

**LOSTWITHIEL
U3A**



**STORIES FROM
THE
WRITING GROUP**

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Lostwithiel u3a Creative Writing Group
lostwithielu3a.org.uk/our-groups/creative-writing

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INTRODUCTION

This collection of stories from the current members of the Writing Group has been produced to mark the 10th anniversary of the formation of Lostwithiel u3a. The Group's origins actually predate the U3A, having started up in February 2012 as the Lostwithiel Writing Group.

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DOWN ON THE FARM

Ann Henderson

It had to be for the best. The school said it was, and the man on the wireless, and even the vicar. He had said it would be “wicked selfishness” to keep the children at home with her, facing all the dangers of a city under bombing, when they could be safe and happy in the clean air of the countryside. She had agreed to do it and there was no turning back. All she could do now was make sure the children saw her confident and happy. That way, they could perhaps feel good about the coming ‘adventure’, as it was being called, without sharing her worries and her deep reluctance to entrust them to strangers.

“Come on, our Terence,” she said briskly. “We don’t want to miss the train, do we?”

All the way to the station, sitting opposite the children near the back of the bus, their mother chatted resolutely about the delightful and interesting things in store for them.

“You’ll be staying in a farming village,” she said. “You’ve got

a book with pictures of farm animals, haven't you, Evie? I've packed it in your bag. Just think if you can see the pigs and the little lambs. You might even be able to help feed them."

Terry wasn't fooled. She was smiling with her mouth but not with her eyes. He remembered that look from the day he started school, and the day they had to go in the ambulance when Evie had a fever. Glancing beside him at little Evie, he guessed she wasn't convinced either. She was trying to get her thumb in her mouth without relinquishing her frantic hold on her battered knitted rabbit.

"Mam," he said, "Why can't you come with us?"

"I wish I could," she said, and this time at least she was telling the truth. "But I have to be here when Dad gets back, haven't I?"

She hoped that bit was true too. It was some time since she had heard from Ted. She wished she knew he was safe. She wished he was here to tell her she was doing the right thing. The station seemed to be swarming with children, all carrying little bags and name labels, which were being checked off by ladies with lists. There were almost no men there, apart from the railway-men, whose gruff voices were very conspicuous among those of all the women and children. Many of the mothers, like his own, were pretending to be cheerful; a few had given up the struggle and were clinging, weeping, to their tear-stained children.

As the train pulled in and the crowd surged towards the doors, Evie was almost swept away from them, retained only by Terry's hold on the back of her coat. His mother seized Terry and Evie together in one last, fierce hug.

"You both be good now," she said as firmly as she could manage. "Terry, you've got to be a big boy, and take care of

Evie.”

“All aboard!” came the guard’s voice. “Everybody that’s going – on the train now.”

Terry and Evie were hustled aboard with no chance to say anything more. The doors slammed shut behind them and the train started almost at once, before they could get themselves to a window to wave goodbye. Terry felt guilty and uneasy as they rattled over the level crossing and picked up speed, leaving all familiar landmarks behind. He should have found a way to reassure his mother; to promise her that he’d care for Evie.

“I will, Mam, I promise,” he said in his head.

He had to start doing it sooner than he expected. After what seemed a long time, Evie whispered in his ear that she wanted the toilet. He glanced down the crowded corridor. There was no immediate sign of a toilet and not a chance she could find one and get back again on her own. There was no sign either of any of the ladies with checklists. It was down to him.

Steeling himself for the mockery he anticipated from some of the other boys once their mission was apparent, he took Evie’s hand and set off along the swaying corridor. To his relief and surprise, there were no comments. It seemed as though in this strange new world they all now inhabited, the usual rules of bullying had shifted, or perhaps been suspended ‘for the duration’, as the adults kept saying.

Every time the train stopped, the ladies with checklists reappeared and the children destined for that stop were identified and helped to alight. The volume of chatter was greatly diminished as time went on – partly because there were fewer children, and they were getting tired, but also because of the growing tension as they all waited for their

turn. The train itself had become to seem like a sort of refuge and they would all be ejected from it soon.

It was beginning to get dark when Terry and Evie were summoned to pick up their bags and accompany the checklist lady to the door. She stepped down herself onto the platform in order to give Evie a hand down the steep step.

“Here you are,” she said, smiling, “and here are people to meet you. I have Terence and Eva Baines here,” she called onto the darkening platform, and two women emerged from the shadows.

“I’m having Terence,” said one of them, pushing forward.

“I’m expecting an Eva,” said another, quieter voice from behind her.

Terry suddenly felt really sick and scared. He tugged at the sleeve of the checklist lady beside him.

“No, that’s wrong,” he hissed. “Evie’s my sister. We have to be together. Mam says I have to look after her.”

“That’s rich,” said the first woman. “The bit they’re paying us for doing this, they’ll be lucky if we can feed one, let alone taking on two at once.”

“I’m afraid it would have been just too complicated to try to keep family members together,” said the checklist lady sympathetically, a hand on Terry’s shoulder. “Most of the houses round here are quite small, you see, and people couldn’t fit in more than one extra person. You’ll be quite close to your sister, and you’ll see her tomorrow. All the children go to church on Sunday morning, so you will meet then. Off you go with Mrs. Wishaw.” She attempted, though gently, to loosen Terry’s grip on his sister’s hand.

That was the last straw for Evie.

“I want my mam,” she wailed.

The other woman now stepped forward and knelt down so that her face was level with Evie's.

"Hullo, Eva," she said. "I'm Mrs. Dent and you're coming to stay with me for a while. We live just up the road here, not far from where your brother will be."

Evie didn't answer, though her sobs were quieter, soothed by the kind, quiet voice even if she didn't really register the content.

Mrs. Dent looked across at Terry.

"I'm really sorry .. Terence, is it? ... that you couldn't come too. It would have been lovely to have you both, but our cottage is tiny and there just isn't room. I think it will be easier for her if you let her go now. She might be less upset if she thinks you are all right about it."

Reluctantly, seeing no option, Terry released Evie and picked up his bag.

"She needs the door open at night; she gets frightened sometimes in the dark," he said quietly to Mrs. Dent and then, loudly, to Evie, "See you tomorrow then, sis. Be a good girl." It didn't occur to him that he sounded at that moment very like his mother when she was attempting to reassure them earlier that day.

"Come on, then," said Mrs. Whishaw. "This way." Behind them, the checklist lady signalled 'job done' to the driver, the door slammed and steam blew back over the platform as the train continued its delivery service.

Terry looked back and heard Mrs. Dent say to Evie,

"Will you tell me the name of your beautiful rabbit?" Then he had to hurry to keep up with Mrs. Whishaw's brisk walking pace.

The house, when they reached it, was bigger than his mam

and dad's house, and to his eyes alarmingly smart and shiny. He put down his bag in the little entrance hall and found it looked very shabby there so he picked it up again and carried it with him.

"We've had our meal, but I kept some for you," said his hostess.

Sure enough, there was a smell of food and a plate of stew was sitting on top of a pan of simmering water, a bowl inverted over it to keep it from drying out too much.

"Thank you," he said politely, as she picked up the plate with a striped tea-towel and put it down at one end of the kitchen table.

"Careful; plate's hot," Mrs. Wishaw warned him as she provided cutlery and a glass of water. It wasn't wonderful stew – the meat was very chewy and the over-cooked vegetables well past their best, but he discovered that he was hungry and cleared his plate.

It seemed rude to just keep eating and not say anything, so he ventured timidly,

"Do you live on a farm?"

"A farm? Whatever gave you that idea?"

"Well, my mam said this was a farming village and I thought Evie might like the animals."

"There are quite a few farms around here, but they're mostly arable, so she won't be seeing cows and sheep much. My husband deals in fertilizer and sells a lot to local small-holders and farmers. Now it's time you were in bed. Up early tomorrow and off to church. You'll see your sister again there."

She took him up to a small, clean, cold room containing a bed, a chair and a chest of drawers. Almost lost in the flowery

wallpaper above the bed was a framed text reading, THOU GOD SEEST ME.

Alone in the frigid bed, he found himself thinking to his surprise not about Evie or his mother but about his long-absent father. Did his dad, he wondered, feel as strange and alone as this in the foreign parts where he was serving in the army?

Next day, lumpy porridge still sticking to his teeth, he was hurried into his coat and set off with Mrs Whishaw towards the church.

The church was a surprise to him. He'd vaguely assumed that this would be something like the morning assemblies at school, with lots of children gathered together and a few adults, and he had planned to find Evie and talk to her, perhaps stand beside her, but this rather plain and bare-looking building turned out to be a proper church, with adults and children together attending a service. Hustled into a pew beside Mrs. Whishaw, the first thing he did was look around for Evie, but he immediately received a jab in the ribs and a loud whisper telling him to,

“Say your prayers. You're not a heathen, are you?”

He wasn't sure whether he was or not, but a glance from side to side showed that people newly arrived were bending their heads and murmuring to themselves what he assumed to be prayers. He therefore dutifully looked at his knees and said to himself the first verse of *All things bright and beautiful*, the only thing that came immediately to mind in connection with school assemblies.

That done, it seemed, he was free to look about him. He had expected to be relieved when he found Evie safely present, but what he did feel was shock. She wasn't far away – in the row in

front, at the other side of the central aisle – but she seemed somehow to have shrunk. She was beside Mrs. Dent, looking very still and small and sort of shrivelled. He could see Mrs. Dent bending towards her and speaking, but so far as he could tell, Evie was making no response at all.

The service seemed to go on for a very long time, with the man at the front doing a lot of talking, but when it was finally over and they were all heading for the door, he said to Mrs. Wishaw,

“I must see Evie,” and shouldered his way in that direction before she had time to respond.

Mrs. Dent saw him coming and bent down towards Evie to point out his approach to her. He was disappointed and slightly hurt that Evie made so little response when she followed the woman’s pointing finger and finally saw him. Looking up, he saw that Mrs. Dent, too, had been hoping that his presence would break the ice that seemed to be forming around his sister.

“She’s so desperately homesick,” Mrs. Dent said softly to him over Evie’s head. “She cried a lot last night and I haven’t been able to get her to eat much.”

Terry felt inadequate and utterly helpless.

“I promised to look after her,” he confessed, “but I don’t know what to do now.”

“I promised to care for her too,” said Mrs. Dent sadly. “We’ll do our best for a bit longer, but Evie is going to be ill if she goes on like this. You’ll be in school with her tomorrow, though not in the same class of course – they’ve added a nursery class to the local primary school for the duration – so I’ll see you in the morning. Perhaps she’ll have settled in a little by then.”

“We’ve got to get a move on,” said Mrs. Wishaw, coming

up behind him. "I've left dinner in the oven." She nodded politely at Mrs. Dent and bore Terry firmly away.

It was a dull day. Because it was Sunday, he wasn't allowed to read any of the comics his mother had put in his bag, so after he had eaten lunch and helped with the dishes, he went for a walk around the village. All the shops were shut and there didn't seem to be anything much to do, but several local people spoke kindly to him. It probably wouldn't have been such a bad place to come to, he thought, if Evie had been all right and if he too could have stayed with somebody like Mrs. Dent. It was clear that for Mrs. Whishaw he was a job she had been paid to do. She would do it properly, but her interest in him stopped there.

Next day, she gave him breakfast and then took him to the end of the road where the school was and gave him the official letter he had to present to the school secretary on arrival.

"Will you be able to find your way back this afternoon?" she asked before leaving him. When he nodded, she said,

"That's good. If I'm out, I'll leave the key under the front door mat."

Terry was glad of her indifference because it left him free to look around for Mrs. Dent and Evie. Once he saw them, however, he almost wished he hadn't. Evie looked dreadful, her face pale and her eyes dry but red-rimmed. Her face, most frighteningly, showed no expression at all.

All his uncertainty about what to do evaporated. He had to get her home. A train had brought them here so there must be trains back. However, though his mother had left a little cash with him for 'pocket money', he wasn't at all sure it would be enough for two train tickets.

The solution to this problem came from an unexpected source.

As soon as she saw him, Mrs. Dent hurried over, Evie in tow.

“Terence,” she said, softly and hurriedly, “If I buy some train tickets and see you to the station, could you get Evie safely home, do you think? She’s a lovely little girl and I would have loved to have her company, but she needs to be away from here.”

The day before the evacuees had arrived, Mrs. Dent had received confirmation that what she had recently suspected was true: like many other women, she had become pregnant during her husband’s brief home leave before he was shipped abroad. Already protective of the child she was carrying, the certainty had grown upon her in the last 24 hours that whatever experiences she might wish for that child, Evie’s present situation was definitely not among them. However great the risks, the child needed to be with her mother. Relief washed over Terry.

“I’m sure I can do it, Mrs. Dent,” he said. “I was just trying to work out whether I had enough money to do it myself.”

“You are a very good brother,” said Mrs. Dent warmly, “and your mother must be very proud of you. I think if there is a train this afternoon, that will be the best thing for Evie. The problem is, your bag is at Mrs. Whishaw’s.”

“That should be OK,” said Terry, and told his fellow conspirator about the key under the mat.

So it was that Terry and Evie were summoned from classes early that afternoon and taken to Mrs. Whishaw’s, where Terry swiftly packed his bag.

“Should I leave a message?” he said. “I don’t want to be rude.”

