A collection of writing by our members and featuring the winning entries in our national Your sins will find you out short story competition

www.chorleywriters.org.uk

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Welcome to our tenth edition of Aware; where we publish writing by members of Chorley & District Writers’ Circle and the winning entries in our annual national writing competition.

This year we asked for short stories up to 2,000 words on the theme of Your Sins Will Find You Out and received around sixty entries from all over the country. The three winning stories from a shortlist of eight are published in these pages and they’re a treat to read.

One of the shortlisted stories was from Tony Noon. A former vice-chair of the Circle, he moved out of the area this year and will be much missed. He’s helped the Circle raise its profile outside the group and he’s a great writer too. We’d all like to wish him luck in his new life.

Our Group Story this year was based on an idea suggested by Tony. We created a school and peopled it with teachers and pupils, then we each took one of those characters and wrote about them individually. So this year we have less the effect of a very short novel written in chapters, and more a soap opera – or perhaps a Gervase Phinn story (although rather racier.) We hope you enjoy it.

But Aware isn’t all about short stories. Several of our members write poetry, others excel at flash fiction and yet others write at longer length, and there are extracts here from the latest published novel by Dave Harrison, our current vice-chair, and from a non-fiction book about the Lancashire music scene by one of our newer members, John Winstanley. John has also done much to help raise the profile of the Circle this year and is an unfailing source of good ideas, practical resourcefulness and good humour.

As we’re quite a small group, members do make an impact individually and none more so than one who sadly passed away this year, Peter Bird. Peter was one of the founder members of the Circle and had recently returned after a few years’ sabbatical. He was a gifted writer, sometimes writing as Nicky J Poole, and was also extremely supportive of other writers – and those two qualities don’t always go hand in hand. He will be much missed, especially by those of us lucky enough to count him as a personal friend. Aware is not the same without a story from Peter.

Dea Parkin
Editor
November 2014

Chorley & District Writers’ Circle

We meet on the last Tuesday of every month except December and enjoy external speakers, workshops, feedback sessions and writing bursts. This November we also hosted a public event called Write Now, the brainchild of our vice-chair Dave Harrison, and it was a huge success, corralling the talents of London literary agent Hannah Sheppard, independent publisher Kevin Duffy of Bluemoose Books and bestselling author Carys Bray – whose first novel A Song for Issy Bradley was shortlisted for the Costa Book Awards just a few days after – as well as Dave himself, talking about the new author services arm of Open Circle Publishing.

Any writer is welcome to join the group and we embrace those who enjoy writing as a hobby as well as those committed to it as a career – and everyone between. It doesn’t matter who our intended audience is, or whether we approach writing from a professional angle and hope to make money: we all write for pleasure.

We publish a monthly newsletter and maintain a website at www.chorleywriters.org.uk and a Facebook page at https://www.facebook.com/CADWC
Thank you, Open Circle Publishing, for year-round sponsorship, without which our comfortable, convenient venue would be beyond our reach. Thanks also to our secondary sponsor Fiction Feedback, and most especially this year to two anonymous donors for very generous donations that made Write Now an exciting, amazing reality instead of a scary gamble we’d hardly dared have risk. You know who you are; thank you.

Committee 2014

Chairwoman       Dea Parkin
Vice-Chair        Dave Harrison
Treasurer         Walter James
Secretary         Victoria Walsh
Newsletter Editor Jeanette Greaves

Venue & Time of Meetings
Upstairs room at The Hartwood, Chorley PR6 7AX.
Last Tuesday of every month (except December), 7.30pm.

Contacts
To contact us please email info@chorleywriters.org.uk or dea@compedge.net or call Dea Parkin on 01257 233614.
This year Chorley & District Writers’ Circle received around sixty entries for our national competition; stories of fewer than 2,000 words on an intriguing theme. We enjoyed reading some very entertaining stories, all judged anonymously of course.

It was difficult agreeing on a shortlist as different stories appeal to different people, but by using a set of guidelines we eventually reached consensus.

Fiction Feedback, the critique and editing service, judged the final shortlist of eight.

**Shortlisted**

*Character Assassination* – Harry Green, Merseyside

*Meek Inheritance* – Tony Noon, formerly Penwortham, Lancashire

*Possession* – Sue Hoffmann, Higher Bebington, Wirral

*Russian Dolls* – Clare Marsh, Horsmonden, Kent

*Sat Nav* – Helen Griffiths, Hook, Hants

*Simon’s Sin* – John Rutter, Preston, Lancashire

*The Moral Laws* – Helen Anderton, Fleet, Hants

*The Receipt* – Rosie Seymour, Sedbergh, Cumbria

**Judges’ Comments**

The variety in interpretation of the theme was the most remarkable, with some strikingly original ideas. In the end, the three stories that won impressed with how they engaged with us, delivering a story that dragged us in and pulled on the emotions, and with the quality of their prose.

**First: Russian Dolls by Clare Marsh**

This story is sophisticated and complex, echoing its title, and unusually among the stories we received it’s written from two viewpoints. Sometimes more than one viewpoint is hard to carry off in fewer than 2,000 words but Clare Marsh does it admirably in this gently humorous tale of how a British man and a Russian woman use an internet matchmaking site, Russian Dolls, to find the partner of their dreams. It shows both parties as pragmatic and ready to deceive to get what they want, telling lies which are sure to find them out. Yet we also see how the two are perfectly matched, and while Clare resists showing us a happy-ever-after, we sense its possibility. Clever yet warmly empathetic, it was the most rewarding story of them all.
Second: The Moral Laws by Helen Anderton

Writing with confidence and assurance, Helen transports us to a society of the future where strict morals as they used to be have been reinstated. The story is elegantly written from the point of view of a man defending himself against the Laws Enforcement Judgement Review Panel as he tries to explain his eminently reasonable actions in the face of mistake and tragedy, and the judges found it incredibly moving and well-written.

