends treacherous. And Alan knew he was driving too fast. But what choice did he have?

He had asked himself that question so many times since. What choice did he have? He'd been trapped by circumstances — fate making decisions for him.

He braked hard into a blind bend and felt the car slide sideways as he eased the

accelerator down again. His mind was whirling. The stupidity of leaving his phone behind. Anger at the mugging. The panic because of his sister's condition. The terror at driving too fast.

And that was when he saw her, saw Sally Cookson in the road. And he stamped on the brake pedal...



Sally Cookson listened to the man's story, feeling sick and light-headed. DS Butler was there too, occasionally scribbling notes. And Ellen was clutching her hand. DS Butler had heard all of this before, but he had insisted she hear it for herself.

But the man, Alan Draper was his name, the man had paused. He took a sip of water, like he didn't want to describe what came next. He was sweating and trembling, clearly under an enormous amount of stress.

Stress? Sally almost laughed at the thought. 'Imagine how I feel,' she thought. 'I was the one who got knocked down. I was left for dead.'

She stared at the man. He was the man in her dreams. The man in her nightmares. For six months, his face had haunted her. And yet here he was. In the flesh, close up, he was just an ordinary person. Even quite good-looking. Seemed nice. He was not the monster she had imagined.

"Go on," she said. "Please."

"We can take a break," suggested DS Butler.

"No, I'm OK. Let's carry on."

Alan Draper cleared his throat. "Anyway, there you were, lying in the road. Just lying there, sort of sprawled. And I was driving so fast I only just managed to stop in time."

"Thank goodness," muttered Ellen.

"At first, I was worried it was one of those scams. You know,

a set-up, to get me out of the car. You hear of these things happening on deserted country lanes. They stage an accident. You get out to help and, bingo, they're in your car and away before you know what's what." He shook his head and swallowed. "But there was something... I don't know...

something real about the way you looked. So I got out. And you'd clearly been knocked down. Your injuries weren't fake. I saw your arm. But I didn't know what to do. I didn't know. I mean, what could I do? There was no room in my car, not with Cara in there. It's only a tiny two-seater. And I could hardly dump her out to put you in instead. And besides, I was terrified of moving you. What if you'd damaged your neck or back? I could have made things much, much worse. I didn't even think I should move you to the side of the road. And every moment I hesitated, I knew the situation was only getting worse — for you and for Cara. If I'd had my phone, obviously I would have used it. Would have used Cara's, but that had been stolen. And I did look around for a handbag. I thought maybe it had got flung away, but I couldn't find one." He rubbed at his forehead, clearly struggling to tell his story. "I suppose I could have waited for someone to come along, but who knew how long that might take? Then Cara started moaning and groaning. So I made a decision to go for help. I only drove a little way down the lane actually and I came across another car, parked in the lay-by. I stopped, jumped out and shouted. But no one was around. I peered through the windows, hoping I might see a phone or a bag or something. I was even prepared to smash a window to get at it, but I couldn't see anything and I knew I was just wasting time."

"My handbag was locked in the boot," Sally said. "And anyway, I'd my phone with me. Although someone told me it was eventually found over the fence in the field. It must have got flung there when I was hit." "Anyway, I drove on and I saw a phone box."

*He made a snap decision.  
Straight to the hospital*



"You don't see many these days," Ellen said.

"No, you don't," Sally agreed.

"So I stopped and phoned for an ambulance. I told them it was vitally urgent, that I'd had to drive away and leave you there."

"Which is why," DS Butler said, "we thought the man who made that call was the driver who knocked you down. We thought it was guilt talking."

"It was," Alan said. "After that, I got Cara to the hospital as quickly as I could. I did honestly think about owning up. But I didn't want the attention, didn't want the hassle. I'm not that sort of person. I did read about it afterwards in the local paper, but I'd done what I could to help and I reckoned that was it. I hadn't seen anything. I hadn't seen the car that hit you and I had nothing to contribute. And I did check on you and found out you were fairly healthy, considering what had happened. And Cara was ill too, which kept me busy, especially in the days immediately following. And she didn't remember any of the journey. She was too delirious to know I'd even stopped. So I thought it was best to stay out of it all and not complicate matters."

"Still should have come forward," DS Butler said.

"But I can understand why you didn't," Sally said. He'd been a man under the most intense pressure. He was frowning now. And she remembered that frown. It sparked a little cascade of memories that had never surfaced before.

Alan Draper had looked down at her, panic and terror and indecision etched into his face.

"Hurry! Please!" Those words had come from a woman, presumably his sister.

He'd looked away, then looked back at Sally. "You're going to be just fine," he'd said. With what sounded like the voice of an angel. "Absolutely fine. But you're going to have to be brave for a few minutes. I need to drive away and get some help."

He'd touched her cheek, stroking the hair from her face. "Hey, don't look so worried. I don't have a phone, you see, and I need to find a phone box to make the call. But you'll be perfectly fine and there's nothing at all to worry about..."

And then her memories faded again. Sally wiped a knuckle beneath her eye, capturing the tear before it could drop.

Ellen squeezed her hand. "Still means the driver who did this is out there somewhere."

"But we might have a lead," DS Butler said. "Thanks to Mr Draper..."



Alan Draper found it hard to



believe he'd been carrying evidence around with him all this time. Well, his car had anyway.

DS Butler had set a detailed forensic examination in progress when Alan had been originally arrested, but that had quickly shown that the car hadn't been recently damaged and repaired. It hadn't even been cleaned all that well.

"No, well." Alan had shrugged. "Quick rub with a sponge is all it's had recently. Life's been too hectic for anything more, what with Cara and her twins." All three of whom were fit and healthy after the scare six months before.

The examination did turn up a handkerchief, though. Mud-spattered and wrapped around the front axle. The mud matched exactly to that at the scene. At first they thought it was Sally Cookson's hankie, somehow sprung from her grip in the collision, then picked up by the vehicle. It was sent for DNA testing, to be used as a link between Alan Draper's car and Sally, confirming his involvement in her RTC.

No DNA from Sally, though — but some from a 34-year-old

male called Barry Pinner, whose details were already in the police system after a string of arrests for various black-market crimes involving cigarettes, booze and mobile phones.

And with Alan's part in the road traffic collision switched from perpetrator to helper, a different reason for the hankie to be there was sought. In the meantime, Barry Pinner was brought in for questioning and his history investigated.

"Turns out," DS Butler said, "that Pinner's mobile phone records showed him making a lengthy call at the time of the accident and pings on the towers placed him in the lane where the collision

occurred. We reckoned he was distracted by the call, which was why he knocked Sally down. He probably got out, even if only momentarily, and the handkerchief fell from his pocket."

"Then when I arrived," Alan said, working it out for himself, "I picked up the hankie on my tyre somehow and that flung it beneath my car where it got tangled on the axle."

"Exactly." DS Butler smiled. "Anyway, there are obvious repairs to the bodywork on Pinner's van that match the way we think the impact happened. So we put it to Pinner and he fessed up. Said he fled the scene because he was frightened. But we got him eventually."

"Which is wonderful." Alan grinned. "Well, for Miss Cookson anyway, if not for this Pinner gentleman. Closure, I think it's called."



At which point, Sally couldn't help but smile. "Yes, closure," she said. "And, please, it's Sally."

"Sally." He smiled. "Of course." Alan Draper was turning out to be the most charming man she'd met in a long, long time.

"You know," DS Butler said to Alan, "if you'd come forward immediately we never would have treated you as a suspect. A quick once-over would've told us your car clearly hadn't hit anyone and so we probably wouldn't have examined it very closely. Which means we wouldn't have found the handkerchief. And without that..."

"... you'd never have found Barry Pinner," Sally finished for him. "So, in the end, it's all worked out for the best."

Although Alan still looked unconvinced.

They weren't in the police station now. DS Butler has organised the meeting in a quaint and bijou bar nearby. And now he looked at his watch. "I really should be going," he said. "So I'll have to leave you two alone together, as it were." And he smiled in an odd way that made him seem like he'd been plotting. Then he said his goodbyes and slipped away...

... leaving them, as he said, alone together.

"So," Sally said.

"So," Alan said.

And they both laughed.

"Another drink?" he asked.

This felt almost like a date now. "Why not?" she replied.

It was odd, after all that had happened, and maybe getting some closure was helping, but she felt really relaxed with Alan. She felt happy. Optimistic, even. It was a strange way to meet a man, but even Ellen reckoned he seemed nice, and Ellen was the expert where men were concerned.