“Don’t worry,” said Mrs. Dent. “I’ll drop in and let her know as soon as she’s home.”

At the station, she bought herself a platform ticket so that she could see the children safely onto the train. Just as they were about to cross the footbridge for the London train, however, the afternoon train from London puffed and clanked to a stop beside them. After a cursory glance at the one passenger who alighted, Terry dropped his bag and raced into her arms, yelling,

“Mam!”

Mrs. Dent picked up the abandoned bag and, holding Evie’s hand, came to join them. Smiling down at Evie, she said,

“I think this was what you needed all along, wasn’t it, Evie?”

Evie, thumb in mouth, nodded, her eyes never leaving her mother as she went forward until she was close enough to lean forward, wrap her free arm around Mrs. Baines’ knees and breathe in the familiar mother smell.

The explanations followed. Terry told his mother how kind Mrs. Dent had been and Mrs. Baines told them how a letter in that morning’s post had informed her that her husband had been wounded in action and was being sent home to recover. The letter had mentioned how much he was looking forward to seeing his children, and she had known then that she should never have let them go away. She had caught the first train she could and come to find them.

The journey home was as different as it could be from the one that had taken them into the country. And one good thing was that they now had a friend in that farming village and one day, once the war was over, they would visit her again.

THE LAST FALL

Caroline Passingham

This story won the Exeter Writers Short Story Competition in 2022. Congratulations, Caroline!

It was a keen blade that made such cuts. Sheets of wrapping paper severed with surgical precision hung down each side of the box. Ripped sticky tape had stripped away some of the brown skin of the cardboard, exposing ribs. The opening flaps, once rigid, now drooped limply. Innards spilled out.

Habiba angled her head this way and that, as if it would help her to see differently, as if the things before her eyes could change if she would only allow them to. Her mother had told her that acceptance would come, that her marriage would begin like a rushing waterfall, hitting rocks on the way down, but that the water would eventually reach the last fall, and then calm.

She turned to it again but could only see his butchery where

the knife cut through the ribbon, the knife that he kept razor sharp, the blade that he sank into the goat's soft throats and then their underbellies.

"Your mother has sent you a gift," he said.

"For the festival."

"Yes."

"I should have opened it."

She saw the shawl shimmering and green like a slippery fish in a splash of ocean. As it slithered through his fingers some of the delicate thread snagged on his rough skin. She rushed forward to rescue it, but he was quick and kept her away.

"This is of no use."

"I can wear it when we visit."

"It is of no use here."

"When I visit my mother."

"We will sell it."

"It is my gift and not yours to take."

"It is mine to take. I am your husband. We need a new hoe. You may keep this until the morning."

With eyes ablaze, Habiba snatched it from him and salvaged the wrapping paper.

Despite the heat she beat the rugs with vengeance, heedless of her tears tracking through the dust. She tended their land, her resentment fuelled by strains of music penetrating the mountains from the town far below where others celebrated the coming of the almond blossom. Defiantly, she made zaalouk, her favourite salad, using the best oil and purposely risking his anger. Determined that the tagine would be a worthy celebration, she was over generous with the last of their dried apricots.

They sat in their courtyard, beneath the mountains and the stars. Their chickens patrolled the walls like murmuring sentries. To her surprise Amir said nothing and they ate in silence. When the meal ended, he passed her something. She opened the waxy paper that crackled through their quiet. Four fat dates nestled there, oozing almond paste and honey. Someone had arranged them carefully and sprinkled cinnamon and mace.

"To celebrate."

She decided that she would make them last and only eat a small piece. She reached for a knife.

"No."

"No?"

"Today you eat a whole one."

"A whole one?"

"Yes. You have a whole one, now, to celebrate the blossom." Without hesitation she pushed it into her mouth, the entire date. Her cheeks bulged and she took fat, sumptuous minutes to eat it. Her eyes grew wide as she chewed and slowly worked the flavours across her tongue. At the end she licked every bit of stickiness from her lips.

He threw his head back and laughed. Still licking her fingers, she looked at him and found herself laughing too.

He rose from the cushions and walked across the courtyard to his lean-to, reappearing with the two broken pieces of the hoe's head and a black rock that he held out to her.

"It's the basalt."

"Basalt!"

"Basalt is hard. Very sharp. Although we are in the foothills, we still have some basalt from the Atlas. Bring your hoe down against it and the basalt will win."

"Everything here is hard."

"I can use the handle again. Maybe the smith will give me something for the head pieces. Your mother's gift will not be wasted. We cannot work our land without this. We have many expenses. Habiba, I need to tell you...."

Before he had time to finish, she had walked away, wrapped her dates carefully and cleared the room of celebration.

In the morning she looked at the steep track snaking down to the town. He had the donkey ready with saddle bags in place. She held the package between them.

"I thought that this might obtain a better price wrapped, as if straight from the souk."

She gave it up to him, and he took her gift without a word or a look.

At noon she sat on the shady side of their compound, her back against the cool walls of rammed earth, admiring them. Her father had promised that Amir would build the best house in the village, and he had. She remembered carrying the lime, the straw, the goat's blood and working the earthen mix for the bricks. The house was big, in expectation of many children. He had heeded her instructions concerning the position of the riad and the design of the clay oven. She knew that most Berber women would be proud to own such a home. Nothing could stop it though, her thought. The heat of it breached his crafted walls and struck her full on. "It is sold....it is sold to another...and now we have a hoe." Focusing on the low pile of kindling her stare intensified as if it would set the wood ablaze.

He was late. She climbed the stairs to the roof terrace and looked for him. The stars were showing. Her fingers slid through her hair wet with washing, and the warm breeze took it. She scanned the track until it disappeared into shadows and realised that she was anxious. This surprised her.

At last, he was there unloading the donkey. He pulled down the hood of his djellaba and washed. She saw the tiredness in his shoulders, added sugar to the mint and brought tea. Eventually he slumped into the cushions and although she questioned him about the day, he remained quiet. She had cooked his favourite bean stew with two plump tomatoes, salted lemon, garlic, harissa and cumin. He ate hungrily, mopping up the juices with freshly baked bread. Afterwards she offered the dates, but he declined and left her alone.

At breakfast he said little, but again, went to his food with enthusiasm. She watched him test the knife for sharpness against the pad of his thumb and then cut cleanly through the soft heart of the loaf. He mixed olives and honey into his fried egg and scooped them onto his bread.

When she cleared away their meal, she was surprised to find him still there, lingering, and watching her as he stole time from his work.

He lowered himself onto the beaten rugs and sat crossed legged. He invited her to sit with him and she did. Excitement ran across his face as words streamed from him.

They had met in the cafe, men from the village and the electric company. All the electricity poles had arrived. But the French men said that there was a problem. They had surveyed it. The last miles of track to their hamlet were too steep and there was danger of landslide. They could not risk their vehicles and

helicopters were not cost effective. Amir had persuaded them that if they took the poles up as high as they could, he and his neighbours would use donkeys to bring them the rest of the way. They took some persuading that donkeys could do it, but in the end they had agreed.

"Electricity and the telephone are coming to our village!"

"If the donkeys can carry it."

"Our mountain donkeys are able, but it will need careful planning."

"A washing-machine?"

"Next year perhaps if the harvest goes well. I'm not sure if the donkeys could get a washing machine here."

"You say that they can get the poles and cables here!"

"Habiba, one day soon our village will be connected to the outside world, to far away countries and people. We will hear their words and see their pictures. You will speak to your mother on the world-wide web!"

Habiba stared ahead, struggling to see her mother's hands resting on a keyboard, to see her mother smiling from a computer screen. The image was forced and would never be. It was too late. Instead, it was easier to see her mother's hands working the vertical loom against the mud walls of her house. She used threads, finer than she'd ever used before, working for hours and hours to make the cloth for her daughter's shawl.

Suddenly, Habiba had nothing to say to him and turned her back.

Days later, when the dawn sun fired the sky, women gathered excitedly on Habiba's roof terrace, and looked down on the melee of men, carts, and donkeys as they kicked up dust. They

saw that it was not like other times, when their men were slow in the heat, moving through the day as its routine took them. Today, a frisson of fellowship and purpose energised every action. And somehow, gradually, out of the brouhaha, a long orderly train emerged and slowly began the descent. Some of the women shouted after them and waved. As he rode out, Amir felt anxious. The whole village had placed their trust in him, and he prayed that his carefully made plans would succeed. He looked up, searching for her along the roof's edge, but she was not there.

Habiba brought mint tea for her guests and then they took to the shade, busy with preparations for the evening meal, happy to be together, united by their anticipation.

As the sun began its descent, someone cried out and they ran to the side of the terrace pointing. Habiba pushed her way to the edge, her heart racing. She strained her eyes, and yes, there it was, a donkey with a pole attached to one side. She then made out another donkey behind, attached to the other side. The weight was distributed between them, and men attended the pole at either end, helping the animals negotiate the tight bends. Slowly more donkeys appeared until there was clearly a whole train of them, working in pairs, easing their way up the mountain. Gradually, the poles were being released at the appropriate points along the track with large roles of cable. Habiba couldn't stop herself laughing with the other women who fussed excitedly.

Much later, as the light was failing, Amir's donkey carried the last pole into the village. People cheered and the children ran beside them laughing and screaming as one was hoisted up to ride the pole.

"He has done it," she thought.

For once, the donkeys were released onto the best pasture by the river, and then the men carried their lanterns to Amir's courtyard where they were greeted by enticing smells of roasting goat and rosemary wood.

Well into the night, Layla, an old woman, settled into the circle of women. They gently touched the beautiful green shawl wrapped around her, praising the quality of the weave, delighting in the colours and the sheen. She told them that her husband had brought it back from the town. They giggled and insisted that to bring such a beautiful gift was a sign that her marriage was alive and vigorous. They playfully probed, asking what she had done to deserve such a prize.

Habiba backed into the shadows, stifling her sobs. Ashamed of her tears, she was relieved when Nadeem, Layla's husband and senior man in their community, rose to speak. The women's laughter was hushed. His rasping voice cracked across the courtyard as he recounted the meeting with the electric company and took obvious pleasure in the telling. They had sat around a large table with the Frenchmen one side and the villagers on the other. All seemed lost when the Frenchmen insisted that it was impossible to reach the village.

Some of the villagers had agreed that it must be Allah's will and argued that their people had no need of electricity. Amir had jumped to his feet and would accept none of it.

"I have been here before. My father argued that the old ways were best. He insisted that electricity would bring bad things and corrupt our people. I am newly married with a young wife. I remember my mother when she was like Habiba, full of strength and vigour, but the land and incessant hardship drained it from her until it could take no more. Without

electricity you condemn my wife to the same. The very name of our people, Amazigh, means freedom, but we are slaves to the old ways."

He had then thrown a small pair of workmen's gloves across the table.

"I have just bought these to protect my wife's beautiful hands," he said. "She will work the hoe tomorrow, for hours, to place food on our table. I pray that electricity will come soon and save her from my mother's fate. I pray for a washing machine and all useful things that will make her life easier. We can bring electricity up the mountain. We will bring it. I will tell you how."

The old man stretched his arms wide.

"Very few thought it could be done. Amir insisted that we try. Our brothers listened and eventually all agreed. And now, today, because of him, we have hauled a promise, a promise of new power and energy, all the way up the mountain. It is now our joint responsibility to complete the job that others would not, to bring electricity into our village. May, Allah grant you grace."

"May, Allah grant you grace," they cried.

Amir looked across to Habiba and saw her clutching a lump of basalt. Her eyes were not on him but still with the shawl, wandering through the weave as it shimmered in lamplight. It came to her easily like a soft dream. She saw her mother's hands reaching out to grasp streaming threads escaping on the current and floating like weed strands. A rush of water parted them, and shoals of tiny fishes darted away, silver streaks swimming into the smooth swell before the brink of the last fall, where they spilled over. The water drummed on the rocks below. "My wife's beautiful hands, my wife's beautiful hands,

my wife's...."

It was late. Chatting women and children tidied the courtyard, said their farewells and wandered home, closely followed by their men. Habiba and Amir sank into the cushions and watched their chickens squabbling over the pickings.

"Habiba, do you think they know that there is still much to be done before the electricity comes?"

"They know. They will go to the work happily. The women are very excited."

He rummaged in the pocket of his kaftan and pulled out the gloves.

"I left these in the café and today one of the Frenchmen brought them to me. There was some money left from the shawl." He quickly looked up as he mentioned it and she saw the concern in his eyes, but he continued and gave his instruction. "You will wear these when hoeing."

She pushed her fingers into them. The gloves felt stiff and hard.

"They will soon soften up," he urged.

"I know. Thank you."

"There are some things that machines will never do as well as human-kind. Hoeing is one of them."

"Who knows? One day perhaps...None of the other women wear gloves."

"None of the other women are my wife. You will wear the gloves when working the land."

The glowing firelight showed her small hands peel the gloves away, place them in her lap and rest her hands there. Sounds from the river, the constant rush of water from the snowmelt caused her to drift towards moments in the evening, to

moments after Nadeem's speech, when she had suddenly known that there was love and that there might be a calm...for she had seen beyond the last fall and knew. She sighed and spoke softly.