Third: The Receipt, by Rosie Seymour

The Receipt is a succinct story using the conceit of a woman going through the items on a receipt from the supermarket to tell us about her life and marriage. And even though a receipt is often the way a wife finds things out about her husband, this was structured and written so well that we still felt it like a body blow, just as she did. Sobering and powerful.

Fiction Feedback provides a professional critique and editing service for writers who are seeking traditional representation and those who are looking to self-publish. Many of our editors work for publishers or literary agencies. We provide supportive, encouraging feedback that highlights strengths as well as weaknesses and makes practical suggestions for how to improve the work.

www.fictionfeedback.co.uk
aware@fictionfeedback.co.uk
‘Looking for love?’ the spam email demanded. Yes, thought Greg, why not give it a go. He’d had it with English girls, or rather he hadn’t. The experience of being abruptly ‘text dumped’ last week was a bitter one. Karen had written ‘Babe, we should cool it’ and he’d replied ‘I wasn’t aware it had ever warmed up!’ Karen had had hardly shown any romantic interest in him, even after he’d bought her generous presents. When he treated her to expensive meals at the local Beefeater, giving her full run of the menu, his searching lips usually found her cold face quickly turning away. She’d made countless implausible excuses for not staying overnight with him. He’d paid for absolutely everything, being unashamedly old fashioned in that respect. Surely some semblance of gratitude wouldn’t have gone amiss in the affection department.

The few girls Greg had managed to date since his divorce were shallow and obsessed with achieving a perfect appearance, too heavily influenced by the vacuous celebrities they idolized. He thought they looked like plastic Barbie dolls, with their spray tans, false nails, in fact false everything, as he’d discovered to his cost when he did get close enough occasionally. He had very little in common with them. None of them was bright enough to share his passion for chess. Why couldn’t any of them see his true value? He was loyal, hardworking and decent.

He clicked the ‘Russian Dolls’ link and entered the intriguing website. The English wasn’t perfect, although infinitely better than his non-existent Russian. Envious of the tantalizing pictures of gorgeous women he decided to pay the extortionate joining fee by credit card. Once the transaction was confirmed the next step was to post a photo. Reluctantly he got up to peer in the mirror. A long, honest look at himself was uncomfortable. His thinning brown hair, growing paunch and thick glasses could be a problem. So instead he found an image online of the man he wished he was, then carefully considered how to word his personal profile before uploading them both.

Seconds later the screen changed. Hordes of beauties appeared who were ‘looking for love with British gentlemen’; or a passport more like thought Greg, who was under no illusions about their motivation. He could select his intended mate by appearance, age, linguistic abilities, education, employment and interests. As he settled down happily to prolonged but delicious deliberation he wished he’d done this ages ago. After an exhaustive search he finally settled on Irina. With her degree in Business Studies, she would be financially independent of him. He deliberately didn’t pick the most attractive girls, hoping Irina who looked somewhat dumpy would just be thankful to be chosen; enough to later compensate for his inaccurate photo.

Still, he thought he was a ‘good catch’ being a homeowner, a flat in Luton anyway, and having a steady job as a counter clerk at a small branch of Barclays Bank. He hadn’t mentioned his interest playing chess amongst his hobbies, thinking it might seem too geeky. He’d listed ‘wine tasting’ and ‘travel’ instead. These at least had an element of truth about them as he had gallons of home brew bubbling away in his kitchen. Every Sunday he watched the trains passing through Luton station, notebook and camera in hand, dreaming of all the journeys he would like to make with his life companion.

* * *

Irina scanned through the web pages looking for a gallant Englishman to urgently rescue her from the drudgery of her drab life in Moscow. Ludmila, her cousin, had found a good match through ‘Russian Dolls’ and now lived in England. She’d suggested joining the agency when Irina’s last relationship ended a month ago. Without exception Irina’s previous boyfriends had been heavy
drinkers and charmless. Oleg had been a brute. She needed to get away quickly and a new life in the West would solve everything.

Greg’s profile looked interesting. He was a homeowner living in Luton. That must be a typing error; surely it should read ‘London’? She pictured a light-filled riverside loft apartment like those on the property sites she loved browsing, dreaming of her future home. Greg was extremely handsome, tall and slim with a thick head of blond hair. He looked like a film star; in fact he looked familiar. Who did he remind her of? He had a good job in banking for Barclays, so he probably worked at Canary Wharf and could provide the lifestyle she craved, with visits to luxurious restaurants and holidays in exotic destinations. All right, she’d slightly exaggerated her academic qualifications, but reflected that she really would have applied to university if she hadn’t failed her end of school exams. She also hadn’t bothered to mention her interest in chess, worried it might put some men off.

Before leaving for her job, cleaning at a hotel, Irina let the agency know that she wanted to find out more about Greg. They were delighted to promote this as they’d been worried she might get stuck on their books.

* * *

That night Greg was overjoyed to see the message from ‘Russian Dolls’ to say Irina wanted to ‘chat’ at 6pm GMT. He poured himself a beer and splashed on some confidence boosting aftershave. It was a relief they wouldn’t be communicating by Skype; they could get to know each other properly first with words and he could establish his true worth before meeting face to face. One serious issue did worry him though. The discovery of his infertility had led to the breakdown of his first marriage. This had been devastating as he’d always longed for a child to share his interests with. However, he didn’t feel comfortable in advertising this to a prospective life partner at such an early stage in their relationship. He thought he should keep quiet about his secret until they got to know each other intimately.

* * *

The drab apartment was icy cold when Irina returned. She shook the snow from her boots as she switched on the heating. Still wearing her gloves she lit the gas and made a coffee, but then didn’t fancy it. Lifting her treasured Matryoshka doll from the shelf she took the ornate nesting figures apart, lining them up along the table in height order. As the room warmed she unwound her grandmother’s scarf, which still smelt of the old lady. Any time now Greg would be online and they could ‘talk’ again as they had done daily since Sunday. Tonight she planned to ask if she could visit him next week, putting this urgency down to a desire to meet him as soon as possible. Fortunately part of ‘Russian Dolls’ service was to offer a very efficient hotline to get quick, if dodgy, visas and book flights, all paid for by their male clients.