Maybe, Sally thought, she had remembered Alan's face so clearly not because she hated him, but because her brain knew the truth all along, but couldn't quite untangle it from everything else.

"So, librarian?" she said. "Sounds... fascinating. Tell me all about it."

And so he did. And it was.

He was, after all, literally, the man in her dreams.

THE END

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# Puzzles

Just for fun, make yourself a coffee and try our two brain-teasers!

Rearrange the letters in the highlighted squares to spell out the name of a half-human, half-fish sea creature (7)

Arrowword

Wire-haired terriers	Walk slowly	Airborne soldiers	Most ridiculous	India's currency unit	Area plan	Begging request
Infinite						
Snitch (4,5)	Opposite of 'high'	Rend, tear		Livestock feed	Portraits by camera	Gets a goal, run etc
					Step, in dancing	
Female hare		Santa's transport				Protuberance
		Arrow-firing weapon	White Greek cheese	Distant	Term in a sales ad (inits)	
Natter	Do-gooder					
			Wilt		Poem dedicated to someone	
Place where buses are kept	Female servers					

## Kriss Kross

Fit the words listed below into the grid, then rearrange the letters in the shaded squares to spell out the name of a mythical creature (10)

3 letters

ELF  
IMP  
ROC  
4 letters  
OGRE  
PERI  
YETI

5 letters

ANGEL  
FAIRY  
GIANT  
GNOME  
NYMPH  
PIXIE  
SIREN

SPOOK

TROLL  
WITCH

7 letters

GREMLIN  
LORELEI  
MONSTER  
PHANTOM

SANDMAN

VAMPIRE

8 letters

MINOTAUR  
WEREWOLF

## ANSWERS

SOLUTION: MERMAID

SOLUTION: HIPPOGRYPH

# DIY

I got good at painting and papering, back then. I even put in a downstairs loo

**Y**ou're good at DIY, so I don't know why you're hedging on this, Issy," my sister, Laura says. I look at the paperwork in front of me on the kitchen table. "It's a lot less to fill in than when I did the plans and the application for the porch," I say, and I know I sound sad, and a bit "faraway".

"Do you want the new house or not?" Laura asks. She sounds exasperated with me, but that can be sisters for you.

"You know I do."

"There you are, then."

But it's not just the DIY which, as Laura has said, I'm good at. DIY was never my husband, Ian's, thing. I should have known right from the start because he was adamant we buy a brand-new house when we married — something that we could move straight into that didn't need work doing to it — even though I hankered after something Victorian, or Georgian, that I could return to its former glory.

"So," Laura carries on, "I'll make coffee. And I'll cut a great big wedge of coffee and walnut cake. You'll need to keep your strength up for all that form-filling." She taps a finger on the forms in front of me. "Start with your name."

Don't you just hate bossy sisters? Laura might be six years younger than I am, but she's bossed me around from the start.

"Don't marry him, then," she said when I told her about the brand-new/period house divide. "He's never going to change and you'll just resent it."

She was right about the first bit because Ian has never so much as picked up a paintbrush, but she was wrong on the second count because I embraced DIY with a passion I didn't know I had back then. I got good at painting and wallpapering and then I tackled

plastering. I even put in a loo in the cupboard under the stairs. Flushed with success, I designed a conservatory and got a local window-fitting company to put it in for me. And then there was the porch — my baby from start to finish.

Ian didn't mind me doing any of this. He took himself off on sailing holidays with his crew from the sailing club while all the dust and the rubble and the smell of fresh paint was going on. And I made a good business out of becoming an interior designer, with enough clients to fund whatever I wanted to do to

the house. Ian and I had two children — Toby and Mollie — and we jogged along together very well.

And then I saw the house of my dreams. Georgian. Four bedrooms, two bathrooms, three reception rooms — as the estate agent jargon has it — a large kitchen and a loft ripe for conversion.

"Go for it, Mum," Mollie said. "Dad's always called the shots before."

"Has he?"

Apart from wanting a new house, he'd been fine about letting me make whatever alterations I thought would improve its value.

"You know he has. When did you last go on holiday?"

"Well, your dad likes sailing and..."

"Yeah, yeah, you get sea-sick. There are other sorts of holidays, you know."

A couple of scales fell from my eyes then — she was right.

Toby said much the same when I told him about the house — Fallowfield — I so wanted to buy.

"And the garden will be great for the children to play in," he said. His eyes were dancing with delight at the thought. "Plenty of room for overnight stops in the school holidays. We won't have a problem helping you fill the bedrooms, Mum."

He gave me a great big hug and I wondered if he knew something then that I didn't. Ian has never been one for

"Name!" she barks at me as she notices I've not written a thing yet.

"In a minute," I say. "There's no rush."

"There's every rush. Do you want this house, or not?"

"We've been through that. You know I do. But it's a big step to take. On my own."

"You've always done everything on your own before, Issy," Laura says, and her voice has softened a bit.

"Did you know about Sam — as in Samantha and not as in Samuel?"

I'd told her what Toby had said.

"No. No concrete proof, but I'd guessed."

"Why didn't you say?"

"Would you have wanted me to?"

"No."

"There you are, then."

But I did get the proof.

When I was sitting in the café, after doing the weekly shop I saw Ian's car pull up. I saw him go around to the passenger door and open it, holding it wide for someone to get out. When had he ever done that for me? Never. I watched as he placed a hand in the small of the back of a woman with deep chestnut hair. He leaned in and kissed her cheek and she turned to smile at him. Not the first time they'd been through that scenario, I decided. They walked to the trolley park and Ian pulled out a trolley. When, I wondered back then, had

he ever done the weekly shop with me? Never. Too noisy, too crowded, and it took up too much of his time.

I left by the side door as Ian and Sam came in the main entrance.

Ian doesn't know I've got these forms yet, but he will. I don't think he'll put up much resistance.

I fill in my name. My date of birth. The date of our marriage — mine and Ian's.

A DIY divorce. I can do this. I'm good at DIY...

THE END

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*Sam had been mentioned more than a few times*

having his grandchildren to stop over — he can't stand the noise or the mess they make.

And then Toby whispered in my ear: "And Sam in the sailing club isn't Sam as in Samuel, but Sam as in Samantha. You did know that didn't you, Mum?"

Sam has been mentioned more than a few times over the years but then so have Phil, and James, and Aaron, and Marcus. But no, I didn't know that and a few more scales fell from my eyes.

Laura comes back with the coffee and the cake.



# We'll Meet Again

The day out had been going so well, but seeing that old photo had taken the smile from Gran's face

I thought we were going out for afternoon tea?" Kelly looked up from her book to see her grandmother, Sunday best coat on, bag over her arm. Nan was staying with her for a few days while her own flat was being redecorated and her energy was daunting. "Are you sure you're not too tired?" asked Kelly. "Mum said for you to take it easy."

"Pah!" Nan's eyes twinkled. "At my age, I can't afford to take things easy. After all, I don't know how much time I have left..."

She'd been saying that since Kelly was five. Grinning, she put her book down. "OK. Let me get my jacket and then I'll bring the car round."

"Where are you taking me?" asked Nan once she was buckled up.

"The old dance hall."

"The Palais?" Nan sounded disappointed. "Last time I saw it, there were pigeons flying in and out. I heard they were going to knock it down."

"Well, lucky for us, they didn't."

Kelly couldn't wait to see Nan's reaction. She had always

loved her grandmother's tales of "the dancing" when she was young. Especially the wartime stories. "Turns out the building is art deco and they're not allowed to pull it down. It's been restored with Lottery funding. Apparently, it's spectacular. It's already being booked up for wedding receptions."

And tucked away on the ground floor, the original tea-room had been turned into a café. Hopefully, Nan would love the 1940s theme.

Kelly parked as close to The Palais as she could and helped Nan out of the car. Her grandmother might be a bit of a firebrand but still, she was 96.

Nan took her arm. "Would you look at that?" Nan stopped and swept her gaze up to the clock tower at the front of the building. "That clock hasn't worked since Pop Patterson got drunk and climbed up to change the time so they would keep the pub open. That must be 70 years ago."

Kelly laughed. "Well, it's working now and it says time for tea. I'm ready for a cuppa. Come on."

But Nan stood for another moment, staring at the spanking new façade. "It's like going back in time." She smiled. "Do you think the Lottery could restore me, too?"

They walked towards the entrance. "We used to skip down this road, me, Peggy, Mary and Norah," said Nan wistfully, leaning on Kelly's arm. "On Saturdays, we'd finish our

sweeping staircase to the upper floor where the dance hall had been.