"I saw my mother's hands tonight, as clearly as I see you now. I saw cracks in the dry skin, scars, hard horny nails and arthritic bone. I saw her life ingrained there Amir. I too have been to that awful place where you watch someone that you love decline, where your heart breaks because there is nothing that you can do to stop it. It brings me joy to know that I have a husband with vision, who works to change that, a husband who brings the poles that will carry electricity up the mountain, a husband who cares enough to protect his wife's hands."

Slowly she held them out to him, and in turn he eagerly wrapped his hands around them and caressed her.

"You will wear the gloves Habiba?"

"I will wear your gloves, Amir." Her chin tilted upwards, "And I will have the washing machine."

THE PRISONER

Jennie Thomas

It was the first week of the Easter holidays and Rosie O'Hanlon sauntered down the garden in the Spring sunshine humming one of her favourite pop songs to herself.

Eight years old, bright as a button and sassy with it, she was particularly pleased with her outfit today. Brown hair in two short plaits finished off with brightly coloured bobbles, the rainbow- coloured jumper her Grannie had knitted tucked under denim dungarees and, Rosie's favourite part, her red Doc Marten boots. She'd turned up the legs of her dungarees to make sure the boots were plainly visible as were her artfully mismatched socks and was satisfied she looked 'beyond cool'.

She'd had fun this morning baking Easter biscuits with her Mum but was now at a bit of a loose end. Her best friend, Maisie, was spending a week of the holidays at her Grandma's house so Rosie was short of a playmate. She looked longingly at the Tree House her Dad had built for her at the far end of

their garden and thought of all the fun she and Maisie would have on her return next week.

They were secretly hoping that they'd be allowed to sleep in the Tree House overnight but hadn't broached the subject yet. Rosie was trying to be on her best behaviour all week, not easy for an inquisitive, mischievous little girl, hoping it would stand them in good stead for when they did ask the question.

She sat down on her favourite tree stump half way down the garden, back leaning on next door's fence and munched on an Easter biscuit that had somehow found its way into her pocket. She sat for awhile and watched a blackbird that caught her attention. It was flying industriously back and forth with beakfuls of straw and moss for its nest and eyed Rosie with suspicion. She was just about to shake the last crumbs of her biscuit onto the grass and get up when she heard voices coming from the other side of the fence.

She listened. It was Billy Jenkins the boy who lived next door chatting to two of his friends. He called them his 'Gang' to impress Rosie, who he always referred to as 'Titchy', much to her annoyance. She was a bit small for her age, but 'Titchy'?

Billy Jenkins was eleven years old and quite big for his age. A clumsy looking boy with chubby cheeks and stubby fingers who always looked at least a size too big for his clothes. His friends were much smaller than him and seemed to think him some kind of 'God'. Rosie thought him a bit of a bully, but he was always very nice to her and Maisie so that was OK. She sat very still so no one knew she was there and, quite rudely, she knew, listened in on the conversation. She told

herself she wouldn't normally have listened, but they were speaking in hushed voices which made it sound doubly interesting.

Billy was telling them something. He was making them promise not to tell and, by then, Rosie's ear was pressed against the fence. He said he had something very special to show them in the tumbledown shed at the far end of his garden. The shed in question was a dilapidated, old structure almost hidden by the brambles and long grass that had taken over the end of his garden. Billy's parents called it their 'Wild Life' garden, designed to attract butterflies and bees. Rosie's Dad said, 'Rubbish!' It was because they were too idle to mow it and complained to Rosie and her Mum about the brambles growing over the fence and all the seeds from the weeds blowing into his well-kept garden.

Billy was telling his friends that whilst searching for an old cricket bat the previous day he had come across a bird trapped in the shed. Obviously had squeezed through one of the many cracks, probably looking for somewhere to make a nest and had been unable to find its way out again. Instead of releasing it, he said that, 'Quick as a flash', Rosie doubted that, 'He'd captured the bird in his hands and popped it into a rusty old birdcage.' Rosie supposed the cage was in the shed along with the other debris that should have found its way to the 'tip' long ago.

Billy's friends gasped in admiration, whilst Rosie clamped both hands over her mouth to silence the groan of horror that escaped.

"What will you do with it?" asked one of the friends.

"Keep it, of course," said Billy. "I read on the internet that lots of people want to buy wild birds. Pay a fortune for them, maybe even a hundred pounds."

"Isn't that because it's illegal to catch them?" asked the other friend.

"Probably," laughed Billy, "but if you two keep it buttoned nobody will ever know. No one except me ever goes to the shed so it will be our secret. Get it? Anyway, come and see. I checked earlier and it's still alive."

And off they all trooped towards the shed.

Rosie felt a bit sick, but was desperate to have a look at the poor thing and contemplated climbing up her Tree House ladder to get a peek, but thought better of it. Time enough when they'd all tired of it and gone somewhere else. She sat quietly until she heard them all coming back down the garden, whispering guiltily to each other.

Suddenly Billy commanded that they all grab their bikes and go off to the Trail in the woods. After an initial scurry everything fell silent again.

Rosie waited a while until she was sure the coast was clear then ambled up the garden, affecting disinterest, until she reached the loose fence panel and pushed it to one side. She squeezed through.

"Lucky I'm 'titchy'," she thought and waded through the long grass and brambles to the old shed. Billy had wedged the door shut with a brick, so she shifted it and opened the door. There, in a rusty, old birdcage was a tiny, brown bird that began flying blindly against the bars of its prison when it saw her.

"Poor thing," soothed Rosie, "you're terrified." And the

gentle sound of her voice seemed to calm the bird as it sat on the far side of the battered cage regarding her unblinkingly with its shiny, black eyes.

Billy had put a small, leafy branch in the cage for it to perch on with a little bowl of water on the floor of the cage beside a small pile of, what looked like chopped up worms.

"Well, at least that's to his credit," thought Rosie looking at the big safety pin he'd secured the cage door with and itching to unfasten it.

"Don't worry little bird," she murmured, "I'll be back soon and we'll plan your escape."

She closed the door gently behind her and shoved the brick back into place.

Rosie spent the rest of the day worrying about the poor, little prisoner in the cage. Her Mum kept asking if she was OK but she daren't say what was worrying her. She did ask to use the lap-top to look up a few different types of birds, saying it was for a 'Bird Watch' project they were doing at school, and discovered the tiny captive was a wren. She read all the information there was about wrens and lots about other wild birds in general, discovering that it was, indeed, illegal to capture them.

That fact in black and white together, with Rosie's feeling that it was very, very cruel made her more determined to form a plan to release it.

The problem was that the next day was Saturday and Billy's parents were likely to be in the garden over the weekend. She wasn't at all convinced the wren would survive until Monday but how could she get back to the shed without anyone

spotting her?

As luck would have it, when her Dad came home from work that evening and they were eating supper, a chance remark from him set her brain whirring as to how to put her plan into action.

Rosie's dad was a keen fisherman and as the forecast was 'fair' for the following day he'd decided to get up early and go off for a few hours fishing.

"Probably be up and having a bite of breakfast by about 5.30," he said.

Rosie's Mum laughingly replied,

"Well, don't wake me, that's the middle of the night!"

Rosie seized her chance,

"Oh, wake me up Dad. It'll give me a chance to check out which birds are around earliest for my Bird Watch."

Her Dad ruffled her hair with his big hands,

"You're a good little student, Rosie. What about making a Bird Table or Nesting Box with me tomorrow afternoon? I'll be back by midday and it could help with your project."

Rosie swallowed guiltily and nodded. She had never lied to her parents before and it felt horrible. Also, it seemed that this particular lie was growing and growing. Still she was trying to save a life, albeit the life of a tiny wren.

Rosie was fast asleep when her Dad roused her in the morning. She sat up, rubbing sleep from her eyes.

"Mum was right," she thought, "does seem like the middle of the night."

She woke up a bit eating cereal and chatting with her Dad and, as it got lighter outside, she thought it was actually quite nice to be up at this time.

When she heard her Dad's car pull off the drive she waited a few minutes in case he'd forgotten anything then quietly opened the back door into the garden. It was just about light enough for her to make her way along the fence, find the loose plank and squeeze through into the garden next door. She glanced back at Billy's house to make sure all the curtains were still drawn and tiptoed across to the shed. She moved the brick and slowly opened the door wide.

The little bird darted back and forth inside its cage and Rosie gave a sigh of relief to see that it was still alive as the Internet had said that wild birds often die in captivity. She picked her way across to the window and opened it as widely as it's rusting hinges would allow then, very slowly, unfastened the safety pin on the cage door, swung the little door open and crouched low on the floor so as not to frighten the tiny creature any more than it was already.

Nothing happened for what seemed like an age then the tiny bird hopped on to the bar at the bottom of the door, cocked its head, looked at Rosie then soared out of the open shed door.

"Good luck, little one," Rosie whispered. "Go build your nest somewhere safer this time."

She carefully shut the window all but a crack, bent the pin and left it hanging from the cage door then carefully shut the shed door and replaced the brick.

It wasn't until she was almost at her own back door that she realised she'd done it all dressed in her pyjamas and slippers.

Rosie shivered as she tiptoed up the stairs and yawned as she snuggled down in her parents' big bed beside her Mum.

"Finished birdwatching?" asked her Mum cuddling her close.

Rosie nodded. She promised herself she'd tell them all about it

soon. Maybe today.

"What exciting news to tell Maisie, too," she smiled as she drifted off to sleep.

ROOM 5

Victoria Nelson

Room 5 is where they torture people. That's what I've heard. I don't actually know that for a fact. I'm just a Camp Guard. You need to know that I don't approve of any of this. I'd rather we all lived happily with each other just like before this all started.

Some people are indeed annoying and some are twats. Some are druggies, dealers, petty criminals. All sorts. Like any other country. But we've all got the potential to be bad, evil even. To just pick on a random group of people and cast them into utter darkness, only worse, is just wrong. Claiming it's not a random group but those who do us the most damage isn't that convincing, to be honest. I mean, have they done statistics etc. or whatever they do on it all? Is this group of folk more prone to villainy, exploitation, sex offending and so on like they tell us? I dunno.

Live and let live. Like we did before.

Now everything, especially food is rationed. And I have three

small children - and a husband, somewhere... Somewhere fighting "on the front line". Wherever, whatever that is. I try not to think about it. So my mother watches the children while I work.

Yes, I can hear the screams from Room 5. I have to pretend I can't. That it's the wild animals in the woods, like they say. But I know it isn't.

If I were braver, if I didn't have the kids, if, if, if. But it's no use kidding myself. I'm a natural coward anyway. Say "BOO!" and I cringe. I was picked on at school by the others and the teachers and teased by my father at home. "Scaredy cat! Scaredy cat!"

When this all comes out: when other people, like the rest of the world hear about this, which can surely only be a matter of time... Please let it be soon. Please let all this madness, this horror, this cruelty, this evil, STOP!

I'd pray if only the churches were open for us again. Light candles, do the whole down on my knees, hands together thing. Just like when I was little. I really believed then, like it was some sort of magic. The incense, the beautiful clothes of the priests, the music, processions, the walloping thunder of the organ and the biscuits we were all given for being good at the end.

I suppose you don't need a church to pray. That's what people say. But I need a holy place to feel that anything, anything could really help, change, bring happiness, grant hopeless wishes. Perform a miracle.

My children are always asking when will Daddy come home?

Why can't we have pudding, yoghurt, fruit, crisps, television?

Why can't we play outside, go to school, see our friends, sleep in our own beds? I don't know what to tell them. They were best friends with some of them. They've been in our home, had tea, had sleepovers, played video games together. Why should they suddenly have to hate them?

I don't. Never will. Don't say that, of course. Not safe. Just join in with the other staff in the camp chanting, "Death to the..." and all that filth. I can't catch anyone else's eye in case they see that I don't believe it, don't agree with it. In case I get taken to 'rehab'. No-one ever seems to come out of Rehab. Each day, each night, each shift, watch the screens, patrol the fences, feed the dogs. (I wish I could eat the dogs' food, whatever it is, I'm always so hungry). Cameras everywhere. Mustn't take any risks at all.

Mum's neighbour's daughter was taken for 'Special Duties'. She's a very good-looking girl. We have our fears, our suspicions, unspoken thoughts about "Special Duties" but no-one dares voice them. For once in my life I'm glad that I've never been considered a beauty. Plain, that's me. Never thought I'd be grateful for my lack of sexy glamour. I know what "Special Duties" might be. Don't want to think about it. Daren't think about it. I can't risk feeling outrage, anger, pity. You don't know who's listening. Who will betray you, just for food.

I turn away, pretending to check my kit when a new convoy is brought in. Scared to recognise one of them. Terrified one of them will recognise me and call out my name.

Some go straight to Room 5. Thankfully, I don't have to go in

there. Others do the cleaning up. The fully paid-up members

of the Elite. I know I'm not fully trusted. That's why I have to watch my step, not take the tiniest risk, not say anything to anyone. Anything at all.

What would happen to my children if they took me to Rehab? Any show of emotion is suspect. So I shut down. Blank face it all. Blank my heart out of my body as if I could stop the flow of blood to my face that might give me away.

I've had to do things I'd never have imagined I'd have the stomach for. It's terrifying what fear, terror, wanting to protect your family will make you do.

Minor stuff, nothing like what must be going on in Room 5.

One day I'll get found out. Till then I just blot everything out.

Everything.

All of it.

All of it.