Finally defrosted, Irina shrugged off her mother’s brown coat with the frayed cuffs. She touched each doll gently on the head, all those generations right down to the last, tiny figure. Gently cradling this in her hand as a talisman for the future, she stroked her stomach. Better not to tell Greg about her early pregnancy for a while. She’d wait until after visiting him in England next week, when she would ensure that they’d get to know each other well enough for him to believe the baby was his.

* * *

Later, after a rapid exchange of emails, Greg and Irina simultaneously pressed the ‘Make this Match’ button.
Is that vid-cam on? Good. Yes, I know you’re the Laws Enforcement Judgement Review Panel. Yes, I know this interview is being downloaded in real time. Yes, I can explain.

We had a child. A child of our own, I mean. Conceived and born of Suzanne’s body. It was amazing. People came from all over town to see her when she was pregnant. They would stop and point, maybe even ask to touch her bump. Most people have never seen a pregnant woman, have they? There was only one problem. We weren’t married.

I assume you know your history. The Moral Fall? So you know people couldn’t handle the First Technological Age, that they were suddenly given all this power, but with no checks, that they gorged on unregulated web-use, technology-dominated life styles and paid the penalties. Obesity mortality rate as high as sixty-eight percent? Ridiculous, wasn’t it? Crime was rife. Imagine living in a society where you had to lock your door at night? Wars Don’t get me started. People murdering other people, all because they lacked basic negotiation packages. It’s unbelievable, when you think that these days we can download argument solvers free of charge. But worst of all there were the predators. I’m not a predator. No, I’m not. You said you’d let me explain. I don’t prey on children, steal them, abuse them sexually, film them, or any of the other things too disgusting to contemplate. You know that back then anyone could have children, and worse, they didn’t have to prove suitability? They didn’t even have to be married. I read somewhere that some children didn’t even have both parents. What sort of society is that for a child?

Yes, I approve of the laws of the Remoralisation Era. A civilised society needs proper checks and regulations. We can live without fear. We’re safe. So are our children. We just made one small mistake, that’s all.

We never imagined Suzanne would get pregnant. We were both bio-scanned clean and we were just having fun. What are the chances of conceiving when ninety-eight percent of the population is barren? Well, less than two percent because you’ve both got to be fertile. One percent? I don’t know. All I know is that it turned out we were both two percenters. Are you a two percenter? No? Then you won’t understand.

I remember Suzanne staring at me, still clutching the abdo scanner to her tummy. ‘Oh Tom, we’re pregnant!’ She put the scanner in my hand and prodded it into her stomach. ‘Press button four.’

I did. It beeped. ‘Holy shit!’ I dropped the scanner. ‘We’re two percenters!’ Then, ‘But we’re not married.’ I did realise, you see, the problem. We didn’t do it deliberately.

I remember Suzanne panicking, crying. ‘They’ll take it away. I don’t want them to take it away.’

I couldn’t bear that thought. ‘We’ll get married. There’s no reason why we shouldn’t. They won’t take our baby.’

‘It’s too late. We’ll fail the bio-scan. You can’t get married retrospectively. The Moral Laws forbid it.’

She was right, of course. I didn’t know what to do. I just didn’t want anyone to take our baby.

We moved. Within the week we were in a different part of the country, Tom and Suzanne Smith, married one month, eight days pregnant. I scoured the Fix-it sites which help you if you’ve transgressed the Moral Laws without realising, and eventually found a marriage related one. Call after call, each seedier than the last, finally put me in touch with a guy called David who would fix our ident chips to show we were married, for a princely sum, of course. It cost a fortune, but he was
as good as his word and when we scanned our ident chips we registered married. Yes, it was wrong, but what would you have done?

Then Amy was born. It was as if an angel had been visited on us. I couldn’t believe how tiny she was. Each weenie finger, her button nose, her chubby legs. Have you ever seen a baby? I’d never seen one before Amy. In fact, I think I’ve only seen about half a dozen children in my life. When ninety-eight percent of the population can’t have kids they’re not exactly standing on every street corner, are they? In fact if your kid was standing on the street corner you’d get arrested for breaking the Moral Laws. Break the Laws too badly and you are judged not suitable to be a parent. Your child is taken from you. Have you got a steri-tissue? Thanks. Sorry, this is difficult for me. Yes, I can continue.

Amy grew. She was the perfect child. We were the perfect parents. We followed the Moral Laws faultlessly and swanned through the annual parental check-ups with never a question raised about our marriage. In time we even forgot that we weren’t actually married and it certainly never crossed anyone else’s mind.

Then, when Amy was eight, the house burnt down. They think it was an electrical fault in the mainframe box, which is why the internal sprinkler system didn’t trip. We were out visiting friends and got home to a blackened mess. Everything was gone, even our ident chips.

Amy was distraught. She kept crying about her dolly. ‘My dolly! My dolly’s gone.’

‘We’ll get you another, sweetheart.’

‘But Daddy, you know she was an antique. She was irreplaceable.’ It broke my heart.

We were housed in the Administration Refuge House whilst we looked for another home. The Laws Enforcement Agents came. They agreed it was a manufacturing fault and we could claim from the company. ‘We’ll need your details,’ they said. ‘So we can get you new ident chips. Names, ages, date and place of birth. Where and when you married.’

Suzanne broke down. ‘It’s all been too much,’ she sobbed. ‘Could you come back tomorrow?’ The Laws Enforcement Agents were really sympathetic and left us alone. ‘Tom,’ she said when they were gone. ‘Where were we supposed to have been married? I don’t know.’

Neither did I. The man David had fixed our ident chips, but there would be no record of any marriage anywhere else. We had never imagined a scenario like this.