"A red carpet," said Nan with deep satisfaction. "They got that right. We felt like film stars walking up there. Except we never walked, we ran. You had to be quick if you wanted to get a good spot."

Kelly found signs to the tea-room but Nan knew where to go.

"The queue for the tea-room at the interval was terrible. We all drank gallons of the stuff. Oh!

## A recording of Vera Lynn was playing quietly

shift at the factory and rush home to get ready. We'd always have a good tea because we planned to dance all night." She paused at the bottom of the steps, looking up. "The boys hung about on the steps, chatting up the girls as we walked in. Not that we gave them the time of day!"

Kelly, too, looked at the steps, imagining a crowd of lads, suited and booted with Brylcreamed hair.

They took the stairs slowly. Inside, they faced another,

This is pretty."

Kelly thought so, too. She took in the little tables with crisp white cloths, dainty doilies and tea-cosies. A recording of Vera Lynn was playing quietly in the background. Nan shook her head.

"The only music in tea-rooms then was a man playing the piano." She was similarly dismissive of the posters on the walls, urging people to dig for victory and that walls had ears.

"We had those in the factory but not in the dance hall. This

was where we came to forget what was going on in Europe.”

The waitress came to take their order. “Sorry, I couldn’t help overhearing. Did you say you were here during the war?”

“That’s right,” Nan beamed.

“There’s an exhibition upstairs,” said the waitress. “A display of old photos from those days. It’s only here for a few weeks. You might be interested.”

“I don’t know,” said Kelly.

“Those stairs...”

Nan waved her concerns away but the waitress smiled.

“There’s lift,” she said helpfully. “It’s new. They had to put it in to comply with regulations.”

That decided things. But first they ate dainty sandwiches and cream horns and drank a pot of tea. Then they were ready to tackle the exhibition.

“These curtains are lovely,” said Nan when they reached the grandeur of the dance hall. “Far nicer than the blackout ones we used to have. It was always so stuffy in here. Girls fainted all the time.” Her eyes twinkled. “Mind you, it was usually into the arms of some unsuitable young man.”

Kelly laughed. “I’d forgotten about the blackout.”

“We didn’t dare forget. Even the glow of a cigarette could get you into trouble. It was so dark with no streetlights and there were so many soldiers around, some of the dads waited outside and walked us home. It was humiliating.”

Kelly could imagine. “Did that happen to you?”

Nan shook her head with a mischievous grin. “My brother Archie told our parents he would see me home. But then he walked his own girl home, while your grandad took me. He had to leave me at the corner in case dad was watching out the window. I had to wait ‘til Archie got back, sometimes from the other side of town.” She grew silent and Kelly suspected she was thinking of her older brother who had died early in the war.

Nan walked slowly round the room, leaning on Kelly’s arm as she examined all the photos.

“This is such a treat. Really takes me back. Even though there was a war on, we always had a laugh. We never knew, you see. Never knew if we’d see each

other tomorrow or ever again. When your grandad was called up, I don’t think I slept a single — Oh, my!”

Kelly looked at the photo that had caught Nan’s attention. “It’s you!” she shrieked. “Look at your hair! And that dress! You’re gorgeous!”

In the photo, the dance floor was packed, with more people crowded round the edges. Nan, skirt swirling, only had eyes for her partner. “Is that Grandpa? Wow! Look at his moustache! Very suave. You two were really something!”

Nan didn’t speak, just stared at

the picture with an expression Kelly had never seen before.

“It is you, isn’t it?” she asked.

Her grandmother nodded. “D... do you think the photo might be for sale?”

“I’ll ask,” said Kelly excitedly. It was; unfortunately at a ridiculous price. Apparently the photographer, then an unknown, had become famous after the war.

Nan’s face fell when Kelly told her but she managed a smile. “Oh, well. Never mind. Can we go now?”

“But we haven’t seen the rest —”

“Please.” With a last, lingering look, Nan turned away from the picture. “I’m tired.”

She was subdued all the way home. “Are you OK?” asked Kelly, worried.

“I’m fine. It was a lovely day out. Thank you, dear. So many memories.” She smiled but there was no heart in it.

At home, Kelly did some research online. There were posters and postcards for sale of the photographer’s best known work, but none of the photo of Nan and Grandad.

Her grandmother was quiet all evening and went to bed even earlier than usual, missing her soaps. Worried about her, Kelly vowed to buy the photo, even if it meant blowing savings. Unfortunately, before she could put her plan into action, Nan had something to say.

“Don’t you dare go buying that photo. I know what you’re like. It’s far too much money.”

It wasn’t, not to bring back Nan’s smile, but Kelly was forced to promise. She considered sneaking back and snapping a picture on her phone but there were signs everywhere forbidding this. And while she would happily take Nan back to see it, the exhibition was only open for a few weeks to coincide with the grand re-opening. Soon, it would be gone.

But the publicity for the official reopening of The Palais gave Kelly an idea. She approached the local paper, who loved her suggestion of a local interest piece and an interview at the

dance hall was arranged. “If they take your photo in front of the old one, we can buy a print at the newspaper office.”

“Mrs McAvoy, how does it feel to come across an image from the past you never knew existed?” the reporter asked Nan on the day of the interview. “If you don’t mind me saying, you look so young. It must have been quite a shock.”

Nan tore her gaze from the photo long enough to deliver a wry smile. “Not at all. The real shock is looking in the mirror and seeing an old woman.”

A small crowd had gathered and everyone chuckled. “And it must be wonderful seeing your husband again, looking so youthful.”

Nan shook her head. “We were married 70 years. I don’t need a photo of my Pat. All I need to do is close my eyes.”

“Oh.” The reporter was thrown. “Your granddaughter said you became very emotional when you saw the photo...”

“Oh, I did that.” Nan turned back to the picture and her expression softened. “But not because of Pat. Look. There. That’s my brother, Archie.”

Surprised, Kelly turned to the photo, as did everyone else. Nan was pointing at three young men in the corner. Someone must have just cracked a joke because they were all laughing.

“Archie’s the one in the middle,” said Nan quietly. “The other two are his pals. Two days after that picture was taken, all three left for France.” Her eyes

grew distant, looking into the past. “The whole train was filled with local boys, so the station platform was crowded. There was bunting and tables set up with food. We all waved flags and the band played as we waved them off. Two months later, we got a telegram: Archie was killed and soon, we heard, Tommy and John, too.”

You could hear a pin drop in the room. Kelly felt a lump in her throat and goosebumps on her skin. She imagined that if she turned her head, she might see the ghosts of the three young men, listening from the shadows.

## Kelly felt a lump in her throat and goosebumps

She wasn’t the only one who jumped when the strains of Vera Lynn singing *We’ll Meet Again* suddenly wafted up the stairs from the tea-room below.

“I don’t have a single picture of Archie,” continued Nan, so quietly people had to strain forward to hear her. “The house got bombed, you see, and we lost everything. I haven’t seen my big brother in over half a century. And just look at him.” She turned to Kelly, her eyes shining. “See how happy he is? I’d forgotten that. All these years, and I’d forgotten his smile.”

Nan’s smile was on the front page of the local paper the next day. Unfortunately her head blocked out the picture of Archie in the background. Kelly was disappointed, however social media picked up the story. Within two days, the family of the photographer had been in touch and presented Nan with a print of the original.

Kelly was there to help her hang it on the wall in her newly decorated flat. They both stood back to admire it, but Nan tutted.

“What is it?”

“Oh, nothing. Just that if I’d known Archie was coming home, I’d have chosen a different colour for the walls. He hated green. Well, too late to change it now. So, love, just let me get my coat and you can tell me where you’re taking me this afternoon.”

Kelly grinned. Archie was back where he belonged. As was Nan’s smile.

THE END

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# Castles *in the* Sand

Somewhere inside my head a different sort of ring comes briefly into view, one with a diamond on the front

**W**e're on a Spanish beach, Simon and me. The sun is beating down, the palm trees are waving in the breeze, and the sea is lapping gently at our bare toes as we walk hand-in-hand along the soft white sand. It's our first holiday together. No work, no worries, no kids. But something doesn't feel right. Something is missing.

Without wanting it to, my mind flashes back to that other holiday, almost seven years ago, when John and I had just got married and the future was opening up to us like the huge, unblemished blue sky that greeted us every morning as we stepped out from our honeymoon hotel. All the fun we had in those two weeks, swimming, sunbathing, dancing the night away, cuddling up together and throwing the

sheets off, on those sweaty, sweltering hot nights. All that hope, all those plans... and all of them broken into tiny pieces. I can't let that happen again.