THE SCHOOL RUN

Katrina Smith

For the topic, "The School Run", there was a 500 word limit.

The light from the full moon radiated through the window and hit the back of the bedroom wall in John's cottage as it had done for years in this room; as it had done for his father and grandfather. John awoke; got up to make his flask of coffee and get the cold pasty wrapped in brown paper from the day before and made his way down to his boat.

The boat was in the harbour just outside his cottage window. Under the cottage was his net store, which he was going to make into a retail shop to rent out, because the village was becoming more for holiday makers than fishing nowadays. It would give him an income in the winter when he couldn't go fishing.

John loved this time of the morning when the villagers were

still asleep and the gulls were still silent.

He climbed aboard and started the engine and made his way out to sea, to his favourite spot for the fish he was to catch today; a place where his father first taught him to use this technique.

The moonlight was still bright at this time of the morning and the sky was still dark, a great time to light up the mackerel as they came to the surface.

Then he saw the school of fish, so he quickly made his way to the nets and then gave chase,

He laughed as he could hear his father saying,

“This is what you call the school run boy.”

He dropped nets and then began to haul in the catch but the gearing started to grind and smoke began to appear. John turned everything off and looked over the side to see if the nets had been blocked in some way. As he looked into the water he thought he could see his father holding out his hand to him. For a moment he reached down to try and pull him up.

Meanwhile in the harbour, businesses were coming to life with more noise and gathering of people and other fishing boats making their way out to sea.

Jake, the skipper of one of the boats, called over to his mate on another boat,

“That old buggler is the first out again. Let’s go and see how he has done and if he has left us anything to catch!”

As the two boats got nearer to John’s boat they couldn’t see him anywhere, so they called out to him,

“Heh! Left us anything or are the drinks on you tonight?”

Jake shouted.

There was no reply.

They both decided to get closer and found that the boat was empty apart from John's cap which he was never seen without.

A call was made and the search revealed that John had fallen overboard and like so many fisherman he could not swim. His body was found a few hours later.

This was John's last school run.

THE SHADOW

Judith Jones

Inspector Maynard-James held the small card aloft with one hand, twirling one end of his moustache with the other.

"This, ladies and gentlemen," he looked round at the small group of faces that made up our local crime division, "this is our thief's calling card. Handmade and beautifully inscribed with the words 'The Shadow'. Left at the scene of the crime for us to find, it was placed neatly to the right of the victim's mantelpiece resting against a large bong."

We managed not to laugh; our Inspector is not known for his sense of humour. I suspect he's not known for his sense either. Unfortunately, Inspector Maynard-James or as we call him MJ, rather imagines himself to be a 21st century Poirot. He likes wearing waistcoats and is trying to grow imposing facial hair.

"We believe this crime has been going for some time, though we have only recently been made aware of it," he continued.

"Well, some of this lot are hardly going to own up to being burgled, wouldn't do their street cred any favours," one of the team said.

"Exactly," MJ paused and twiddled a little more. "It was the loss of the dog that caused this particular victim to come forward. A poodle belonging to his wife, one of the big ones. Answers to the name of Trixie Belle La Belle."

We all laughed, even MJ.

"The victim is Mr Leyton Driscoll," the inspector said, "who, as you know, sports a brush cut, has a love of heavy gold rings and a number of tattoos that are easily identifiable. Not an advantage in his line of work which means he often wears long sleeves to hide them. Another feature his victims have recalled at different times as he was spotted entering or exiting their properties. Luckily for us he was not particularly adept at burglary which has made our job considerably easier." The thought of him walking a hunting dog, favoured by the French Sun King to catch waterfowl in the 17th century, made me smile. It was not quite the image Mr Driscoll usually promoted.

I raised my hand; MJ hates being interrupted.

"Kenton?" he paused, eyeing me up. As the newest member of our little team, he regards me as an irritant not a blessing. I consider myself quite the reverse.

"Was anything else stolen?"

"Rather a lot of Mr Driscoll's gold jewellery and that of his wife. Both were reluctant to own up to it and it's possible the jewellery's provenance is rather dubious." MJ gripped the lapels of his jacket, "Mr Driscoll also mentioned three more of his associates being targeted in a similar manner but his is the only one involving dog theft."

"All getting those calling cards sir?" a braver team member than me asked and was rewarded with a glare.

"Yes, according to Mr Driscoll. That will require following up in due course."

I was about to ask what else had been stolen when the duty sergeant stuck her head round the office door and shoved a yellow Post-it note at me,

"It's downstairs, pale pink and lilac. Think it's the stolen one. Come and have a look."

"Excuse me sir, the missing dog appears to have been found," I passed the Inspector the note, "shall I go and check it out?"

He sucked air through his teeth for a moment, then passed me a photo,

"This is the pet in question with Mrs Driscoll a few weeks ago. See if this one matches the other."

Grabbing my note book I exited rapidly, cut across the outer office headed through a warren of scuffed corridors and sticky balding carpet to the front desk. Ours is not a modern or well-maintained station, it is north Devon after all. Not quite the chrome and glass extravaganza I'd begun work in, in the Midlands but its charms had grown on me, after my first month here, plus the coffee machine worked which is always a blessing.

Sliding my pass card through the door security I entered the waiting room wondering exactly what I was about to see?

Inspector Maynard James's face registered surprise and consternation on my return,

"Is that the dog?"

I nodded and tied the lead to my chair.

Trixie Belle La Belle sighed noisily and seated herself neatly to wait. From my experience, all ten minutes of it, she was a very amiable animal.

Second guessing MJ's next remark I said,

"I could hardly leave her at the front desk and Ms Shall, who found her, had already been waiting half an hour to be seen. She's no trouble and had a pee out in the yard."

A smothered laugh made me pause. Poor MJ's not a lover of animals nor of the mention of bodily functions.

Consulting my notes I added,

"She was found this morning by Ms Shall of 36 Lupin Gardens at about 7am when she took her own dog, Rufus, out for his early morning walk. Trixie Belle La Belle was sitting by Ms Shall's gate eating a left-over kebab. Ms Shall said it looked like it was a donner kebab."

We all winced at the thought of that exiting the dog in a few hours.

Our eyes gravitated to Trixie Belle La Belle, who was a sight to behold. Clipped in the continental fashion to create pompoms over each paw, a hair style to rival the Sun King, Louis XIV's and a rather naked rear ended balanced by huge shoulder puffs, she glared haughtily at us. Pale pink and lilac echoed her owner's bouffant hairdo from the photo we had.

"Well, that's one good thing to report." MJ tweaked his moustache and edged further away from the dog. "Kenton contact Mr Driscoll and take her, the dog, round or it'll have to be the Pound."

I suspected the dog pound had long ago disappeared in a round of cuts but didn't say this,

"Certainly, Sir. Have robberies been round to dust for prints?"

"Are you joking? With our budget not a chance," MJ stopped. "Still you could have a shuft, I mean a look, take a dusting set with you. Be interesting to see who's prints we pick up there. Driscoll has a list of dubious associates. Take Baker with you, see what you can find out."

"Did you want to know anything about Ms Shall sir?"

"Do I need to?"

"Well seemed a little odd that she lives in Lupin Gardens, not the most salubrious address in town."

"We all have to live somewhere Detective Kenton." MJ's patronising tone set my teeth on edge, "How did she seem to you?"

"Too posh for that area, small, neat and in a twinset without the pearls and quite elderly."

"Fallen on hard times, all she can afford I expect," MJ nodded to himself and dismissed Baker and I with a wave of his hand.

Untying Trixie Belle La Belle's lead I allowed myself to be dismissed. As I said earlier, our Inspector doesn't have much sense, common or otherwise and Ms Shall interested me.

Baker and I joined the crime team about the same time. We get on quite well and he's good at plugging away, unearthing links and co-incidences. I'm more a wild flights of fancy and outside the box thinking sort of gal.

With the dog trotting along behind us we mulled over who was stupid enough to rob Driscoll and nick his dog at the same time.

"Not one of his contemporaries then," Jim said, "some unlucky burke who thought an address on Sweet Briar Hill was worth a punt."

"The burglar alarm, has he got one? Can't imagine he'd not have one unless he got a pile of rottweilers he lets loose at night. This one," I tugged Trixie Belle La Belle's lead gently, "is hardly going to morph into a terrifying guard dog."

"Whoever it is will be regretting it and who else they've been turning over once Driscoll and his cronies find out who it is."

"All low lives so far, no one very high up the pecking order. Driscoll does a bit of work for The Gaffer on Lynch Street when he's not getting caught for ripping off old ladies or nicking people's cars. Odd The Gaffer's not been touched?"

Jim laughed, "Your imagination is too good Jess, far too good."

To say that Mrs Driscoll was delighted to see Trixie Belle La Belle would have been an understatement. The dog bore the reunion in a stoical sort of fashion.

"My Doreen's pride and joy that dog is," had been Leyton Driscoll's thoughts on the matter, "wait till I get my hands on the little shits, apologies for the language officer," he added looking at me.

I nodded, I hear worse than that at the station, usually when I'm speaking.

"Sir I believe forensics have not yet managed to get here. I have a dusting kit in the car and would be happy to check for prints. If you could show us the point of entry and where the jewellery was taken from?"

"Quite all right officer, doubt you'll find anything." I thought he looked a little shifty.

"You may be right, but I'd be in dereliction of my duty if I didn't. Don't want you suing us for negligence now."

"The thing is," he read my name card, "Detective Kenton,

we're not sure where the little gits got in. See the cleaner might have left the door unlocked."

"Really?"

"None of its insured or nothing and well Doreen doesn't always lock the safe up. Gets flustered if the dammed thing won't unlock."

"Is that the same with the alarm system?" I glanced at Baker trying to keep a straight face as Driscoll nodded. "Perhaps you have some photos of the items stolen?"

He brightened up at this point,

"I always take photos, reminds me of when I got Doreen stuff. Give us a minute and I'll get them."

"Oh Mr Driscoll, may we have a word with your cleaner please?"

"She's round here somewhere," with that he disappeared yelling, "Angela!" very loudly.

"And what do you make of all that?" Jim eased the lid off his take-away coffee carefully. We'd stopped at a local tea shop for cake.

I bit into my saffron bun and thought. Angela had been a carbon copy of her employer with added fag hanging out of her mouth. The leopard print catsuit and clacky heels didn't suggest she did much cleaning but the house had looked pristine so I knew I shouldn't judge a book by its cover. She had looked familiar, but I couldn't place her. Early 60's, scarlet nails and a pink coiffure to rival the dog.

"She works three mornings a week, came in at 9am to find the safe open and Mrs D in a state," Jim checked his notes between bites of a large Chelsea bun. Police hours are such that you grab food when you can. We were both on a late shift

so this would double up as dinner probably. Drives his wife and mine crackers when we don't eat properly.

Shunting my seat back I leaned the case file against the steering wheel and began to read through it,

"Okay, we know that Driscoll is the fourth victim, there's been Ed Adams, Trigger Stevens and an Alf Hebblethwaite. Driscoll's a petty thief, shifts knock off stuff; Adams is a builder possibly dodgy; Stevens is a car dealer, very dodgy and Hebblethwaite is a businessman supposedly. What links this lot to each other?"

"Getting prints might have helped but Mr D wasn't having that," Jim chewed noisily for a few seconds. "Must be a link, something obvious but what?"

We both stared through the windscreen racking our brains, yet nothing sprang to mind.

"Better get back to the station, MJ will want an update. He's going to want this wrapped up asap, crime figures have to go into head office by next week." I shuffled the statements neatly together, "Perhaps if we read everything again something'll jump out!"

Jim raised an eyebrow saying nothing.

It was Jim who spotted it, found the link and me who realised who was next. MJ had agreed there was something and told us to get on with it. The rest of the team were put on County Lines duties, focusing on the local dealers and suppliers. That left Jim and I to begin the laborious job on unearthing connections and joining the dots.

Jim'd been looking into the backgrounds of the victims. Every one of them had highly questionable pasts and dubious business dealings that went back years. All had been to the

local comp, though not at the same time. All had police records for a range of low level but persistent crimes from burglary to assault with a bit of money laundering and embezzlement thrown in.

I'd been looking at what had been stolen and a pattern was emerging. Each victim had lost items easily disposed of and of high value from jewellery to watches, cash to cameras. So far each had lost in excess of ten grand. Well, that's what they'd owned up to though we suspected it was more. The safes were always open, the doors unlocked and the alarms off or non-existent.

The Shadow knew the victims well, their weaknesses, their routines, and wealth.

"Got to be an inside job," Jim had said the morning after the dog had been handed in, "who knows them all and why them?"

Later that day he found the link.

"Jess this is it. The link, ten years ago all of them had links to Marbella!"

"How?"

"Time share, selling non-existent properties to gullible idiots. Hebblethwaite was the developer, Adams the builder, Stevens the salesman and Driscoll the scout."

He'd written each name on a post-it and was shuffling them about when I saw the word.

"Stop!" Grabbing the one with Stevens written on it I wrote a large S under it. "Look. See what the initial of each makes?"

"Bloody hell Jess, the beginning of Shadow. Just missing the O & W."

"So the next victims will be someone starting with those letters," I finished off for him. "It's someone who got ripped

off by them, has to be.'

"Bloody hell Jess, we've solved it."