I got on the con-link and called him up. Funny how you forget so much, yet the number of the man I’d given millions to remains engrained on my brain. I didn’t get David though. I got a message saying, “This is the Laws Enforcement Agency. This channel is being monitored. Please disconnect; you will be recontacted immediately.”

I dropped the call and instantly wiped my ident number from the register. David had been caught and we were stuck. I wondered if we could bluff our way through, but you know the Laws Enforcement Agency. They can smell a lie a kilometre away. No offence.

Then I wondered if our priest could help us. We’d been going to the local church since before Amy was born and our priest knew us for good moral people. I wondered if he knew what to do, or even if he would vouch for us. I went to see him and demanded a proper confession with full confidentiality. Then I told him our problem.

He was shocked, I can see that now. A couple he had always thought the perfect example of the Remoralisation Era had turned out to be Law Breakers. He said the Laws Enforcement Agency would undoubtedly find out, but that nevertheless he would speak in our defence at our hearing. I thanked him and said I would let him know if that happened. I wondered aloud if it would be possible to get married anyway, even if it was too late, but he went pale and crossed himself so I went away.

You’ve seen the download of our trial, haven’t you? You must have. He stood there and instead of supporting us he denounced us as pure evil. I was stunned and Suzanne almost had a breakdown. We were such caring parents. If we’d hurt or abused our child in any way, like people used to in the time of the Moral Fall, that would be a fair accusation. But we weren’t evil. We brought up a perfect lovely child. We just made one mistake, before she was even born, and didn’t know what to do next. I’m sure that if it weren’t for the priest we’d still have Amy now. But they
took her from us. I can still hear her screams as they wrenched her from our arms, still hear Suzanne weeping as they drove her away. I don’t care who they gave her to, nobody could care for her, love her as we did. I can’t bear it. Give me a moment, please.

Sorry. I’ll try to carry on. You must know the rest too, I suppose. Suzanne had a complete breakdown and was on medication for three months, until she passed her monthly health check. When they said she was clear they took her off the medication and the next day she went to the priest’s house and assaulted him. They say she broke his jaw. No, I don’t condone violence. She should never have done it. But he lied, and both church law and the Moral Laws say you should never lie. Have you locked him up? You’re a bit selective about your Laws Enforcement, aren’t you? Bitter? Well, if your daughter had been ripped from your arms you’d be bitter too. Word gets round, though. People stopped going to him. I heard they closed his church. Don’t you wonder what other lies he’s told? He should be sitting here now, under investigation, not me. No, I’m not telling you how to do your job, I’m telling you to do it better. We passed our annual parental checks for years because nobody did the full checks. Did you think of that? Being looked into? I bet it is.

Suzanne got two months on the Electricity Generators. Eight hours a day in a man sized hamster wheel, powering the nation. Ten if they were short of manpower. It ruined her health. When she came out we got married. Yes, I know, stable door and all that, but we hoped we might get pregnant again. Then she did a full health scan and it declared her not two percent any more. The Generators had ruined her and she had become barren. And that was that. She hadn’t got Amy, she hadn’t got her health, and the final hope that we might have another child was gone too.

She hanged herself. Are you married? You are? Imagine coming home and finding your wife dangling from the banisters. How would you like that? What have I got now? No wife, no daughter, no life. But somewhere out there is my little girl. Can’t you understand? I’m not a predator. I’m not. I’m not driving the streets looking for kids to steal and abuse. I’m looking for my own daughter. I just want to see her. She has beautiful blonde hair and blue eyes and a lovely smile and this giggle that makes you want to giggle with her. It’s her birthday in two months. I want to know that she’s all right, that she’s happy. You’re sure she is? Well, obviously I can trust your parental checks, can’t I? The checks which didn’t pick up our lie. One small mistake. What other mistakes are slipping by?

Forgive me if I want to check for myself.

That’s my explanation. You think you can get me out? Well, there’s no rush. I’ve nothing to go home to. No, I can’t say I won’t go driving the streets again. Yes, I know if I get picked up again I risk a term on the Generators but I want to find Amy. I just want to know she’s all right. That’s all. Is that so wrong?
I am waiting for him to return. I have filled the time by staring at my reflection in our wardrobe mirror. A slightly plump, middle-aged woman stares back, hair beginning to grey around the temples and eyes rimmed with red. She gazes at hands she no longer recognises, cradling a small piece of paper.

The reflection becomes aware of my gaze and, suddenly self-conscious, her posture changes. She straightens her spine and pulls back her shoulders. Not content with these improvements, she makes further adjustments, tidying away rebellious strands of hair, controlling them with grips that she steals from her disciplined chignon. It is only now, well into her fourth decade, that the years are beginning to reveal themselves.

Perhaps I am like a tree trunk, I think, examining my face. Each line representing a year of my life. I lean forward to count them until the madness of my actions pulls me back into the sanity of the bedroom I share with my husband. I glance down at the piece of paper in my hand. A supermarket till receipt from a shopping trip long forgotten now swept up in spring clean.

**New potatoes £1.89**

I am waiting for my husband of ten years – my lover of fifteen – to return. My faintly ridiculous, slightly paunch ed husband whose socks I have paired for a decade and a half. Seven pairs a week. Fifty-two weeks of the year. 365 pairs per annum. Throughout the course of my marriage I have paired 3650 socks.

I have measured out my life with woollen socks.

**Salad leaves £1.69**

He is a good man, my husband. He remembers to notice and make appropriate comments about my new hair. He has, eventually, learned to call a dress a dress and not a frock. He remembers our anniversaries. His shoulders are broad and water repellent.

We share a history that began in undergraduate days, his passion for philosophy and my passion for poetry embraced. We debated, we discussed, and eventually we declared. Love, it seemed had crept in without us noticing her.