Sometimes my thumb still rolls across to the base of my finger and rubs at the skin, just fleetingly, as if it's feeling for my rings. I suppose it's a bit like having a tooth out. A tooth that's been there so long that its sudden absence comes as a surprise, and you can't stop your tongue from roving over the spot, exploring the still-sore space, searching for what's been lost.

I miss my rings. I can't tell Simon that, of course. He might mistake my feelings at the physical loss of those familiar gold bands wrapped, snugly and comfortably, around my finger, for a different yearning. He might think I'm missing John, my old life, my marriage, but he would be wrong. I'm not. John is very firmly in my past. He left me for another woman, left me with debts and heartache, and a lot of forgiving to do. But I did it, and I don't believe in looking back. Not in anger, anyway.

After three years alone, the pain and upheaval of my divorce

is, at last, a thing of the past. I have a new flat, a new job, new friends, and now I have Simon. I love him, and I know that he loves me. "Give me a ring, Hayley," he often says as we kiss goodnight after an evening out or as he sets off on a business trip. Of course, he means that I should call him, but somewhere inside my head a different sort of ring comes briefly into view, one with a diamond on the front, and a little voice that I struggle to hold back just longs to shout after him: "No, why don't you give *me* a ring?" but I never say it out loud.

I'd love to get married again. To him. Wonderful, handsome, caring Simon. I'd love to have that feeling again, that what we have is here to stay, but Simon doesn't seem to want to make the commitment, and I'm not sure why. You see, the thing about Simon — the thing I have convinced myself is holding him back — is the fact that he already has three children. Although they don't live with him all the time, Sam, Jack and Amy are a massive part of his life... and rapidly becoming a part of mine too.

They burst upon us on alternate weekends, unloading

*Without wanting it to, my  
mind flashes back*



bags of toys and DVDs all over the carpet, wanting to go and feed the ducks whatever the weather, eating take-away pizzas in front of the TV and demanding bedtime stories. I'm not used to that kind of full-on family life, much as I love being part of it, and by Sunday evening I'm usually exhausted and quite pleased to get home to the calm of my own flat. Perhaps that's why he's wary. He just can't see me as a future stepmother. Much as I'd like to be. And a mother too, one day, I hope. But, even so, since I met Simon and his boisterous brood, I'm probably the happiest I have ever been. It's just that... Well, it's probably just me being silly, but I need to know this is forever, and right now it doesn't feel that it is.

We stop at a beach-side bar and order drinks, find a shady table and sit down under a parasol, watching the world go by. A young family are busy building sandcastles, the younger boy's red plastic spade digging away 19 to the dozen, the dad fetching water in a tiny bucket to pour into the moat, the mum gathering shells. At the water's edge, the older children, a boy and a girl, are messing about with a ball, squealing every time it splashes down hard into the sea and sends a sudden spray of cold water up over their heads.

"It seems strange, being here without the kids..." Simon gazes at the children playing, reaches for my hand and squeezes it. "This is the first time I've been on holiday without them since... well, since they were born."

"Do you miss them?" I look at his face but I can't see what's in his eyes through his dark sunglasses. "Maybe we should have brought them with us?"

"No, Hayley. This is our time. And I think we deserve it, don't you? Some time alone, away from it all. I've asked a lot from you this last year or so, I do know that, foisting three of them on you all the time. It's not the ideal start to a relationship, is it? You having to cope with someone else's children, and me worrying myself sick that you'll tire of it all and leave?"

"Simon! How can you even think that? It would never enter my head to leave you. I love your

children." I tug at the ring-pull on my can of Coke, with more force than usual, and pour the bubbling brown liquid into my rum. I've never complained about the children, never even hinted they could be a problem. This is all in his head. I can't even look at him, I'm so confused.

"And I love you!"

He sits silently for a moment, his fingers fiddling with the little yellow paper umbrella in his cocktail, his head turned towards the family on the sand and their wobbly sandcastle.

"I know you do... but maybe I carry too much baggage."

"Fifteen kilos," I say, trying to lighten the mood. "I saw them weigh it at the airport."

"You know what I mean."

And I do. Of course, I do.

"I can't expect you to saddle yourself with me. Not with three

feeling sorry for himself, or get started on building a new one." I touch his face and turn it gently back towards me. "We both have a past, Simon. Marriages, memories, possessions, the children... I would never want to deny that, or change it. I mean, look at them..."

My eyes turn to the young family again, shovelling at the sand with their hands, at super-quick speed, as if they have to make up for lost time. "Same sand, but pushed into a different shape, with maybe a few extra turrets and some new shells thrown in for good measure. And I bet they've learned from what went wrong the first time, where its weaknesses were, so it will end up a bigger and better castle, a stronger castle, than the one it's going to replace... especially with all five of them

holding it out towards him. "Will you marry me?"

He hesitates for a second, but I'm sure that's simply because of the shock. "I suppose what I really mean is, will you all marry me? All four of you?"

"I thought you'd never ask!" he says, and he leaps up and grabs the ring from my hand and tries to slide it, shakily, onto my outstretched finger. It's rough and sharp, and not even round, and it's way too small. It balances on my fingertip for just a few seconds before it falls off into the sand at our feet, but for those few seconds, everything feels right. Perfect, in fact.

He leans across the table and kisses me, long and hard, and we sit there for a while, saying nothing at all, just watching the little waves lap at the shoreline, and the children's rebuilt castle, taking shape, growing and changing before our eyes.

We finish our drinks and get up from the table. But before we leave, Simon takes the little paper umbrella from his glass and shakes the drops of liquid away. He holds it gently in one hand, the other wrapped tightly around mine, and as we reach the family on the beach he bends down and pops it into the top of the sandcastle, like a tiny flag, standing proudly, yellow as the sun. The toddler beams up at us, and the mum nods a silent "thank you".

"When we get back to the hotel," I say, "let's give the kids a ring, and tell them our news."

"Later." Simon stops and kisses me again, lifting his sunglasses so I can see his eyes and the promise that's shining out of them. "This is our time, Hayley. Just the two of us, remember? Let's make the most of it while we can, because when we get home, we have a brand-new castle to build. One so strong that nobody will ever knock it down."

We take a last look at the tiny paper umbrella, waving at us in the breeze, and then we walk back together, knowing we have all the time in the world, and making big, deep, side-by-side footprints in the sand.

THE END

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kids who are going to be around for the next... 10 years, at least. It isn't fair."

The boy and girl who have been playing in the sea choose that moment to come running back up the beach, pushing at each other and giggling as they race to be first back to their towels. The boy gets there first, throwing himself down on the sand, his foot flying out and tripping his sister, who loses her balance and falls, awkwardly, on top of her little brother's sandcastle. The toddler lets out a loud wail as all his hard work crumbles into a misshapen mound of soggy sand.

"Fair? What has fair got to do with it?" I say. "Things happen. It wasn't your fault your wife left you, or mine that John left me. We just have to carry on and deal with what life throws at us. Like... like that poor little boy over there, having his castle knocked away from him in an instant. Do you think that's fair? But it's happened, and there are two things he can do about it. Sit there

working on it together."

"Why am I so stupid?" Simon smiles at me. "And why are you so wise?"

"That's just the way it is," I joke.

"But I mean it, Simon. If you thought for a moment that your children are some sort of obstacle to romance, or a burden to me, then you've got it all so wrong. It's a privilege, and a joy, to have them in my life."

"Oh, I do love you, Hayley." There's a choke in his voice, as if his emotions are all bubbling up in one big rush, just like the Coke did when I poured it into my glass. "More than I can ever say."

I look down into my drink, but the Coke has already gone flat and still in the warmth of the sun. Simon is still too, sitting quietly, deep in thought. And then I notice the empty can, its ring-pull pushed back and shining up at me, and, without stopping to think, I just do what comes naturally, what feels right. "Simon," I say, twisting the metal ring and ripping it off,

When Mum asked to meet me in Langton's department store during my lunch hour (I'd just started a job nearby, in an insurance office off Tottenham Court Road), I knew I should keep my wits about me.

I'd grown up with parents you might politely call swervers and chancers. Since my dad's flit, years earlier, Mum had done lots of "proper" jobs, most recently in a paper shop in Regent Street. Still, she wasn't above pulling one of her old routines. And as she led me to the caff in Langton's, I wondered if she was going for her old standby of "finding" a bug in the salad. She usually carried a dead beetle in a matchbox in her handbag. No doubt I'd come in handy to vouch for her respectability.