Things of course are never quite so simple. Finding the others in the gang proved difficult and a day later The Shadow struck again. This time a large quantity of cash was removed, Driscoll rang me up to tell me.

"Fingers O'Leary is most put out, had one of them cards too. Told him I knew who to talk to down the Nick. Got any leads?"

"An interesting fact has emerged, you all knew each other in Marbella, part of a timeshare development that went belly up I believe Sir." Jim slid closer to hear his reaction.

A deafening silence followed. I could feel the cogs cranking up as he tried to think quickly. A rare event I suspected.

"Perhaps you could tell me who else was part of," I paused to find the right word, "your consortium? That might help us find the next victim before The Shadow does."

"You never heard it from me, like none of us has reported nothing either, right?"

"Certainly, any new information is entirely confidential sir." Beside me Jim was almost doubled up laughing silently.

"Wallace, Granger Wallace has a place out on the new estate, Plum Way."

"And Mr Wallace's role in the group was?"

"Money man, him and O'Leary put up the cash for it all," Driscoll added.

"Was there anyone else involved?" The Wallace name fitted the pattern so far. I crossed my fingers.

"Yeah a few more Spanish ones and an estate agent out there."

"I see that's very helpful, very helpful Mr Driscoll. Thank

you."

"I never told you nothing."

Suddenly one of my wilder flights of fancy appeared,

"One more small question do any of the others have a cleaner?"

It was dark up the side alley off Plum Way. I'd been sitting up here for three nights now on a hunch, Jim fidgeted and broke off more chocolate for us. When Driscoll had confirmed they all had cleaners we went back through the notes and there it was. All different names and addresses but a very definite link.

"So, how are these cleaners connected to Marbella?" Jim had been trying to find a list of people who'd lost money out there and failed, "are they working together?"

"Are they the same person?" had been my thought. "The first theft was almost a year ago, now we've had two in a week. I reckon we've spooked The Shadow."

"And the Spanish side?" Jim had had no luck finding people there either.

I'd shrugged, it didn't fit the pattern and that was all we had to go on.

After another hour I was ready to call it a night, my hunch seemed misguided. As I stretched something moved and a second later an inky silhouette detached itself from the darkness and walked towards us.

"Bingo!" I thought.

The figure was slight, we'd caught up with it very easily. There'd been no fight, no struggle at all and as the ski mask had come off Jim and I had nearly let go in surprise.

"Angela!"

"Ms Shall?"

"One and the same, my dears, obviously my time is up. I knew it was too good to last," she held out her wrists waiting for cuffs.

"Um, are you likely to make a run for it?" I asked glancing at Jim.

"Not in the slightest and if you don't mind a walk I'm happy to explain. I live back in town near the river."

"We've got the car," Jim nodded at me, "I'll catch you up."

It was quite surreal, tea and biscuits as the dawn came up with The Shadow. Neither Angela or Ms Shall was her name, nor did she live at the addresses given.

"I'm Sharon Ann Doe, lived here a little over a year, my only aim to get my money back from those bastards who stole it."

"And the calling card?"

"Ah that was a play on my name Sh....A....Doe. I had so many names lined up I wanted something to remind me who I was." We gawped at her,

"Not the initials of the 'bastards' then?" I said and explained our theory.

"Goodness, I never noticed that. How clever that would have been," she sighed, "I'm not that clever just determined. You see they robbed me of our savings, robbed my husband of his life. The shock when we found out was too much and he had a heart attack, then another and then a stroke. He was a few years older than me, never really recovered. Took me a long time to recover, we'd had to sell up and buy a much smaller house, all our savings had gone, just our pensions left. I was so angry with myself for being so stupid and at them for being so evil. Once Chris died, I had a lot of time to think, it

was a chance news report about a car dealer called Stevens that set me on the path to finding them." She stopped to drink her tea. "Shall I explain it all now or at the station? I have a friendly solicitor I can call."

"Let's stay here for now," I smiled at her, "plenty of time for that later. How did you manage it? it was quite an undertaking."

Her dog, Rufus, padded over and plonked himself on her feet and she ruffled his greying muzzle,

"Not difficult. They'd used their own names in Marbella and once I knew one was here, I reckoned they were all fairly close by. The article was about Stevens celebrating 25 years running his car dealership was when I recognised him. I began to ferret about then luck stepped in and I was in the dealership pretending to look at a car when I overheard him saying he needed a cleaner, his wife had broken her wrist. He never recognised me. I had a blond wig on that time. From there it was easy to find stuff, took a month and I knew where his cash was etc. Cleaners are invisible and his wife is a dreadful show-off."

"How much did you take?" Jim asked.

"That time about ten grand in cash and ten in the ghastliest, gold jewellery. A friend of mine has a small furnace for his jewellery business. He makes his own stuff. He has it all and it'll be melted down eventually," she looked up, "he doesn't know about this. Thinks it's all my mother's."

We nodded and let her carry on.

"From there I wangled a job with Hebblethwaite, they don't mix much so he never realised who I was. Carried on till Driscoll and then the dog followed me home. Blasted animal, I knew Doreen would force Leyton into going to the police so

had to react quickly. Thought you'd clocked me when I was being Angela,' she half laughed, 'the dressing up bit was fun. They'd ripped off about thirty of us so wouldn't have recognised me even if I'd told them. I've about 20 wigs now. My aim was to recover as much money as possible. Take out what they'd stolen from Chris and I, then give the rest to charity. I'd give it back to the other poor sods who they'd conned but then I'd have to explain what I'd done. Even my sons don't know."

She gazed sadly at her empty mug and I had a very strong urge to put an arm round her.

Glancing at Jim I stood up,

"Sharon, go to bed and we'll be in touch. Jim and I need to see our Super. Not quite ethical I know but I don't think you're a flight risk. Be some time tomorrow I expect. Call in sick to the Wallace's, I'll explain my thinking later."

Patting her on the shoulder, we left and headed off duty.

"Think on it Jim, her life's wrecked enough," I'd said as I'd dropped him off at his house, "those low lifes got what they deserved."

In the end it all worked out surprisingly well. MJ was shocked then came round to my way of thinking when I argued my case.

"I see it like this sir," I'd said with Jim beside me, "Mrs Doe has been handing out her own version of natural justice. She was the victim initially and has suffered hugely at the hands of this scurrilous bunch. I agree she should have gone to the police when she clocked Stevens but, in all truth, would we have been able to make anything stick or get her money back?"

MJ had to concede this point, so I'd carried on,

"As to the money, sir, well that was hers in the first place and as to the jewellery well we've traced some of it to other crimes."

"You have?" MJ had been imagining how much better his crime numbers would look if that could be made to stick.

"Mr Driscoll and a few others kindly gave us photos of their dearly beloveds wearing some of the stuff and Mrs Doe has returned everything all bagged up from each house she got it from. Jim has been cross referencing it and we've linked over half of it to investigations going back five years," I passed MJ a folder, "the details of it all, sir. We've also contacted the fraud division at Exeter with all the information and they are going to be looking into the Marbella fraud. Our discussions with the CPS suggest that the whole lot of them could be put away for a very long time with what we've got on them."

I'd stopped then to allow MJ time to really imagine his crime figures and the Chief Constable's warm words to him.

Mrs Doe was speechless, followed by deliriously happy. The only reported crime was dog napping and that had been resolved. All the rest had never been formally declared as a crime and since the jewellery was being returned to its rightful owners, and the money had never supposedly gone missing there was no case to bring against Mrs Doe.

A year later I let her know that though the mills of justice grind slow they do, occasionally grind even and all six of the Marbella bunch, as we'd christened them, were safely behind bars for a very long time.

The Shadow's work was done.

ROOM 5

Gill Briggs

Here's the thing. This story, this collection of events and memories, is not really about Room 5. Room 5 is significant, but principally because it is the gateway to Room 6, and that is where your attention is focused.

You think you have never been religious, but for the first time in your life there is a scintilla of doubt. What if you are wrong? What if Room 6 is not just empty, everlasting darkness? You had anticipated that when the end was imminent, when that door opened, there could be a fleeting moment when your life flashed before your eyes – a jumble of images, almost too hard to discern, as if someone had pressed the fast rewind button. But you realise it's not like that; Room 5 is the place for reflection, for recollection, and most importantly, for reckoning.

Have you led a good life? Does it matter? How can you tell? You start to think back, and become aware of a need to justify

your actions, to satisfy yourself that you have nothing to fear going forward. Nevertheless, Room 5 is a lonely place and you are aware that there is no life left for you to live, no opportunity to prove yourself, so judgement rests on what has gone before. On the opposite side of the room is another door, and through it is Room 4.

As you cross the threshold, you notice that the area nearest the door is dimly lit, cold, and feels joyless. There are few memories here for you to assess; this was a depressing time of life. Your wife died, your children avoided you, your joints were stiff and your bones ached. All the pleasures of life had deserted you. You expected more of your children, especially the girl, but she was the first to leave and make a new life well away from the family home. Would it have been such a sacrifice for them to care for their elderly father after all you had done for them? Private schools, expensive weddings, deposits on houses... yet they had turned their backs on you, visiting infrequently and only briefly. It dawns on you that they were not just ungrateful – they didn't love you. You have never allowed yourself to realise this before. Perhaps it's no surprise, they always took their mother's side. They blamed you for her depression and borderline alcoholism, never giving a thought to how difficult it was for you to live with someone like that. It became worse when she discovered your affairs, but what did she expect? Were you not allowed a modicum of pleasure, a little light relief in your life?

Room 4 is filled with characters from your adult life. There are work colleagues, standing together in groups, casting glances towards you. You would not have considered them friends – insurance was a cut-throat business, every man for himself,

and very competitive. Like you, they would have employed any number of underhand tactics to make sure they made a good living. You hadn't enjoyed it much, but it provided for the family, not that they were grateful.

In one corner of the room sits your wife, head on her arms, at the kitchen table. She's also unhappy. As you watch her, you feel a tinge of guilt – whose fault was it that the relationship had faded away? You had loved her to begin with, of course. She was feisty, independent, opinionated, good fun to be with. You had imagined a life of gentle sparring, keeping the romance alive, but once you were married and the responsibilities piled up, your expectations changed. Why did she constantly have to challenge you? Could she not just have accepted you for what you were? Perhaps you should have realised there could be a problem when she argued about using the traditional wedding vows to honour and obey you, suggesting instead some hippy Indian mantra. You had won her over by telling her how upset your parents would be. Her attempts at independence had faded over the years, submitting to the role of child-raiser. After a time you realised almost all her attention centred around the children, leaving very little for you. She lost her looks, complained when you stayed out late, moaned about everything and accused you of philandering. She was always worse when she'd been out with her friends; they didn't like you and did their best to turn her against you. This gave her the courage to argue with you and tell you what she thought of you – she could be very cruel and hurtful, and would work herself up into a state. Sometimes the only thing to do was to give her a slap, though you regretted it afterwards. You considered leaving, but you didn't want to be seen as a failure.

What went wrong? You had expected to be happy during this settled period of your life. You had a good job, a nice house, the mortgage gradually being paid off, two holidays a year, family growing up, no worries to speak of. Of course the world around you was in a pretty bad state, but that wasn't your fault, and anyway, you did your bit, a donation to the Sally Army and Lifeboats at Christmas.

You are not enjoying being in Room 4. It seems to be raising questions you would prefer not to answer. There is a chink of light on the far side and you realise there is another door. You make your way into Room 3.

Suddenly you feel much better. You remember that your life was good at this point. You were free! You had new friends, a series of attractive girlfriends, life was fun. You were good-looking, quick-witted and popular, someone people wanted to be around. This was a powerful feeling, but also an addictive one, and in order to feed it, you surrounded yourself with people who appreciated you, who made you feel good, laughed at your jokes and copied your dismissal of those who were not as fortunate as you. It was important not to lose that momentum so occasionally you took advantage of what seemed like a good opportunity – I mean, everyone cheats or lies once in a while, don't they? If others allow themselves to be walked over, that doesn't make you a bully, it just means you are determined to succeed. Survival of the fittest.

The atmosphere in Room 3 is lighter than in Room 4, but something is missing. In a darkened corner you see your parents. The distance is significant. They appear shaded, as if in a cloud. You have tried not to think of them for a long time. They died many years ago – you organised the funerals and

delivered bland, unspecific eulogies to the small groups of people who attended. You have an awareness that the freedoms you recognise in Room 3 are linked to your separation from your parents, that before this you had not been happy. The time in Room 3 was a good period, full of opportunity and promise, though much of this went unfulfilled. It would be good to stay in Room 3, but Room 2 offers explanations, and cannot be ignored.

The room is dark as you enter, but lighter towards the far side. Your parents are in it, brightly illuminated, facing each other, unaware of you. They have been arguing. Your father raises his hand, your mother cowers and cries. This was a frequent occurrence, though you didn't fully understand it until you reached puberty. By this time you were frightened of your father, and he in turn was mostly angry and dismissive, and yet secretly you admired his ability to control.

In the middle of the room, you see your younger self with your father, before he lost interest in you. He would take you to the pub with him, where people would crowd round him, and he would laugh and joke, always the centre of attention. You were proud to be his son. He would have a twinkle in his eye as he skipped home, holding your hand, but once inside the house everything would change – a caustic remark from your mother and the blood would rush to his cheeks and his actions become unpredictable.