**Fillet steak £10.99**

We have grown together, my husband and I, like the honeysuckle and the ivy in the garden of the house we bought with our first salaries. A Victorian terrace we agreed, with a walled garden. He would tend the vegetables and I would bring colour and fragrance into our little world. The honeysuckle, he whispered into my hair the first summer we moved in, reminded him of me. ‘Beautiful, with a delicate fragrance and capable of pulling down walls.’ I was flattered. Everything he said back then was beautiful and poetic, and everything I replied was philosophical and deep.

I watched as he grew out of his trainers and into his brogues. He witnessed the exchange of my poetry books for piles of marking. Children came into our lives. The honeysuckle flowered and the ivy crept.
Freshly squeezed orange juice £1.75

With children came noise, chaos, love and tears. We traded Sunday mornings with smoked salmon bagels, fresh coffee, broadsheets and leisurely sex for a relentless cavalcade of children’s entertainers, wet, muddy walks in the woods and more unconditional love than we had ever dreamt of. His work became increasingly demanding. Early mornings, late evenings. My work became exclusively the family. I learned to take satisfaction in the simple pleasures. A loaf well raised, a child well mannered, a garden satisfactorily pruned.

Bagels £1.99

The pain was unexpected. It took us all by surprise. There was normal life and then there was sudden, dragging, debilitating pain. We hoped, I hoped, it was something simple, something easy to resolve.

I managed the pain, I kept it from him as best I could, and he worked hard to pretend he did not notice and then there they were. The set of three, the trio, the triumvirate.

Consultation. Diagnosis. Treatment.

Radical hysterectomy – the removal of the womb, cervix, fallopian tubes, pelvic lymph nodes and the upper part of the vagina.

A letter arrives. A date given, the 1st of March. I recall my Gran’s words ‘When March comes in like a lion she will go out like a lamb’. The 1st of March is six weeks away.

For six weeks I am alone, I have my husband, my children, my friends, my family, but I am more alone than I would ever have believed possible. When the world goes to sleep I inhabit the darkness – the space between normality and death. A world where I breathe my last breath over and over again, a world in which my children’s pain is visited and revisited endlessly.

I clear out a kitchen drawer. In the drawer I place boxes. I reason that a year should cover it. Each box has a name, a date, an age and a personal message. I estimate it will be a year before he is ready to send birthday gifts, so I mark the calendar and colour coordinate the boxes.

Six weeks pass, they trick me by appearing to crawl and then stepping up the pace at the last minute. I refuse to allow my husband to witness the preparations for surgery, I send him away. He protests, briefly, and then he leaves.

He will not bear witness to my fear.

Bouquet of flowers £10.99

March 1st – in like a lion. There are complications, and slowly, painfully, there are resolutions.

Life eventually resumes a steady pace. Everything is back to normal, I hear him say into his phone.

I have no womb, my vagina has been surgically reconstructed and I am experiencing the sudden onset of the menopause, but dinner is on the table at six and shirts are once again appearing the wardrobe. Life, it would indeed appear, is back to normal.

His car is pulling into the drive. Without looking, I follow his actions. Like the game on the radio where a song is played for a moment then faded out and the contestant has to sing along until the volume is once again increased and they discover how accurate their timing has been. I play along, I speak his rhythm and I realise that I know him.

Champagne £27.99

Reverse into space.
Open door to check side position.
Nod in self approval.
Glance in mirror to check rear positioning.
Remove glasses using both hands.
Carefully fold arms of glasses in and place atop cleaning cloth.
Fold cleaning cloth over glasses.
Snap shut case.
Pause to look at mobile.
Double check handbrake.
Exit vehicle. Six steps to door.
Key in lock.
Coat off.
Shoes off. Climb stairs.

**Fetherlite condoms. £9.99**

**Date of transaction. March 1st.**

Like a lamb to the slaughter.
For our Group Story this year, instead of creating one complete story in a series of sequential chapters, we decided to each take a specified character from a particular setting and write a piece about them. Dea created the setting, Chorland High School, and provided brief character summaries. Then we each chose one.

We had surprisingly few inconsistencies across the stories, and the overlaps are effective on the whole. So, welcome to Chorland, our local high school, and to the staff and pupils who roam its corridors and narrate their varied stories below.

Chorland High School

Paul, Year 13

Cathy Lennon

Paul loved sprinting around the track after nearly two hours of Physics. It was partly the overpowering sense of escape but also because the track ran alongside the netball court where Jenna Finch had netball practice on a Wednesday. Jenna’s smooth, slender legs went on forever. Years ago, when he was the old Paul, he’d had a nanny from the Philippines whose skin was that same caramel colour. One day he’d licked her arm, to see if it tasted as good as it looked. The nanny had shrieked and hit him with a tea towel. He’d never tried it again but he still imagined Jenna Finch’s skin would taste delicious.

At the finish line he bent forward, gulping air.

‘Going to Rhianna’s party, Saturday?’ Rob Forsyth, a lad whose Physics marks were even worse than Paul’s and who never normally spoke to him appeared by his side doing ostentatious hamstring stretches while gawping at the girls.

‘Maybe.’ The netball practice ended and Rhianna walked alongside Jenna, bouncing the netball as she talked. Paul saw Jenna glance in his direction and straightened, crossing his arms behind his head.

‘You’re 18 already, aren’t you?’

Paul frowned. Rob wasn’t a mate and he didn’t feel like talking. ‘Yeah.’

‘Listen, do us a favour and come to Whelan’s with me after this. We need to buy booze for the party.’

Paul stiffened.

‘Sorry mate, busy.’

‘Tomorrow then?’

‘Dunno. Busy again.’

‘Bastard.’

‘Whatever.’

Paul was the last person into the showers. He took his time getting dressed. When everyone had gone he blasted his head under the dryer. He pushed back his hair and looked at himself in the
mirror. Would Jenna Finch fancy someone like him? He wrinkled his big, asymmetrical nose. Outside, by the breeze block wall that divided the gym from the bike sheds, Jenna stood texting. It was almost as if he’d conjured her up. When he got close to her she stopped texting and gave him the widest, most incredible smile he’d ever seen. It was like the sun coming out.