But as we sat down, she seemed to guess my thoughts and said, with a nostalgic smile, "That was a favourite of mine and your dad's, all right, but don't worry. I've not brought you here to corrupt you."

"Glad to hear it." Mention of my dad brought me up short, though, and I reached for the menu to hide my emotions.

"I just thought we should discuss wedding accessories," said Mum. "They have some nice gloves in, I saw, and some darling satin shoes with pearl-buttoned bows that would go with your dress. We can take a look after a bite here."

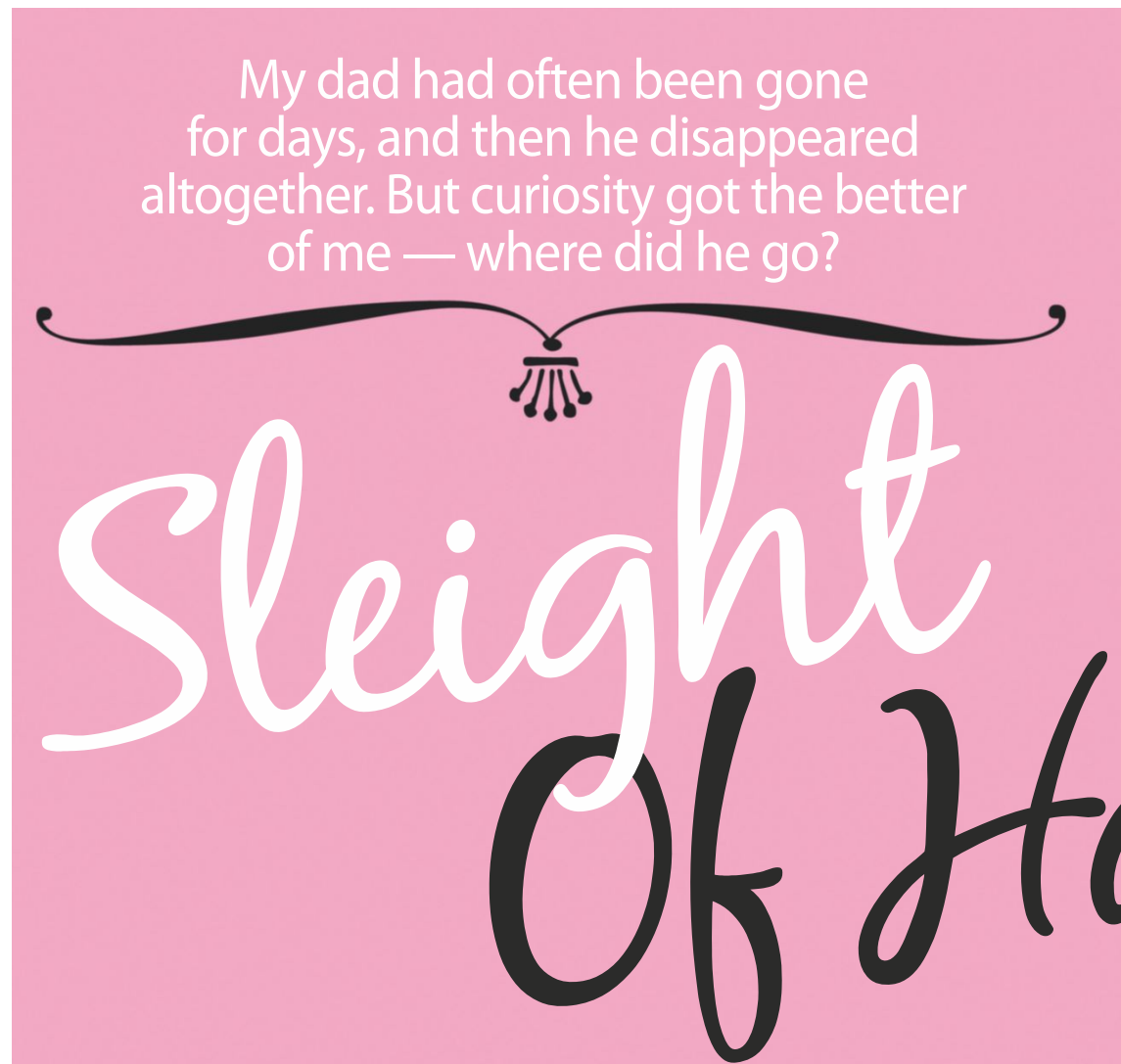
I nodded, though she knew Richard and I were keeping things on a budget.

Still, my heartbeat steadied. Accessories I could cope with. The one topic I wasn't keen to discuss in detail with her, was my dad — a figure who loomed large in my life for one who'd been absent much of it.



According to Mum, she and my dad, Paul "Pinky" Machin, had met during an air raid in '44 at The Velvet Cat in Curzon Street, a gentleman's club where she'd been coat-check girl and he'd been the doorman. As the toffs ran for shelter in the basement, she'd stayed at her post and looked the other way while the handsome doorman with an outsize pinky ring on his left hand went through the cloakroom pockets.

Later, when everyone came up from the basement, their fur coats



were being used to cover stretcher cases, and no one could work out where a few valuables had strayed. "Pinky never nicked from his own," Mum had always told me. "He always stuck to victimless crimes. Them lot at the club could afford to lose a few trifles."

As to whether or not she'd ever nicked a trifle here and there in her time, she'd always been coy

— usually by coming home with packets of streaky or slabs of chocolate that were dented from falling off the back of the lorry. "Anyway," he'd say, as Mum got out the frying pan, "war's been over this many bloomin' years and they're still making us stand in line with coupons. Not us, they won't!"

He did his midnight flit when I was 13. Mum told me he'd

A bit like the hole Pinky left in our lives. I'll always remember the three of us dancing around our mouldy kitchen of a Saturday morning while the washer tried to follow us, belching like an unappeased volcanic god. "I'll get that fixed, love," Pinky kept promising Mum. "I know a man who knows a man."

Mum said he hadn't left a forwarding address "so the Frazers can't come putting the squeeze on us. It's to keep us safe."

Could have been worse, I'd thought at the time. Thanks to his wheeling and dealing, he'd often been gone for days, travelling all over to meet up with "contacts". That made it easier to acclimatise to a longer absence. Well, easier for me, maybe.

And that was the last we saw or heard of Pinky — until curiosity got the better of me.



A few months after Pinky's flit, I'd caught two buses to Petticoat Lane to do a recce on the Frazer

## I'll always remember the three of us dancing around our mouldy kitchen

and I didn't like to press too hard. She'd grown up in a care home, and you needed wits to survive that, especially in the 30s. That said and despite giving her the benefit of the doubt, it would take me a while to realise there was no such thing as a victimless crime.

By the time I was nine, me, Mum and Pinky were living in a flat over a shop in Kensal Green.

On the whole, Pinky (he disliked being called "Dad") did right by us

had to do a runner to swerve a couple of heavies known as the Frazer brothers.

Apparently, he'd sold them several hundred boxes of a detergent that he'd promised was a "miracle stain-lifter". The Frazer brothers had sold the boxes on their stall in Petticoat Lane, only for shoppers to demand their money back; seemed that the detergent went right through your delicates and left a hole.



fiancé Richard. To this day, he probably still thinks I caught my heel accidentally in that drainage cover outside the nightclub where he was waiting for a taxi.

He ended up missing the taxi so he could help rescue my broken-heeled shoe.

Then, as I hobbled to the Tube station, he followed me to offer his arm, said my listing to starboard gave me a Marilyn wiggle, and asked if I fancied joining him for coffee at a late-night caff? He even put me in a cab home, a proper gent from the off (give or take naff chat-up lines with the word “wiggle” to the fore).

Mum was indeed pleased to see me marrying “an upstanding citizen”, but while she fretted about accessories, quite different issues surfaced for me in the wedding planning. First off, I told Richard I didn’t want him wearing a ring, saying I’d never liked rings on men.

Then we nearly had a row when he pressed me about Pinky: “I know he’s not Dad Of The Year material, but wouldn’t it be nice if he walked you down the aisle? I’d help you track him down.”

“You don’t understand.”

“OK, so help me understand.”

I did — by coming clean about the true nature of Pinky’s relationship to the Frazer brothers. “I can’t tell Mum — it would almost be crueller now, after all these years, to find out he had a wife and possible kids elsewhere all along.”

“But they’d be your half-siblings!” said Richard. “It’s shocking the way he’s behaved but... if it were me, I’d want the whole story. I’d want to hold him to account.”