On the far side of the room where you are even younger, everything is much quieter. There are many new experiences – school, playtime, friends, excursions – your mother is devoted, your father considerate, though a little bemused. There is a sense that there was more happiness before this, and you

know you need to pass into Room 1, though it seems unlikely that you will remember much of what happened there.

What you think you know you have probably read elsewhere – the thump of her heartbeat, her fingers gently massaging you in your watery cocoon. You were safe, happy, cared for, but you were already beginning to exert your free will, rolling and kicking, waiting for that moment when you would burst screaming into the world and start to fend for yourself. When you reach what you understand to be ‘the beginning’, you realise that it is also the end.

The door which leads out of Room 1 is familiar – it takes you back to Room 5 and you find yourself standing once more in front of the door to Room 6. You see now that there is a small notice on the door and you peer over to read it. ‘Before you open this door take a moment to think. Given the chance to start over, what would you do differently?’

ONLY ON TUESDAY

Pat Stearn

He sat on his usual bench and stared, without seeing, at the same view he saw every Tuesday. He had been coming here every Tuesday for the past five years, ever since the day she died, in fact. It was a ritual that gave him a sort of strange comfort but not closure. The day was always the same; buy a bunch of flowers from the florist, drive the short distance to the churchyard, place the flowers on her grave and then sit on the bench. He didn't go into the church, that wasn't his thing. She did the church going for both of them. Much good it had done her, her god had not saved her in spite of her dedication. Then he returned home, picking up a take away from the local Chinese restaurant. Once home he would eat his meal while looking through the photograph album. The following day he would return to his office and work through the week. The business was thriving and he had good employees and managers who ensured that everything went according to plan

and gave him space when he needed it, especially on Tuesdays.

One Tuesday he had followed the usual ritual of buying flowers and arranging them on her grave. He had made his way to the bench and found a woman sitting there. She was small and thin and sat hunched forward. Her elbows rested on her knees and her head was on her hands. He approached cautiously, wondering if she was crying. He stopped a few feet away from her and softly cleared his throat. She looked up, startled. To his relief she wasn't crying but her face was pale and drawn

"Is it alright if I sit down here for a while?" he asked.

"Sure, be my guest," and she moved to the far end of the bench.

Taking a clue from her body language he sat at the other end. The silence hung between them. Eventually he said, more to himself than to her,

"I come here every Tuesday."

"I've only just found it today. It's tranquil, helps me think."

"I've been coming here every Tuesday for five years. I'm not sure why, an act of remembrance, I suppose. I'm sorry; I didn't mean to intrude on your privacy."

"I think it's the other way round if you've been coming here for the past five years. You arrive and someone's sitting on your bench. That must be hard for you particularly since you just put flowers on a grave. I'll go." And she stood up.

"No, no, I don't want to drive you away, you have as much right to sit here as I do."

She sat down but didn't look at him, just returned to her hunched position, elbows on knees, head in hands. They sat in silence for some time. Eventually she looked at her watch,

stood up and said,
“Got to go now, bye.”
And she was gone.

The next Tuesday he followed his usual routine. The weather had turned cloudy and cold so he carried an umbrella in case it rained. He laid the flowers, as usual, and then wandered across to the bench. She was there again.

“Hello, mind if I sit down?”

A brief flicker of a smile crossed her face.

“I told you, it’s your space. I think you need it more than I do. I can sit in the church, but I prefer to be in the fresh air. There is another bench but this one has the better view.”

“Do you come to visit someone?” As soon as he had said it he regretted it. “Sorry, sorry, none of my business. I apologise.”

“No there’s no one here for me to visit. It’s just a convenient place to come. It helps me think and to plan.”

“Plan?”

“Yes, for the future.”

“I see.”

“I don’t think you do really. I might as well come clean. I’m a prisoner at the nearby open prison, just finishing a four year sentence. I’m allowed out on day release to work and I also have this one day a week when I can do what I like. So I come here to try to sort out my future and to try to come to terms with what I did.”

He was silent.

“Don’t you want to know what my crime was?”

“Only if you want to tell me. It’s none of my business. You seem a decent person; you’ve served your sentence. You deserve a new start.”

“I killed two people. Drunk behind the wheel of my car. I fully deserved my sentence. I was surprised it wasn’t longer, six years, but two years off for good behaviour. I’m due to be released in a month.”

He sat in shocked silence, not knowing what to say. Was there anything to say? Quite a lot actually but he was unsure he wanted to say any of it. If he started he might not be able to stop. All the pent up hurt and anger of five long years. He had refused counselling, saying he could sort things out by himself. That had been a mistake, he now realised. But he felt compelled to respond to her. He took the easy option.

“Did you get any help, counselling and the like? They seem quite keen for people to talk, to get them to face up to things, acknowledge their guilt.”

“It took me a while. I readily admitted that I shouldn’t have got in my car, but I felt there were reasons for my doing it. My husband had gone to his weekly line dancing class. I thought it was rather an odd hobby for a man in his forties, but then became uneasy with the whole thing. He would come home later and later. Just a drink in the pub with a few of the others he explained. Then he was quick to say that he only ever drank soft drinks. He certainly never smelt of alcohol, but sometimes there would be another smell on him, one that I couldn’t define. Then I began to suspect he was having an affair. There was only one way I would know so one week I went to the hall where the class was held and waited until they all came out. I had been on edge all evening and had drunk a bottle of wine, Dutch courage I told myself. I waited and then he came out, arm in arm with a woman. They got in his car and drove off. I followed and they stopped in a lay by beside some woods. I

drove on slowly and parked and waited. I had no idea what I was going to do, I just sat frozen in horror. Then I felt the anger and hurt well up inside me. I sat there for what seemed like ages and then his car came up behind mine and headed back towards the town centre. All I wanted to do then was to get home as soon as possible. There is quite a sharp bend on that road and I lost control and slammed into the back of his car. It left the road, hit a tree and went into a ditch. My car skidded and also left the road but ploughed into long grass and bushes. So they were both killed and I had minor injuries. I was arrested and charged. I decided to plead guilty and take the consequences.”

He sat looking at her. Eventually he asked,

“is your name Ann Thorold?”

“Yes, how do you know that?”

“Oh I must have read about it in the papers. After all we do live in a small town.”

The explanation sounded lame to him but she didn’t seem to notice. She had reverted to her hunched up posture, leaning forward, staring at the ground.

He stood up and began a restless pacing. Eventually he stopped and looking towards the grave where he had placed the flowers earlier he said,

“I come to visit my wife every Tuesday, have done ever since she died.”

“Yes you told me but not that it was your wife.”

“It was an accident, a drunk driver. I knew she was having an affair. I couldn’t face the court case, went to stay with a friend in Spain until it was all over.”

“Your wife was Lucy Sullivan.” It was a statement rather than a question. “I thought it was odd that the husband never

turned up at my trial and never gave a Victim Personal Statement. I asked if I could meet him. There was so much I wanted to say to him, to apologise, to beg his forgiveness. But nothing happened.”

“Well, now you have. But I must go. I’ll be here next Tuesday, what about you? Maybe we need to talk.”

“If you want me to be here I will be. As you know I can only come on Tuesdays.”

GNOME AFFAIRS

Ronnie Puttock

Author's note: This is one of over a dozen stories featuring Inspector Hector.

Brian Hubbard had a problem. How was he going to stop Sheila finding out? His life wouldn't be worth living if she discovered what he'd done. She would find out sooner or later, he knew that, but he hoped that through some clandestine surreptitiousness he could mitigate the seriousness of his misbehaviour. Last time, he'd told Sheila that he wouldn't do it again, and he truly meant it at the time, but today he was tempted and couldn't stop himself. He had to have it. The "it" was swathed in bubble wrap nestling in the carrier bag in his hand. Cunningly, he had turned the bag inside out so that the words "Charlie's Garden Emporium" emblazoned on it were hidden from view; especially Sheila's.

The problem had dogged him all the way home on the train

and on the ten-minute walk from the station. No solution had presented itself and his steps slowed to a dawdle as he turned off Sycamore Drive into Laburnum Avenue. Number 47 was almost in view when the answer hit him. He'd noticed that some of his neighbours had already trundled their wheelie bins to their front gates.

"Aha! That's what I'll do," Brian thought. "I'll hide David [he'd already decided on a name] behind the bins and when I've taken them out tonight [it was always his job] I'll sneak out the back door from the garage and put him in the shed."

And that's exactly what he did, at least as far as hiding it and putting out the bins but he didn't get as far as the shed.

"Brian!" Sheila called from the back door. "Brian, where are you going?"

"Oh God," thought Brian. "Quick, think of something!" while desperately trying to hide the package. He'd deliberately picked this particular time because Sheila was always glued to the TV when the repeats of "Don't Wait Up" was on.

But, too late.

"What's that you've got behind your back, Brian?"

"Er, nothing dear." Then, realising how foolish that sounded, considering he was carrying a large "something". "Oh, it's just some bulbs Bob, at the office, has given me. I'm just taking them up to the shed."

"Why didn't you do that when you got home from work, instead of skulking around in the dark?"

"Er, well, er, I just thought I'd leave it till later. There was no rush."

Sheila stepped towards her husband,

"Show me!" she demanded and snatched the bag from Brian's grasp.

“No, don’t open it!” Brian cried, grabbing back the package.

“Brian Hubbard, you’re hiding something from me!” Sheila shrieked. “Give it to me, now!”

The unfortunate object was yanked back into her hands.

Brian stood by helplessly. He knew his secret was going to be discovered and he knew he could do nothing about it. He couldn’t think of anything to say that would make the situation any easier for him and he knew, from experience, that if he did say something it would probably make things worse. He simply waited for the inevitable.

The carrier bag was discarded; the bubble wrap was unrolled, like removing the bandages from a mummy and then there was David fully exposed. On his head sat a red pointy hat and he wore trousers to match; his blue jacket was strained and stretched over his vast corporation and held in place by a bright gold button. Most of his white shirt was hidden by a long grey beard; his pudgy little hands were clasped across the expanse of his stomach and his head was thrown back with mouth wide open in a fixed silent guffaw.

“He’s a laughing gnome,” Brian muttered. “I call him David. You know, after that David Bowie song “The Laughing Gnome”.

“Arrgh!” screamed Sheila, thrusting the hapless gnome back into Brian’s hands. “Get rid of it! Just get rid of the hideous thing! You promised you wouldn’t buy any more of these things!” She turned on her heels, “And you’ve made me miss my programme. I’ll deal with you later, Brian!”

The door slammed behind her.

“I’m very sorry, dear, but I just couldn’t resist him,” Brian whined into the night.

He sighed.

“Oh well, David, I’ll take you to meet Cedric. Maybe she’ll

calm down in a day or two and let you stay, especially if I can hide you in the irises where you can't be seen from the house."

Brian walked up the path to the pond. It was dark, so he placed David as best he could so that he wouldn't be visible.

"Hello Cedric," said Brian. "I've brought you a friend to keep you company. His name's David."

Cedric carried on looking down into the water, his face a picture of concentration. His little Wellington boots dangled just above the water line, in his hands was a fishing rod from which a piece of wire hung down into the pond. He wore similar attire to David, except that his jacket was green and he was several sizes slimmer. He'd been sitting on the same flat rock for two years now and had never caught anything. To tell the truth, he was never going to as there were no fish in the pond. A few insecty things floated or scooted around on the water's surface and in the Spring, there were tadpoles. Every year Brian wondered where the frog spawn came from. Of course, he knew where it came from, but he'd never seen any frogs in his garden. He'd always ponder on this: hundreds of tadpoles but no frogs. He knew tadpoles can be carnivorous, but surely not to that extent. Maybe it was rats or the urban foxes that snapped up the frogs as soon as they made land. It was such a pity, he thought, that there weren't more frogs, or hedgehogs for that matter, that could gobble up all the slugs and snails that devastated his flowers and vegetables every year.

Brian sighed a deep sigh. He couldn't stay there all night. He had to face Sheila. If he was lucky, she would just freeze him out for a day or two. He said "Goodnight", to Cedric and David and trudged back to the house.

The next morning was very quiet. Brian and Sheila busied themselves getting their own breakfast, the only human sounds were the voices talking quietly from the radio. It was Saturday and, although Brian couldn't escape by going to work, he was thankful to hide behind the newspaper and eat his breakfast. When finished, he was only too pleased to fold the paper, put his things on the draining board, go to the utility room, put on his gardening shoes and head out into the blessed relief of the garden's fresh and calming air.

Sheila barely raised an eyebrow when she heard Brian shouting outside. She continued to read the paper, which she'd picked up after Brian left, when her husband crashed open the door and yelled,

"You murderer! You've killed David! He's had his head knocked completely off!"

Sheila calmly folded the paper and set it aside. In a calm voice she said,

"What are you blethering about, Brian? Are you trying to tell me that that ghastly gnome thing has been damaged?"

"You know damn well it has, because you're the one who did it. Nobody else could have!"

"Oh, so now you're accusing me of gnomicide. Well, Brian, I must admit I am pleased to hear about its demise, but I assure you I wouldn't stoop so low as to do that out of spite. You should know me better than that. You know that when I seek revenge it's always served cold," Sheila replied, adding a hint of a smile.

She picked up the paper again, her eye being caught by an article exposing further sordid details about that awful David Mellor.