‘Hi!’
He nearly looked behind him but he knew there was no one there. He tried a smile back, but it sort of wobbled. ‘Lo.’
Jenna pocketed her phone and hoisted her back pack, her sport bags drummed against her golden limbs, now with the added attraction of white ankle socks. He liked the way they made her look sort of demure. Like butter wouldn’t melt all over her and into his mouth. He swallowed.
‘Going to Rhianna’s party, Saturday?’ She had tied her blonde hair into a long plait for netball and he fought the urge to grab onto it like a rope and never let go.
‘Yeah,’ he croaked.
‘You?’
‘Everyone is,’ she chuckled. ‘It’s going to be sick. Her mum and dad are away.’
‘Right.’ Why couldn’t he think of anything to say?
They reached the school gates where a boy and girl from the lower sixth were kissing passionately. He felt heat rising.
‘Want to walk up past Whelan’s?’ she asked brightly. ‘I need a drink. Forgot my water bottle, doh!’
‘Sure.’
She laughed. ‘You don’t talk much, do you?’
He laughed too then, like the fizz when you unscrew the cap off a coke bottle. ‘Suppose not.’
She hoisted her backpack again. ‘Weeell. Why don’t you tell me about yourself? Where do you even live?’
Paul’s smile faded. He’d learned that people could get nasty when they knew you lived in a big house with a shiny sports car parked outside.
‘It’s about half an hour’s walk,’ he said. ‘You any nearer?’
‘Depends whether I’m at my mum’s or my dad’s,’ she said.
‘Right,’ he said. He hadn’t seen his dad for more than a year now. Not since he’d remarried and his mother wouldn’t let him go to the wedding. And when he’d said he was going to go anyway he didn’t think about that night anymore. Though he still woke up from dreams with strobing blue lights in his mind eye and sweat pouring off him.
At Whelan’s she took a long time choosing out of the fridge. He looked up and saw the CCTV camera, watching him with its suspicious eye.
‘What are you getting?’ she asked, appearing by his side with a can of pop.
‘I’m all right,’ he said.
‘I mean, for the party.’ She looked meaningfully at him, bringing her face close to his so that the dark blue line around her pale blue irises drew his stare like a bullseye. ‘We should get something while we’re here,’ she whispered.
Her lips were kissing the air around her face as she spoke, his blood drummed in his ears, the magnetic pull of her body sent waves of longing through him. She moved even closer and he half closed his eyes.
‘Vodka’s good,’ she murmured, the tip of her tongue touching her top lip.
He stepped back, his legs feeling weak, as if he had run too many sprints.
‘I’ve no money.’
‘I’ve got some.’ She was already rummaging in her bag for her purse. ‘Whelan always asks for ID. You have got yours, haven’t you?’
He shook his head, desperate to get out of there now. Outside he could see Rob Forsyth and some others skulking by the bus stop. The understanding was like a slap.
‘Gotta go. Forgot something.’
He made it home quicker than his best time for the 1500 metres. He let himself in quietly, into that too-big hall in which two people’s empty lives echoed. He passed the door to his father’s
old office and saw his mother with her legs up on the desk, her scrawny body slumped in the chair, expensively dyed hair spilling over the arm. An empty glass trailed from her fingers and she looked at him with eyes that struggled to focus.

‘That you, Paul? Be a darling, won’t you?’ she slurred, her smile slipping and sliding across her facial muscles like a deer on ice. ‘Bring me another bottle.’

### Henry, Year 8

Trefor Lloyd

Mrs Hepworth was not an inspirational history teacher. She knew it and her pupils knew it. On this particular day she was tackling medieval history with her Year 8s and just about keeping the lesson on an even keel.

As it happened, history was one of Henry’s favourite subjects but it had taken no more than five minutes of Mrs Hepworth’s plodding delivery before he had switched his mind to other things. His current project was to learn the Periodic Table and he was just going through the Transition metals – vanadium, atomic number 23, bluish appearance, additive to steel; chromium, atomic number 24 – when something Mrs Hepworth said snagged his attention.

‘What was that about Chaucer, Miss?’

A look somewhere between resignation and panic crossed the face of Mrs Hepworth. Experience had taught her that Henry’s precocious interjections usually meant trouble.

‘I said; Geoffrey Chaucer who wrote the Canterbury Tales was born about 1340 in the reign of Edward III.’

Henry had learnt all the dates of the kings and queens of England when he was in Year 6 at primary school and this was too good an opportunity to miss.

‘That’s not right, Richard II was king between 1327 and 1377... Miss.’

‘That’s not what my notes say,’ Mrs Hepworth blustered.

‘Well, your notes are wrong, Miss,’ Henry countered.

In desperation she tried heavy sarcasm. ‘Well thank you, Henry, we all so look forward to your enlightened contributions, but if we could get back to Geoffrey Chaucer?’

But it was too late and she knew it. The tenuous grasp she had on the attention of her class slipped away and the rest of the lesson was spent trying to keep the background hubbub to a level that would not attract the attention of the Head.

‘Henry – wait for me,’ a voice bellowed from the middle distance. Henry turned round to see a corridor full of eager-faced Year 7s all heading for the playground with the single-minded purpose of newly hatched salmon in search of the open sea. Crossing this happy tide with elbows flailing was Bertie.

Henry had never had many friends and was reconciled to the fact that it was part of the price he had to pay for being so much brighter than everyone else. Bertie, he supposed, was the closest he had to a friend although he preferred to think of him more as an acolyte. Henry’s mother always encouraged him to learn a new word every day and ‘acolyte’ was one of his recent acquisitions. He was sure that as time went by there would be lots of opportunities to use it.

Bertie finally arrived, leaving bruised Year 7s in his wake.

‘That was awesome, Henry – the way you got Ma Hepworth for not knowing dates and stuff. Got her knickers in a real twist – she’s such a crap teacher.’