“Well, you’re not me!” I said hotly — but he’d lit the blue touch paper, all right.

brothers and maybe plead with them to let Pinky come back.

Turned out quite a few people in Petticoat Lane knew the Frazer brothers and their stall — but it was in Portobello Market.

So I’d bunked off school and headed for that market, checking out all the stalls until I came across two elderly blokes with a nice line in patter and a stall heaped high with “housewife’s essentials”.

“Where did you get these?” I’d asked, picking up a brightly coloured squeaky sponge. “They’re not in the shops.”

“My son-in-law travels round the country, meeting suppliers,” explained a Frazer brother. “Hang on...” He rooted about under the stall and brought up a frying pan. “Maybe your mum would like one of these? Just in this week. Nonstick surface, see? Developed from discoveries they made during the war when coming up with the atom bomb.”

“Don’t tell her that!” tutted the other brother. “It’s perfectly safe,

though, love. No atoms or anything pesky like that floating around.”

I took the pan to examine it and asked, “is your son-in-law the one with the pinky ring?”

“Ah, you’ve met him here before, then? He don’t do much on the stall now. Like I said, travels about the place instead, finding us new stock.”

I didn’t want to make them suspicious, so I said I’d tell my mum about the pan.

Son-in-law, I said to myself on the buses home. Which meant he was married to that Frazer brother’s daughter. I’d read about men like Pinky — a girl in every town instead of every port. Maybe he’d had too many plates spinning when he decided something had to give — me and Mum, to be precise.

And, like all accomplished liars, he’d told Mum just enough of the truth to sound convincing — there was a stall owned by the Frazer brothers, for example. Maybe he never counted on my guile finding out the rest.

I’d left things there, though. He could stick his non-stick pans, I decided.

Better that way. For Mum as well as for me.



People like Pinky seemed more and more old-school as I grew up. Maybe Mum was, too.

The changing world of the 60s was for young people like me, at

## The old world had made its final bow, it seemed to me

ease with a new skyline thrusting up from London’s bomb craters — “high rises” they were called. The old world had made its final bow, it seemed to me, when the cranes building those very high rises had dipped respectfully at Churchill’s cortège.

Still, I kept an old-school trick or two up my own sleeve (maybe that’s inevitable when you grow up with a couple of swervers and chancers). Take the night I met my

I tossed and turned for a few nights in the flat I still shared with Mum, and then I knew I would go looking for Pinky, after all — starting with my last-known point of reference, Portobello Market.



It had been 13 years since my last visit. Many of the stalls were passed down through the same family, but after I’d walked around the market a couple of times, I panicked that I’d let my one line of enquiry slip away.







And then, around a corner and past a pile of brightly coloured washing-up bowls, I heard a voice calling for punters to “roll up and inspect the very latest in aluminium saucepans, based on metal developed by those there space jockeys at Cape Carnival!”

And there he was, standing behind a kitchenware stall, older and fatter, but still wearing an outside pinky ring. “Dad?”

He whirled around, his face a picture of saggy-jowled shock.

“Dad, it’s me!” I stepped up to the stall. “I’m getting married next month and though you don’t deserve a second of my time, you ridiculous old faker, I’ve decided to come looking for you be —”

“Not here!” he hissed. “And less of the ‘f’ word round here, if it’s all the same to you. Step lively over this way.”

He led me to a corner behind the washing-up bowls and said, in a voice of doubting wonder, “Esme? You’ve grown tall. You’re just like your mother.”

He wasn’t even remorseful, I realised, his eyes darting about, watching punters stroll by and mourning lost sales opportunities.

“You’re still working on the family stall, I see,” I snapped, and I told him about my previous visit. “So much for the Frazer brothers being after you!”

“Well, they were, in a way. Ivy’s dad knew I were meeting more on my travels than suppliers. He threatened to tell her if I didn’t come to heel.”

“You and Ivy have kids?” I asked, my voice shaking.

He nodded, and I must have looked a bit faint, because he lowered me carefully onto an upturned washing-up bowl. And then he said, “I’m not your father, love. That’s not to say I didn’t enjoy the honour, long as it lasted. Your ma and I hooked up when you were a bab.” I gazed at him groggily. “Wh-why should I believe anything you say?”

He scratched his neck. “Because I were a prisoner of war between ‘43 and ‘45. I weren’t even in London when you became a twinkle in someone else’s eye. Think about it, love. Able-bodied bloke like me wouldn’t have been happy to hang about the place as a doorman — I was up and at Jerry, soon as I could.”

“Then who —?”

“Some things your ma kept to herself for the best of reasons,” he said, looking away. “Young women like that, walking home in the blackout, all sorts about... She weren’t ever keen to talk about it. She wanted me to be your dad and I did my best for as long as I could, honest I did. Your ma, though, she never knew about Ivy. I thought it best to let her think I’d been scared away and left the two of you behind for your own good.”

He’d thought it best. “So you chose to worry her to death rather than break her heart more directly? You didn’t even send a postcard or letter in all that time, telling her you were OK!”

He scratched the other side of

## ‘That type are always looking over the fence for greener grass’

his neck. “When you put it like that... Listen, what’s done is done, water turned brackish under that particular bridge. You’ve got to understand, it were hard for prisoners coming back from the war. I’d been engaged to Ivy before I left, my path set out. Then I came back a different person and met your mum. I wanted to do right by her and Ivy.” Here the glint in his eye turned crafty. “Much good it would do now to break your ma’s heart years after the event. You’re getting married, you say? Have our latest range of aluminium saucepans on me. Or anything else you fancy off the stall. Least I can do.”

“Is your real name even Paul Machin?”

“It’s Paul, any rate. I let a ration book I came by take care of the rest.”

That was why he’d been happy enough to put his “name” on my birth cert, covering his tracks even as he appeared to do right by me.

I took as a “gift” the washing-up bowl I’d been sitting on. To my way of thinking, pots and pans acquired sentimental value in a way a cheap plastic bowl never would.

I told him he had no further cause to worry — I wouldn’t be sharing any of what I’d learned with Mum. Then I spent another bus journey back from Portobello Market, dwelling on newly discovered and very hard truths.

I still felt “Pinky” had been a coward, letting me believe he was my dad and letting Mum believe he was unencumbered, then doing a runner as the easy way out of everything.

And yet... another part of me recognised he’d done the same as me, ultimately — protected Mum from a harsh truth as surely as she’d protected me from a more sordid origin story.

Oddly, we’d all been protecting each other.



I told Richard the further instalment of the Pinky story, then I invited Mum to lunch at Langton’s. “It’d be nice,” I said, “to have lunch together, just the two of us, before the wedding. The rehearsal dinner will be full of Rich’s family.”

Because it was just the two of us and always had been. As we tucked

he’d met someone else. Truth be told, I could’ve tried harder to track him down, but I s’pose I didn’t like what I might find or have to tell you. Better to leave your old man on a pedestal, I thought.”

I got another jolt, because she was right. His radio silence all these years had never piqued her curiosity in a way I might have expected.

She leant over and squeezed my wrist in a rare moment of maternal softness. “Leave old Pinky in the past, love. You did right to choose Richard, an upstanding citizen. He’ll never go looking over the fence.”

I did, indeed, leave it there.

She wore a big, old, floppy Ali MacGraw hat to the wedding. There was a fake bug on top of the wedding cake as a private joke between three of us (I’d let Richard in on it).

From reading the Sunday supplements, she got a yen for travelling aboard, so Richard and I made sure she joined us on the new package holidays that everyone was taking. For us, feeling the Spanish sun on our backs was like stepping onto the moon.

When she died, I found tucked away in a bottom drawer the only potential clue she’d left (or could bear to leave) to my real identity — a bus ticket from Stepney to Piccadilly on a date in March ‘44 — folded inside an empty matchbook with a picture of a cat on the front.

Why that particular bus ticket, I wondered?

Maybe she’d missed her bus back to her digs in Stepney after her shift in the cloakroom of The Velvet Cat one night... then been sweet-talked on the walk home or outside the club; maybe by the sort of toff who seduced, then discarded, pretty cloakroom attendants as easily as they did used matches.

It bugged me for a while.

And then, around the time I was expecting for a second time, I decided to stop wondering or following up lines of enquiry, and get on with my life.

I decided, if you like, that I’d let the brackish water silt up under that particular bridge, while I concentrated on the years unfolding before me and the new family I was building around me — one I knew Mum would be proud of.