"It had to be you!" Brian blurted out. "There's no one else!"

Without looking up from the paper, Sheila responded quietly and evenly,

“Brian, if you’re so bothered about finding a culprit, why don’t you call the police?”

“I’ll do just that, my dear. Maybe you’ll confess to them.”

And that’s what he did. And this is where I came into the story. Those of you who have read my anecdotes before will know me as Inspector, or even Chief Inspector, Hector. However, Brian and Sheila Hubbard’s case goes back to when I was still a wet-behind-the-ears constable and it was one of my first. We, that is myself and P.C. Jock Spon, had been called to a property in Laburnum Avenue to follow up a report of vandalism. Jock was an experienced police officer and had been assigned to be my mentor. As we knocked on the front door of number 47, he said,

“Now, laddie, you take the lead on this. I’ll not say a word unless I see you getting into difficulty, but my nose tells me this is going to be one of those cases where we say we’ll do our best, but...”

A man opened the door.

“Are you Mr. Brian Hubbard?” I asked.

“Yes, I am,” the man replied. “Please come in.”

We entered and followed Mr. Hubbard into the living room.

“I am Constable Hector and this is my colleague, Constable Spon,” I began. “We understand that you reported an act of vandalism on these premises. Is that correct, sir?”

“Yes, that’s right and if you come into the garden, I can show you exactly what happened.”

“That would be very useful, sir,” I said.

As Mr. Hubbard led us through to the garden, Jock gave me an

encouraging nod. In the kitchen a woman sat at the table.

“This is my wife, Sheila,” Mr. Hubbard said.

“Good morning, ma’am,” I said.

She merely nodded at us.

Mr. Hubbard led us to the end of the garden and picked up an object which he held out to us in both hands. It was, I assumed, a garden ornament of the gnome kind. It was about eighteen inches tall but it had no head. It had been decapitated. From the jaggedness of the break I deduced that it had been beheaded using some force. It hadn’t been cut or sawn off cleanly and calmly. Obviously, it was an act of violence, probably impulsive, and not one that was cold-bloodedly premeditated. My assumptions and deductions were confirmed when Mr. Hubbard stated,

“Someone’s knocked David’s head off. Deliberately and violently.”

“David?” I queried.

“Oh, sorry,” Mr. Hubbard said. “I called the gnome, David, because of the David Bowie song, “The Laughing Gnome”. If you could see his head, you’d know he was laughing.”

I caught Jock’s eye. He’d pursed his lips desperately stifling a smile.

“And do you have the head, sir?” I asked.

“No,” Mr. Hubbard replied. “That’s the odd thing; I can’t find it. Maybe it fell in the pond.”

“Perhaps so, sir,” I replied, “but it’s not particularly important, we have the rest of the object as evidence.”

Now that I knew the background to the case, I could start asking pertinent questions.

“Did you hear anything out of the ordinary last night, sir?”

“No. Nothing that I can recall,” was the reply.

“Are there any means of access to the garden, other than through the house?”

“Er, no, unless someone climbs over a neighbour’s fence. Well, I suppose someone could get in by forcing open the garage door.”

“I see. And was the garage door closed last night?”

“Yes. I closed and locked it after I put the bins out.”

Jock interjected at this point.

“It’s Saturday today, sir. Are you saying that your bins are emptied on a Saturday?”

“They’re normally collected on a Friday,” said Mr. Hubbard. “But the binmen were on strike earlier this week and they were making up for the missed collections.”

“That’s right,” I said. “My bins were collected a day late this week as well.”

Jock gave me a fleeting scowl. I don’t think I should have said that.

“Can you show us your garage, sir?” I asked.

We went into the garage and the door was locked and there was no obvious sign of tampering.

“Well, sir,” I said, “It doesn’t look as though someone broke into your garden. Perhaps we should have a word with Mrs. Hubbard? Maybe she heard something.”

“By all means,” said Mr. Hubbard and he led us back into the kitchen.

“Sheila,” he said, “these officers want to know if you can help them with their enquiries into the vandalism.”

“Fire away,” Mrs. Hubbard said.

“Ma’am, did you hear anything out of the ordinary last night?”

“Nothing at all, officer.”

“But you did get out of bed for a while,” interrupted Mr. Hubbard.

“Yes, I did, but only to go to the bathroom. You know that, Brian.”

She sounded rather condescending and I made a mental note that perhaps not all was happy in the Hubbard house, particularly as Mr. Hubbard added,

“You can say that, but can you prove that’s all you did?”

Mrs. Hubbard snapped back,

“Brian, please be quiet!” Then she addressed us, saying, “My husband thinks I broke his beloved gnome...”

“She hates them!” Mr. Hubbard broke in, vehemently.

“I think hate is too mild a word,” Mrs. Hubbard continued. “I detest them, abhor them. But I wouldn’t be so childish as to smash them.”

If I say so myself, my next line of questioning would have impressed Sherlock Holmes.

“Mrs. Hubbard,” I said, “if you were to go into the garden what would you wear on your feet?”

“That’s an odd question, constable, but if you want to know, I’d put on my old shoes.”

“Can you show them to me, please, ma’am?”

“I can’t see the relevance of this, but they’re in the utility room.”

We all trooped into the utility room and Mrs. Hubbard showed me the shoes in question. I studied them closely.

“It rained last night,” I said, “and if you’d gone out then it’s likely they’d still be wet and muddy. The soles of these shoes are completely dry and there’s no trace of mud.”

I handed the shoes to Mr. Hubbard and added, “In all probability, sir, your wife didn’t go into the garden last night

and couldn't have vandalised your gnome."

"Wow, you are a smart one," smiled Mrs. Hubbard.

Mr. Hubbard's gaze swivelled from me, to his wife and then back to me. Guilt and embarrassment were written all over his face.

"Mmm, yes, a good point constable," he stuttered. "But how do you explain the damage?"

"Your guess is as good as mine, sir. It could have fallen over, I suppose, or be knocked over by a fox or a cat. Those are the most likely explanations. We've had no other reports of vandalism in this area, so we can almost certainly rule that out as such behaviour tends to come in clusters. But we will take this seriously, sir. It will be logged and recorded and if there is an outbreak of vandalism in the area in the near future, we may well link your case to it."

And that was the end of that as far as we were concerned, though I can't say if it was for Mr. and Mrs. Hubbard. We thanked them for their time and went on our way.

Jock Spon was very complimentary about how I conducted the interviews and said he was impressed about the shoes and suggested I apply to join the CID in due course.

When the police officers and Mr. Hubbard had left the garden to go back to the house and if anyone had been around, they would have sworn that Cedric's expression softened into a smirk. Could it be that he was pleased that David, with his incessant and irritating cackle had had his block knocked off?

ROOM 5

Nicola Tipton

Kate Bradshaw walked down the corridor clutching an illicit mug of coffee and a pile of marking. She didn't care. She already had a headache and it was only 10.45am. She'd lost all but five minutes of her break because she'd carried out her threat to keep some recalcitrant Year 8 back for ten minutes: unacceptable behaviour in class. A futile gesture in the scheme of things but she was determined to at least try and make a difference. She was buggered if she'd go without coffee, especially as she now had the joy of a stint in Room 5.

Kate had taken up the post of Head of Creative Arts at Elysium Fields precisely three weeks and two days ago. You couldn't really count the first two days. They'd been Baker Days as she still referred to them. INSET Days be arsed. Bloody Education Secretaries always poking their noses in and making things worse, especially the Tories. Thatcher, the Milk Snatcher. Baker

not only took away five days holiday but introduced SATs.

Kate had thought that she'd known what she was letting herself in for. She hadn't walked into the job blind and had known the school back in its previous incarnation when it had been called Primrose Grange, an homage to the Flowers Estate it was built to serve. The estate was as rough as fuck. Was then and still was now as she was finding out to her cost. So was the school despite a new Head, change of name and becoming an academy. Academy! More like a cross between a mental asylum and a prison. How had it been described in the advertisement for the post? "Challenging." She should have known better.

Her first job had been in a neighbouring school; still tough but further up the road: different demographic. Less council, some aspirant first-time buyers, sprinkling of professionals, and closer to the Green Belt to the North East of Sheffield. Amazing what a difference half a mile could make. That was all eons ago. She was 35 now, two kids of her own but still hopelessly idealistic. Deprived kids with shitty lives still deserved and needed good teachers, a good education.

She passed Geoff Wilde, one of the SMT scuttling to the safety of his office after break duty. He smiled briefly and made no attempt to challenge her about the coffee she'd taken out of the staff room. 'Let him bloody try,' she thought as she beamed back, radiantly.

The SMT was ridiculously top heavy, spent far too much time cooking up yet more unworkable schemes to get the school out of special measures and improve behaviour. They were

noticeably absent when anything big kicked off or you needed a bit of support. And, of course, they did very little teaching. Wilde was particularly inept. He'd been the one who announced in briefing on the first day of term,

“Please be aware, if you see Karl Jones on site do not approach and report immediately. He should not be returning to school and may be carrying a gun.”

FFS! There was no photo posted of said youth. How the hell were new staff supposed to ‘be aware’?

Kate passed the boys’ toilets. The all too familiar smell of cannabis wafted out. She had mentioned this to the Head on more than one occasion but nothing seemed to get done. She considered inhaling deeply, but thought better of it, although being stoned might help get through the next hour.

As head of a faculty Kate had the pleasure of two periods a week in room 5. The naughty step for big boys and girls.

She entered the room and relieved the Head of English. “What time do you call this?” He smiled. It was the gentlest of reprimands. She should have taken over half way through break and it was almost over. Furthermore, Terry Green was a lovely man: an Irish Catholic, passionate about words, Shakespeare, storytelling, and Yeats. He was in his early fifties, quietly spoken had thinning dark curly hair and a beard. He'd taught at the school for years. He was as rare as a hen's tooth. He was respected and inspired his charges, many of whose parents he'd also taught. If she hadn't been married, she might have let herself fancy him.

“I'm so sorry. I kept some kids back. I'm really so sorry.”

“Never mind. I’ve got a free next and I’ve not been taken for cover.”

“I owe you one.”

She glanced round the room. Mercifully it was empty of kids. They were released back into the fray at break unless they had been booked in for a day’s internal exclusion.

Room 5 was nothing like the Removal Rooms you’d see today. Just a desk for the poor bugger in charge to sit behind and three smaller affairs for the kids crammed into what was not much more than a cupboard with a window. No booths facing the wall and no bloody communication with the outside world: no phone link to reception, no mobiles, and no computer to send emails. Primitive wasn’t the word for it. She sensed it would not be long before her first charge would arrive as she knew Y11 lower Maths sets were being taught, Year 10 RE not to mention Y9 Life Skills. All a recipe for recalcitrance, poor behaviour and outbursts of swearing. Furthermore, the school had not been able to successfully recruit Maths teachers for well over a year so many of the above classes were being taught by a succession of hapless supply teachers who frequently failed to return to the school after a day’s work unless they were desperate and had bailiffs knocking at their doors.

The kids were bored, lacked motivation, couldn’t give a toss. They were only too willing to vent colourfully about the lesson, school and teacher. Last week a boy called Duane, pronounced Dwayne, had been caught running a book as to how many minutes a teacher would last before they left the classroom, burst into tears or he was sent out.

The lad in question was 15 going on 40, had a bristle of facial hair, was built like a brick shithouse and could leer for England. He might not be able to master quadratic equations but he was more than adept at dealing with odds, and was a dab hand at dodgy financial dealings. Quite the entrepreneur. Every day he bought a packet of fags from the corner shop and sold them singly at a highly inflated price to smokers at break at the edge of the field where staff on duty never ventured. Everyone knew about it but nothing was done. To be honest Kate didn't really care about that. She did, however, admonish him about his treatment of supply teachers and contained him for the best part of an hour.

Kate looked at her watch. Any moment now she reckoned. She couldn't be bothered to attempt to read the GCSE evaluations of 'Blood Brothers' which she'd taken her group to see the week before. The Crucible did preview tickets for a pound and she had paid for the trip out of her department budget. She'd wanted to start the year with a brand-new option group on a roll. The group was small because it was the first for a number of years. The previous Head of Drama had been off sick for over a year and had finally accepted early retirement on the grounds of ill health. Kate reckoned it was twelve quid well spent.

The door flew open. Kyla, a Y9 pupil Kate could actually name because she taught her and had been mentioned in briefing as being vulnerable, burst into the room. She threw the referral slip on the desk, slumped into a chair put her head on her folded arms on the desk and sobbed. Kate looked at the slip. Kyla had evidently screamed at Ms Bell, 'fuck off you fucking

cunt' whilst jabbing a finger in her face. Kate sighed. It was a miracle she'd come down and not bunked off. It was pissing with rain though and she probably didn't want to go home and face her alcoholic mother.

Kate waited a moment and spoke gently.

"Kyla, you know, that your behaviour was completely unacceptable. It's not like you, why did you do it?"

Kyla sounded tired and spoke through tears.

"Because she **is** a fucking cunt and she knows fuck all." She continued, "What does she know? She's an old cow and I bet she's never even had sex ... who'd want to have sex with her anyway? She's so fat and ugly."

"Kyla, you can't speak to a member of staff like that whatever you think."