Henry concurred. ‘If she doesn’t know simple stuff like the dates of the kings of England then she ought not to be teaching. I might report her to Ofsted for being incompetent.’

Bertie had no idea what Ofsted was but decided not to ask since he thought it was unlikely to involve either sex or football, and having delivered his message of approbation he headed off in search of more Year 7s to elbow.
It was Friday evening and Henry was settling down with one of his favourite books, ‘Battles of the Medieval World’. It had been a good week, he thought. There was a maths test in which he had come second without really trying; just behind Pikey the class nerd who couldn’t do anything but maths and IT. The periodic table was going well although the Lanthanides were a bit boring. Then he had overheard his parents discussing whether Oxford or Cambridge would suit him better – Henry had already put some thought into this one and decided that Oxford would be preferable, principally because it had the Ashmolean Museum.

Henry idly flicked through his book and by chance ended up at the chapter on the Battle of Crécy. He started to read: The Battle of Crécy in 1346 established the six-foot English yew bow as the dominant battlefield weapon of the time. King Edward III’s crushing victory over the French – and stopped abruptly. That couldn’t be right. 1346 – it must be Richard II. Odd, he thought, it was the same mistake that old Ma Hepworth had made.

Doubt, a very infrequent visitor, crept into Henry’s mind. He turned to the timeline at the start of the book and looked at the dates. Doubt was unceremoniously ejected by certainty but as it left it blew a large raspberry. Henry had got it wrong. For some reason he couldn’t understand he had muddled up the dates of Edward III and Richard II. He had been so sure and yet old Ma Hepworth had been right all along – shit, shit, shit. She would have realised by now – she was bound to check. The thought of his error being paraded round the next history lesson made him squirm. Making mistakes was a painful business, he thought, particularly when you make a point of flaunting your ability from the rooftops.

Of course, to say that Henry had discovered humility would be a gross exaggeration but he had learnt that claims to infallibility are best left to popes.

Mr Francis Dashwood, English Teacher

Victoria Walsh

‘I’ve just had an absolute nightmare first week, I don’t want to repeat that again! And that little... Tasha... she’s full of herself isn’t she...’

‘Ah Tasha, yes you’ve got to watch her. She’s clever all right. I’ve had a few dealings with her.’

Francis leaned in closer. ‘She hasn’t... you know... am sure you talk about... ever got the wrong impression?’

John chuckled. ‘Oh she loves herself I’ll say that, but no.’ He put his hand on Francis’s knee and whispered, ‘A few rejections won’t do her ego any harm.’

Francis sat back, relieved. It was his first teaching job and he was eager to give the wrong impression about himself.

‘Anyway, it’s that Lindsay in Year 10 you want to worry about,’ said John as he stood to go. ‘Oh. Are you on detention duty?’ queried Francis.

‘Ah, we don’t call it that any more, Ted calls it “reflection time”,’ he mimicked using air quoting.

‘A waste of time if you ask me.’

John spun round and replied vehemently, ‘Well, we didn’t ask you, Fred!’ He turned back to Francis. ‘Old school, would still use a cane probably.’

Francis giggled nervously, taken back by the passion in John’s voice. ‘Oh I forgot to ask, fancy a pint after?’ John said, half out of the door.

Francis stood, running his fingers through his hair, deliberating. ‘Yeh sure, why not.’

Hopefully this meeting wouldn’t take long.

Ted entered the staff room. ‘Right, is everyone here?’
‘No, John is on de – I mean, “reflection time”,’ Francis air quoted before he had time to think, causing Fred to snigger. Ted frowned. ‘Err... and Dawn has had to leave.’

Ted shook his head disappointed, ‘Well, for the rest of you, you’re in for a treat.’

Francis couldn’t help but notice Roberta, she really was very attractive. She certainly had a quality about her...

‘Are you listening, Francis?’

He shook his head, trying to focus; her voice brought him back to the meeting.

‘Well, yes anyway,’ continued Ted, ‘it’s a very exciting time for all of us.’

Francis was ready for a pint. Reflection time must have overrun so he went in search of John. He seemed a good guy, did John, but he never seemed to take his job seriously as though he knew it wouldn’t last. He wondered if that was why he disliked Fred, if he thought his role was a waste of time too.

Through the glass window John held his head, gripping his hair, his face ashen.

‘Hey, what’s wrong? Where is everyone?’

‘Gone.’

‘Oh, ready for that pint?’

‘Yeh.’

Francis stood awkwardly for a moment before sitting on the desk opposite John. He put his hand to the back of his head in comfort which jolted John.

‘What happened?’

‘It’s Paul. He used to do all right, no problems but last term he...well, he...’

‘It’s okay, I know you can’t say... It can’t be easy knowing some of these kids’ troubles.’

‘No it isn’t.’

‘Come on’, Francis walked around the table and put his arm around John’s broad shoulders to help him get up. These kids had zapped all the energy out of him.

‘You know, you’re not just a pretty face,’ John said. ‘Most of that lot,’ he shook his head towards the staffroom, ‘wouldn’t have even come in.’

‘Yeh well, I’m new, what do I know.’ They both chuckled.

‘Yes you are,’ John said as he paused a second too long as he looked into Francis’s eyes. Francis grinned back; maybe he did want to make the right impression after all.

Terry Innis, Caretaker

Dave Harrison

Terry felt queer. It was her mother’s expression, one she used frequently before it gained negative connotations and became frowned upon. It was the best way she could describe the way she was this morning as she arrived at school.

Last night had been parents’ night. The usual chaos had ensued and she had been kept very late. It wasn’t supposed to be like that but it always was. An appointments system had been put in place to make sure everyone was seen in a reasonable time. Although it was perfectly simple, it had proved way beyond the capacity of teachers and parents to comprehend. Each pupil had a sheet with the names of all their teachers. They were allocated times for their parents to see each teacher. All they had to do was to turn up at the allotted time, be told how good/bad/indifferent their child was and move smartly on to the next appointment.