THE END

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# My Forever Family

My mum was fab in lots of ways, but things like school and proper clothes just weren't her strengths

**H**ush little baby, don't say a word,  
Momma's gonna buy you a mockingbird.

I can't believe I'm actually a mum. I gaze down at my daughter. Her red-as-cherry lips make the smallest movements, as though she's dreaming of the feed she's just finished. There's the tiniest drop of milk in the corner of her mouth. I dab it with a muslin, not wishing to wake her. "Never wake a sleeping baby," don't they always say?

*And if that mockingbird won't sing,  
Momma's gonna buy you a diamond ring.*

I won't, of course I won't, but I've always liked this lullaby. Was it something my mum sang to me? I like to think so, but in truth I just can't remember. She was always waking me, I know that, when I was older. To go on adventures and stuff. She'd

shake me awake in the middle of the night.

"Come on, Kidder, we should be outside. There's a full moon. Maybe shooting stars. Let's go and make a wish."

I'd try and delve back under the blanket, but there was no resisting Mum in that mood, and eventually I'd follow her outdoors, shivering to gaze at the sky.

I'm still good at identifying the various constellations. One day, I'll teach my daughter their names too.

I'm on my own today, for the first day since we left hospital. It's a scary prospect. Later, I'll

take Lola into town. That's her name, you see. Lola. I've always loved that name. It was in a song Mum used to sing to me at bedtime.

Mum used to sing to me all the time, until I was taken away from her, kicking and screaming. I was nine, and I remember the day like it was yesterday. The social worker was kind, in so far as you can be when you're taking a child away from their mother.

"Mum, stop them taking me. Don't let me go."

I put up a good fight, that is until I looked back and saw my mum — yes, my mum — give

me a tiny wave goodbye. Like it was nothing that I was going. Like she was just giving up on me. I didn't wave back. I gave in instead. I got into the car like the social worker asked me to, and I didn't look back. I guess you'd say I pretty quickly resigned myself to the fact that I was going to be living somewhere else and with someone else from now on.

I won't bore you with all the gory details, once I get started I might not stop. But basically my mum couldn't cope. Not once Dad left. I went to school one day, I was five, and when I came home he'd gone.

"We're high and dry, Kidder," Mum said. She called me that, Kidder. I kind of liked it, even though my name is Keira. And it seems she was right. Although I couldn't see it back then, I think today you might say of my mum that she wasn't a coper. That life threw lemons at her and she didn't make

*I got into the car like the social worker asked me to*



lemonade, but soaked up the bitterness instead.

Don't get me wrong. She was fab in lots and lots of ways, was my mum. And she was always cheerful around me, although deep down I think I knew something was up. You try and see the best of things, don't you, when you're a kid? I wanted my mum to be a brilliant mum, and so that was how I saw her. We'd have day trips to the seaside, we'd spin in circles at midnight in the rain; we'd sit for hours in the, library reading books. They were important things to do, of course.

But then so was school, and proper food and clothes and stuff.

Those things weren't her strength, and they were considered important too, especially by the authorities. Mum didn't like authority; she made that quite clear.

"Why does it matter if your skirt is grey and your shoes are black? What do teachers know? You should be wearing cheerful colours, rainbow colours."

And so I'd turn up at school in a multi-striped sweater that was several sizes too big for me, and the school would send me home for wearing the wrong uniform. Not the first time I turned up in it, but the 10th or 11th.

"Have they nothing better to do?" my mum would protest when I appeared on the doorstep. "They should be teaching you about the world we inhabit, not making you adhere to petty rules. Stuff 'em, let's go and see if the bluebells are out yet. I'll just get changed into something more suitable." She'd tug off her dressing-gown.

And off we'd trot, even though moments before she'd been sitting in front of the TV in the exact same spot I'd left her when I'd headed off for school that morning. There'd be a cold cup of coffee next to her, and maybe a glass of something too. I wasn't sure what. It was always empty when I saw it.

Mum had her issues. The teachers saw it if I didn't, and that's how Social Services became involved.

Anyway, this isn't about my mum, not really.

This is about me, and Lola now, too. And Nick, of course, Lola's dad and my boyfriend and bestie. We've been together four years. He's gone back to work today, although he's called twice already to check we're OK.

"Of course we are, love, why wouldn't we be?"

I think I must have sounded a bit defensive.

"No reason," he said. "Just missing my girls."

I was lucky, I guess, that I didn't end up in a children's home. I went into foster care. I wince now, looking back at those years. I was angry, really angry, from day one. I must have been a handful, but if I was, you wouldn't know. The families were really kind. I moved every couple of years until I was 15, but

I didn't straightaway. In fact, I sulked at the thought, and stuffed it under my pillow. Of course, she could have found it there when I was out during the day, but she didn't. She waited until I handed it over. By then, it was a much bigger job.

"No worries at all," she'd said, peering at the now massive holes in both elbows. "I'll have it as good as new in no time."

She did a pretty good job, I have to say. I got loads more wear out of it. I was pleased about that. It was a link of sorts to my real mum. The mum who'd added colour to my life, if not stability.

I've still got the jumper, somewhere. I must dig it out. I'll tell Lola about it some day.

She snuffles as I stand, still holding her in my arms, ready to lower her as gently as you like into the pram.

*And if that diamond ring*



I managed to stay at the same school, which was something.

I began to behave, to conform even. I often wondered what Mum might have thought. Despite railing against routine — porridge for breakfast, a regular bedtime — I could see the benefits. I no longer fell asleep at school. My stomach wouldn't rumble before lunchtime.

I even wore a grey skirt and black shoes, although I still wore the multi-striped jumper for ages on the way to and from school. I'd been wearing it the day I'd been taken away from Mum. Because it had been so big back then it fitted me for years, and Mary, my third foster mum, darned it for me. I'd been really upset when a hole had appeared in the elbows.

"That's where it will wear," she'd said. "Hand it over and I'll put it right."

*turns to brass*

*Momma's gonna buy you a looking glass.*

Lola settles immediately. Seems she already finds comfort in the sound of my voice. That makes my heart swell, that does.

I never did get adopted or anything. The last family I was with, the fifth family, the Gallaghers, they were lovely. And I fitted right in. Before, with the other foster families, I'd been a worry, I know. I'd run away a few times. Tried to get back to Mum. I was sure she was still in the same house, the curtains were still up, the Moroccan Hookah pipe was still in the downstairs window, but if she knew I was there when I knocked, she never let on. It really hurt, that did.

I had lots of counselling. That helped.

The Gallagher kids were a bit wild too. They never truanted

or anything, but they were bold and sassy, within limits. They'd try anything.

"Come on, Keira, if you don't try it, how d'you know you don't like it?" they'd say as they caught hold of the rope swing and handed it to me. There was a leg drop if I let go. I'd break a leg or something.

"Won't that get us into trouble?" I asked.

"Well, don't let go then. No one will ever know, so long as you hold on tight."

I made it to the other side and back again. Mrs Gallagher raised an eyebrow when we got home covered in dust and leaves, but she never said a word.

It was just how Mum would have been. Like I say, she may have had her issues, my mum, lots of them, I'm not blind to them, but there was lots to like about her too. If I fitted in well with a family like the Gallaghers, she must have done something right. It was just on her own, that she struggled.

I'm lucky I'm not on my own. I close the front door as quietly as I can. It's about a mile into town, so a nice walk. Nick will be pleased we got out. I'll take some photos on my phone to show him later.

I'm meeting Mrs Gallagher for a cup of tea today. We stayed in touch, all of us. They came to visit me in hospital. The midwife gave an eyeroll as they all trooped in.

It was great to see them. They're like family to me and Nick, and now Lola, too.

I dig around in my handbag. I'm taking a bit of a detour. I've got an envelope to post. Through Mum's door. It's got a note and photos of Lola.

Makes you think, doesn't it, having a child of your own? That's why I decided to contact Mum. Not face to face for now. There'll be lots of things for each of us to say. Things to iron out. And it won't always be easy.

I'm so lucky to have Nick and Lola and the Gallaghers. If, some day, she could be part of it too, I'd like that.

Part of my Forever Family.

THE END

© Fran Tracey, 2017

With Lady M refusing to be cut down from behind the door, Polly was pretty sure legal action was unlikely

# Hairings On

**P**C Polly Jones was standing in Cubicle 3 of the Sirina Beauty Salon. In front of her, suspended from a hook on the back of the door, was a woman with the wind-tunnel look of someone who'd fought time and lost.

She'd been found by the cleaner, who thought she was dead. Polly also thought this until she went to cut her down. As she lifted the scissors, the woman managed a low moan and her eyes bulged with fear.