"If Miss Jackson had been taking the lesson like normal, she would have told me what it was about and given me the choice of staying or going to sit in the library or Mr. Davies' office."

Di Jackson was Kyla's form tutor, and would normally take Life Skills but she was on a course so Janet Bell, a supply teacher, had been given the lesson. Ted Davies was the learning mentor.

A boy arrived, David. He was conscientious, mild mannered and an elective mute. He'd been entrusted to send down work for completion. He stood staring at Kyla.

"Thank you, David, that will be all." Kate spoke firmly and gestured to the door.

She glanced down at the worksheet. Sex Education.

Contraception. Consequences of failure to use contraception.

Not the easiest of topics for a supply teacher to take on with a

load of Y9, who desperately needed educating but considered they knew everything about sex, yet thought cling film a good substitute for condoms and Chlamydia was what posh people might call their daughter. No wonder Kyla hadn't coped. She'd had an abortion in the summer holiday.

Kate felt angry. Wilde oversaw Life Skills, or PSHE, as it was now officially called. Personal, Social, Health and Economic education. Another genius idea dreamed up by an Education Secretary trying to be trendy and relevant but simply re-inventing the wheel.

Geoff was a lazy, dozy git and sexist to boot. He planned lessons which were designed to require minimal input from the teacher. An out-of-date short video usually prefaced equally outdated work sheets to be filled in. Kids generally hated the lessons. Good tutors, of which there were few, ignored the plans, allowed discussion and answered questions. Trouble was there were still staff, who found it all embarrassing. Wilde was free now. He should have stepped in and taken that lesson or at least taken some kind of action before the lesson. He knew all about Kyla. He'd even stood in for the Head at briefings and talked about her. Bloody useless man.

Kyla had stopped crying. Kate went over to her and bent down so that she was at eye level with her. Although technically she shouldn't, she put an arm round Kyla's shoulders. Damn it she was in loco parentis and this child needed some support and the door had a window onto the corridor.

At that moment, Duane swaggered in waving his referral slip around as if it was a certificate for outstanding achievement. He gave Kate his best leer making no secret of the fact that he

was trying to peer down her top. Kate stood up. She was fuming but managed to remain relatively composed.

“I saw you miss. You’re not supposed to do that.”

“Really, and I suppose you’ve been sent here for your exemplary behaviour! Just bloody well sit down! Now!”

Duane smirked, sat back in a chair, legs spread wide, hands folded on his belly just above his crotch. Little shit Kate thought. Fucking little shit.

He looked at Kyla.

“You been blubbing?”

“Fuck off!”

“Ooh, did you hear that, Miss?”

“Give me the referral Duane. Be interesting to see what gives me the pleasure of your company - again.”

Duane grinned.

“Maths is boring. Mr Biggs is a gay twat! And I wanted the pleasure of your company – again so I called him a useless twat and told him he could shove his isosceles triangles up his arse!”

Kate slapped a GCSE Maths text book, kept in Room 5, and some paper on Duane’s desk.

“Right, find the page and just get on with it.” She returned to Kyla.

“Miss, someone’s drawn a cock on this page.”

Kate had heard it all before. She sighed and said with her best withering look,

“If you don’t want to be excluded, I suggest that you just shut up and behave for once in your life. You don’t impress me.”

She smiled sardonically. Amazingly, Duane did give it a rest, probably because he wasn’t stupid, by any stretch of the

imagination, and wanted to listen to what she said to Kyla. He could probably sense that there was something out of the ordinary about Kyla being there.

Kate fervently hoped that Ted might pass by. She knew that he would pop his head in if he wasn't occupied elsewhere. He'd been looking out for her as a new member of staff and he invariably knew all the kids who were likely to roll up in Room 5, whereas she did not.

She spoke softly,

“How are you feeling now?”

“Okay Miss.” Her voice sounded dead. Kyla clearly wasn't okay but she was less agitated.

Aware that Duane was listening, Kate was careful with her words.

“Okay Kyla, this is what I suggest we do. First, I'm going to give you some paper and I think it would be a good idea if you wrote a short apology to Miss Bell. You know that you shouldn't have sworn at her like that and she doesn't know anything about you. Just say that you're sorry. You don't have to go into any details about why you reacted as you did. After, I've finished here I can explain the situation to her if you want me to and I will speak to Mr. Davies, Miss Jackson and your Head of Year so that this matter need not be taken any further. Does that sound like a plan?”

“Yes. Thanks Miss. I just don't want me mam to know. She'd kill me.”

“No problem,” Kate said reassuringly although she wasn't at all sure what would transpire but hoped that common sense would prevail. This child had enough to cope with. It was a miracle that she was in school and she needed all the support that she could get.

“What lesson do you have next?”

“English.”

“Who with?”

“Mr Green. I like him Miss.”

“Kate smiled, “So do I. Do you think you will be okay? If you like I can come with you and explain a little to him, and, if you feel it’s all too much, I’m sure that he will let you go to the library for some time out.”

“Thanks Miss.”

“No problem. Now, perhaps you could write that apology.” Kyla picked up her pen and started to write. Kate turned her attention back to Duane. Unsurprisingly, he’d made no start on the Maths. He had also refrained from drawing more cocks in the book or on his blank sheet of paper.

“As for you, I think that you better start writing an apology as well. You better try and sound as if you mean it. I imagine your Head of Year will have plenty to say about the matter. I shall be reporting your inappropriate behaviour towards me and the homophobic remarks.”

Eileen Taylor was a terrific Head of Year, incredibly hard working, strong but fair. Kids respected her. Kate knew that she would have her support and the whole matter would be properly dealt with.

“If you try and get yourself kicked out again next week, you won’t be coming here. You’ll end up looking pretty silly sitting in Ms. Taylor’s Y7 German class. I doubt whether you will try and give her the benefit of your magnetic charms!”

CANNONBALL

Tim Smith

“Not after midnight, do you hear me Gunter?”

“Yes Herr Kapellmeister, not before midnight,” came the reply.

“NOT AFTER MIDNIGHT, you stupid boy!” bellowed the Kapellmeister.

Man and boy stood on the bastion with the town of Rüsselsheim spread below them, house roofs punctuated by towers, spires, the town hall, castle, palace and the Knight’s Hall.

“You have no intelligence at all. You can’t sing, you have no conversational skills, you don’t listen. What are you doing here Gunter, what are you doing here?”

Gunter shrugged.

The Kapellmeister, black cloak flapping in the stiff breeze, glared down at the boy.

“Listen to me; the cannon is to be fired just a minute before

midnight, not after, before – you understand?”

“How will I know when it’s a minute before midnight?”
came the almost inaudible reply.

“YOU WILL KNOW!” The Kapellmeister stabbed the air with his bony finger. “You will know by listening for the St. Anna clock mechanism starting to wind. Once that starts you begin your preparations to fire the cannon a minute before midnight. Do you understand? Then once the cannon has fired the glorious clock will announce midnight and the New Year; followed by the wonderful bells. The cannon comes first, then the chimes and then the bells. Have you got that?”

He looked down and shook his head. Almost in despair he said quietly,

“Who chose you, Gunter?”

“The Bürgermeister,” came the reply.

“I should have guessed it. Did he give a reason?”

“That I was big and strong and would do as I was told. It was a great honour as the Prince is entertaining important guests and the Kapellmeister would be pleased for someone to help as he has to organise the Mass...”

The Kapellmeister held up his hand,

“Did he indeed? Are you sure it wasn’t a case of being in the right place at the right time?”

Gunter shrugged.

The Kapellmeister asked whether Gunter knew how to fire the cannon.

“Yes,” came the reply. “You pull the gear stick and ratchet the cannon up so it’s pointing to the stars, apply a flame to the gunpowder hole and, bang, it fires.”

“You do know that it has to be loaded before firing?”

“Yes. From a pile of balls, one with eagle stamped on it.”

The Kapellmeister sighed,

“Gunter, there are two piles of canon balls. It is the one nearest you, not the other pile. Those must never be touched! They have a different eagle. You must load the canon with the imperial eagle of Austria, not the other, do you understand?”

“Yes, Herr Kapellmeister,” came the reply. “Why?”

“Because,” sighed the Kapellmeister, “they are Russian; different eagle, not appropriate to the occasion.”

“Oh.”

“Here is your powder to fire it and the tinder box to strike a light. Keep them dry. Just listen for the clock mechanism. Have everything ready. The Prince and the town are relying on you to start everything with a bang. Just do as I have told you. You have an hour to prepare. Don’t let us down!”

The Kapellmeister disappeared through the trapdoor leaving Gunter to gaze over the moonlit town.

The Prince was indeed entertaining important guests. He had arrived home from the Congress in Vienna only a week before, announcing to everyone, including a near hysterical wife, that Tzar Alexander would be calling en route to Wurttemberg to see his future brother-in-law, the king. Everything must be tidy, clean and fresh. A good impression must be made. It may lead to marriage for their daughter, Augusta. The Princess indicated that the Tzar was already married. The Prince replied suggesting a Grand Duke? The Princess looked appalled. Augusta looked excited.

Tzar Alexander was bored. These petty German states, nothing to do, women like dumplings. This was the back of beyond!. They say Wurttemberg was the same, but after that – Paris,

wonderful Paris. The Tzar shrugged, the last reception before leaving, good, hope it's not as bad as the greeting when he arrived. They all looked so sour. Don't they realise with one flick of my finger...

He laughed.

The valet pinned the glittering orders on to his dress uniform. He was ready.

Gunter woke from his revelry. He thought he heard St. Anna's clock mechanism start. He ratcheted the cannon barrel to point skywards. He started to rub the tinder for a flame. It was hard work. Eventually a small spark ignited the dry stuff in the box. It roared into life, flamed for a few moments and then sank away to dullness. Gunter felt in his pocket for straw to help the flame to live again. Gunpowder? Forgot the gunpowder he thought. Gunpowder was poured into the powder hole, straw burst into life and started to burn.

"Oh my God, I forgot the cannonball." Gunter hopped from foot to foot with sudden nerves. He released the ratchet gear, the barrel fell back into position with a crash. The flames in the tinder box began to subside. Gunter picked up the box and rammed the contents into powder hole and, with a start, remembered the ball. He bent, and with considerable effort, picked up a ball and pushed it into the mouth of the cannon. He reached for the ratchet gear and began to pull. Nothing happened. He pulled again. Still nothing. He looked down. A corner of his jacket had become entangled with the gear stick. He pulled the jacket – nothing moved he tried again – still nothing.

There was a sudden "swoosh" followed by a thunderous roar. A flaming cannon ball shot out of the barrel heading for the St.

Anna bell tower. Gunter screamed a silent scream.

The ball crashed through the tower aperture, causing the bells to clang with near insanity, and out the other side, narrowly missing the town hall tower and then on to the theatre, crashing through the roof, roaring along the rope gallery and careering just under the painted ceiling of the auditorium where Apollo in perpetual pursuit of Daphne took on a surprised look. Leaving a hole, dead centre, in the serene prince's coat of arms, it crashed out of the front of the theatre, crossed the square and roared over the roof of the palace knocking carved urns and stonework onto the cobbles below.

"Tis the Devil's fire!" wailed an old lady.

"GUNTER!" screamed the Kapellmeister, transfixed to the cathedral organ. "GUNTER, I'll kill you!"

Gunter, minus his jacket, was already down the bastion steps and heading along the street towards the town gate. Out into the countryside and to the home farm in the mountains.

The cannonball, oblivious of all human emotion, roared on over the palace and towards the Knight's Hall. A splendid late medieval hall built to commemorate a fabled visit of Charlemagne, hence the superb set of stained glass windows. It had certainly hosted entertainments for Marie Theresa, Holy Roman Empress and a more subdued reception for Napoleon whose army was passing through. The French emperor had taken a fancy to the silver, so, at vast cost, new silver graced the tables.

The hall was splendidly lit. Candles glowed everywhere. In a room beyond the hall, unbelievable amounts of food were piled high. Tables were thronged by the guests eating with gusto. Music filled the hall, played by an orchestra imported

from Vienna. A new dance, the waltz, a sudden rage all over Europe, was danced in the principality for the first time. Not everyone seemed that impressed. The Bürgermeister muttered that it may be good for peasants, but for persons of quality? He had his doubts.

The Tzar was enjoying himself. A waltz with Augusta had been energetic. He led her back to the dais and turned, there was a multicoloured flash and crash of glass and the cannonball dropped through the window and plunged to the floor. A wave of cold air blew most of the candles out except for on the dais. The music stopped, guests gasped and scattered, the vibration from the landing cannonball preceded the rolling ball itself and made the furniture dance and the china and glass chatter.

Champagne corks popped in unison with one another.

Alcoholic fountains spread over the white linen.

The ball rolled towards the dais.

The Prince stood ramrod stiff, his face ashen. He turned to the Tzar. The Tzar looked on. The ball rolled towards him and as the Tzar looked down it stopped just an inch from his white-kid toe. There was a moments silence.

"How wonderful, what a splendid New Years gift!" The Tzar roared with laughter and delight, clapping the somewhat stupefied Prince on the back. "You must present your munitions engineer! How clever. How original. How wonderful and look, a Russian eagle on the ball! Return to sender, eh Prince?"

The buzz of voices and merriment returned to the hall; candles were relit; music resumed, and, in the distance, the chaotic chimes of St. Anna welcomed in the New Year.