The woman was not hanging by her neck but by a loop on the top of her head. For some reason, she couldn't talk or move a muscle. Polly wondered if she might want a cup of tea, but there was no way of telling.

There were five staff and Sirina, who led her to a small upstairs office.

"Yes," she said, "I know who she is. Lady M from the Hall."

"One of your regulars?"

"Oh, yes. Manicures, pedicures, massages, and non-surgical lifts to every possible part. And a vile temper."

She paused. "The only reason the therapists put up with her is the size of her tips."

Polly sipped her herbal tea. "But not so obnoxious someone would do her harm?"

Sirina smiled. "You don't kill the Golden Goose."

"When did you see her last?"

"Saturday morning. We were exceptionally busy and she came in just as Jasmine, that's our Saturday girl, passed the desk. Jasmine's not the brightest but quite capable — although never off her wretched phone."

"I didn't find out what Madam wanted as we close at noon and Jasmine had to dash. Of course, we checked the cubicles before locking up but we wouldn't have thought to look behind the doors."

Polly drew breath. "So your client has been hanging there all weekend."

Sirina sank lower in her chair. "She'll sue us, she's bound to."

"Where's Jasmine now?"

"Looking after her mum. That's why she was in a hurry,

had to collect her from A & E. Mum's been cook and housekeeper for Lord M for years. Fell off a chair that morning while dusting and broke her wrist and a valuable vase."

Polly noted the address and satisfied herself that the client was still refusing to be cut down.

The cottage sat on the edge of the Hall estate. Jasmine opened the door and led her into a small sitting room where an older woman, with her arm in a sling, occupied the sofa. Polly thought she'd been crying.

Jasmine was profuse in her apologies. "How awful! I got that call from the hospital and I just forgot all about her. See, she come in and wanted an appointment for the new treatment for baggy knees. Well, I told her there was no one available nor would be 'til Thursday but she wouldn't have it. 'You,' she said, 'you're a therapist, aren't you?' but I said, 'No I'm just learning, I go to college and watch the others.'"

"But she said, 'It's only knees, for heaven's sake, and I need them for a week Sunday as we're off to the Carry Been.'"

"Caribbean?" suggested Polly.

"Well, she wouldn't take no for an answer, and she was threatening to go elsewhere, and I knew Sirina needed the money and I thought, 'Well, I have watched it being done and there is a cubicle empty and it would stop her having a fizz!'"

Polly leant forward. "So you did it."

"I was doing great, threading it's called, you make a mesh under the skin and pull it tight and it makes your cells grow or something and lasts two years. I was just about to cling-film her when she says I might as well do the rest of her as I'm doing such a good job. So I did. I got all the threads up around her neck but I hadn't seen how the other girls finished off so I gave them a good pull like a drawstring bag and tied them together.

"There was still her double chin, cheeks and forehead so I did them too and knotted her up on top. She looked a good 20 years younger and I showed her in the mirror like they do in the hairdressers'. She seemed pretty pleased.

"But after all that sewing, she was oozing a bit from the needles, so I hung her up to dry on the hook behind the door."

Polly considered Jasmine's sturdy frame and conceded it was possible. But it seemed to her there wasn't much to be done if Lady M remained suspended and refused to be cut down. This would indicate no felony had been committed, the client was satisfied with her situation and legal action was unlikely. She returned to the police station and conveyed as much to Sirina.



Jasmine lay on the sun deck of Lord M's luxury yacht, texting her friends about the Carry Been. After the visit of that policewoman, a distressed Lord M had called on them to

apologise for his wife sacking her mum and threatening to evict them because she couldn't perform her duties.

To Jasmine's surprise, he'd gone on to confess how much he admired her mum, and in particular her venison casserole, and now that his wife was tied up elsewhere, he pleaded, they could, if she was willing, all start a new life together.

Jasmine reflected that if she hadn't taken her mum's tearful phone call just before Lady M arrived at the salon, and that if her ladyship, while having her knees done, had not referred to her mum as "that silly cow of a housekeeper", Jasmine would not have sewn her up quite so tightly.

Or told her to keep absolutely still for the rest of the week so that the improvements would "set".

Or forgotten to tell anyone.

THE END

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*Her eyes bulged with fear*

# 'Ideas Come When I'm Least Expecting Them'



Jenny Ashcroft reveals the secrets of her success to Sue Cooke

## How did you become a novelist?

I've always wanted to write. I studied history at university, and when I left I went straight into corporate strategy, but I always kept writing. When I was on flights for work, rather than watch a movie I would write little scenes or chapters. Then when my youngest was six months old, I started the first chapter of a book on the commute home from work. I said to my husband, "I've started writing," and he said, "Well, keep going". So that year, every spare minute — on the commute, after the kids had gone to bed, in snatched half hours at lunchtime — I wrote my first book. It was set during the First World War, which is the subject I did in my final year at university, so it was like the book I was always going to write. I loved doing it so much, there was no doubt in my mind that I was going to go straight on and write another one. People say to me sometimes, "Where do you get the motivation from?". But it's like the biggest treat to sit down and write. It's a huge privilege.

## Where do you get your ideas for plots?

The central premise for *Beneath A Burning Sky* came when I was doing my research. There was a real-life occurrence in Egypt in 1906 called the Denshawai incident, where a local woman was injured, with major

consequences. That made me think: set further back in time, what would happen if there

was an accident which had knock-on effects on people who had nothing to do with it? The book as it exists now is not how I wrote it the first time, though. One of the things I find hardest is to get characters to do seemingly quite strange things with rational reasons, and the ideas come when I'm least expecting them. I just have to let my subconscious work away. I can be cooking the kids' tea or sorting laundry and suddenly the answer will just pop into my head when I'm not thinking about it.

## Where do you get your ideas for characters?

They come from the story, I think. I was writing yesterday and all of a sudden this minor character was talking on the page. They just come up as you're writing, and start to breathe and become human very quickly. You can't always control them.

## Which of your characters is your favourite?

Alma in *Island In The East* is a lovely, bubbly character. She's the heroine Ivy's best friend. She's fun, very warm and loyal, and she was there from the start. I enjoyed writing her so much. Everyone should have a friend like her.

## Which of your characters would you most like to be?

Ivy in *Island In The East* is very strong, brave and smart. She goes

on a difficult but very important journey in the book. I still can't read her final chapter without shedding a tear — that's how much she has come to mean to me.

## Which book have you most enjoyed writing?

*Island In The East* was a complete and utter joy to write. It just flowed. We lived in Singapore for six years, so maybe it had been growing in my mind all that time, and the places are so real to me. I just felt such a thrill every day when I sat down to write that book. There are a lot of warm characters in it and a lot of love between them, which is another reason it felt such a delight to write.

## Which book has been hardest to write?

*Beneath A Burning Sky* was the hardest to write, for two reasons. The first is that I didn't have a publishing deal, so I was writing it without the support of an editor. And the other is that the mystery element was hard to get right. It was that question of how much information do I release so the reader feels like they can start to guess, while keeping it open enough that you feel anyone could have done it? Honestly,

I have nothing but respect for people who write crime because it really challenged me, trying to keep that mystery a mystery until the right moment. Some chapters were a lot easier to write, like the love affair between Edward and Olivia, but it was the ones where I was just trying to slowly release what happened that were hard. But now, looking at it as a book, the feeling is amazing. I suppose it's like having a slightly trickier child — you don't love them any less just because they're challenging.

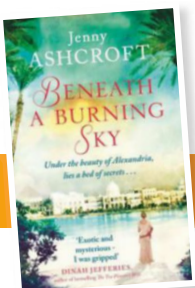
## Which fictional character do you wish you'd created?

I think Mrs Bennet in *Pride And Prejudice* is wonderful. I've no idea how many times I've read that book, but she still makes me laugh. She just leaps from the page, she's so vivid. She's got these fantastic flaws, but you still think you'd like to know her.

## What is your all-time favourite book?

*Anne Of Green Gables* by L. M. Montgomery is the book that made me fall in love with reading. I recently re-read it, and I think it reads just as well as an adult as a child. The scenes are so vivid, the writing is spare but so good, the characters are amazing. I can't wait until my daughter's old enough to read it!

**BENEATH A BURNING SKY BY JENNY ASHCROFT IS OUT NOW IN PAPERBACK (SPHERE, £7.99), AND THE ISLAND IN THE EAST IS AVAILABLE NOW IN EBOOK AND TO PREORDER IN PAPERBACK.**





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