The first appointment was five thirty, the last at ten to nine. Everyone should have been out of the hall by nine. Terry could then tidy up, secure the premises and be home before ten pm. Fat chance.
At ten thirty, every teacher still had a queue of at least three lots of parents, most of whom had their child in tow. This was a result of parents latching on to the first teacher they encountered and telling them about the holiday they were looking forward to, the way that school uniforms had increased in price and how things had changed since they were at school. Appointments were completely forgotten and the teachers never checked them, just accepting blindly that whoever was sat in front of them must be there for a reason.

Mrs Close spent half her time talking to parents of children that didn’t even attend her class. Fred Raddish was even worse, routinely rambling on about the wrong child and failing to recognise his pupils even if they were sat directly in front of him.

Chaos reigned as always and last night was a particularly bad example. God only knew what time they finally ushered out the last set of parents, still shouting the odds as they went. It was late, too late to do all the clearing up that members of staff were supposed to help with but never did.

Funny thing, Terry couldn’t even remember what time she’d got home. She couldn’t even remember getting home. No wonder she felt weird today. She couldn’t blame herself for being tired.

The school felt strange, the familiar smells seemed to be absent and she failed to hear the usual cracking of the heating pipes and the cascade of water from leaky cisterns that normally greeted her. The main hall was her first job, moving the tables and stacking the chairs ready for assembly when six hundred reluctant bodies would be crammed in to hear the latest reasons for them all to feel proud or ashamed.

The hall was immaculate. Not only had the chairs been neatly put away but the floor had been swept and polished. Terry couldn’t believe her eyes. She had seen the last teacher leave before she locked up so this had to have been done very early this morning. The only person who might possibly have done this was Valerie Short, bless her.

Terry walked down to the staff room so that she could thank her personally. The whole place looked like it had been thoroughly cleaned very recently. The black scuff marks from thousands of cheap trainers were barely discernible on the wooden floors, and even the walls lacked their usual quota of grey hand marks.

There was a man she didn’t recognise in the staff room, he was vacuuming vigorously and oblivious to her presence. There was something wrong, Terry thought, then realised that the silly guy hadn’t got the cleaner switched on. He was just waving the brush over the floor in crazy fashion. She tapped him gently on the shoulder but he failed to respond. She tried standing in front of him and waving but he ignored her completely. She had two reasons to find Valerie now, a crazy man in the staff room was something she would also need to know about.

Terry walked slowly down to the headmaster’s office. There was something else she had to tell Valerie. Three things now. Thanks for tidying up. The weird vacuuming man. And a very important thing that kept eluding her. It was as if the very action of swimming towards the thought was creating ripples that pushed it away.

The main noticeboard was sparsely populated with sheets of information regarding forthcoming events and recent playing-field triumphs. The rugby team stood holding a silver cup aloft in triumph. Terry felt a sharp pain in her abdomen as one of the faces caught her attention. The memory surfaced with a rush of desperate sadness. That’s what she had to tell Valerie. He’d been there after everyone had left, she’d caught him making his twisted little packages. She shuddered as she remembered his contorted face, stinking breath and the shove that sent her plunging down into the stairwell.

Terry felt queer. It had been parents’ night and she couldn’t remember getting home.
Before you hear about it and get the wrong idea, this is something I haven’t told anyone – OK? He didn’t know he was my first.

The thing is, I’m not sure he was.

My mother always says, ‘whoever knows anything where love’s concerned?’ and smiles wide-eyed, in a flirtatious kind of a way. Men are just men. You just sort of know.

What I do know is he makes a good lasagne. That maths and physics kind of go together.

That he likes history and I like history of art, and run an after-school club – Art Attack.

Art’s my thing, not his, which is sport. He’s pretty fit, Chorland First XI captain. I hear the girls whisper, as he strides on to the pitch – stay to watch the match, and me? I’m not blind.

He’s young, got that Harry Styles kind of hair, and he’s not that arrogant. Not like Mr Darcy Dashing Dashwood, who is simply a poseur, who draws female attention like a magnet. Not mine – and I’ve always hated Jane Austen.

It feels good walking across the quad with my sunglasses on, to the arts group. Out of hours adds to the frisson of excitement and I know I’ve always had rather fit, flickable hair and have seen Dashing Dashwood looking furtively behind The Houses of Asgard – perhaps I’m his Achilles heel – not a chance! He couldn’t draw a glance! I’ve decided to begin with an ‘everyone asking a question’ idea to stimulate friendship, shatter that awkward freshers’ silence. ‘Break a leg’ comes to mind, and I laugh, feeling as skittish as my mum.

A boy is leaning far back in his chair, as far as he can dare, and he stares at me with large blue ‘dangerous’ eyes, my mother would say. I’d dismissed the remark – till now.

‘Have you never seen The Ceiling?’ he asks – looking straight at me. I should have corrected his grammar, but all I hear is a hint of delicious Italian accent. I’ve no doubt he means the one in the Sistine Chapel, until I hear the giggling and shuffling of feet his question draws as he stares me up and down – and out.

‘Michelangelo?’

‘Paulo,’ he replies, ‘and you’re named after that pretty blue flower the Romans liked.’

I cough, and try to hide the blush I can feel. The second time I saw him he taught me how to smoke, laughing as I tried to drag the wrong end.

When we arrange to meet I’m late.

So is he.

When he turns up I’ve got my feet in the quad fountain. It’s hot and my shoes hurt.

‘Not quite the Trevi.’ I hear the accent and turn to see him, jacket flying, hair wind-tousled.

We stare at each other, up, down and he tells me my eyes are Tuscany brown. Brown as the burnt but gorgeous lasagne he makes me in the tiny flat provided by overseas students at Chorland High. Even the cheap wine in cracked mugs tastes delicious as he pushes me on to the sofa, which clearly serves as his bed.

I think I nearly said it then, but that would have made it a Thing, which it wasn’t.

‘Welcome to Roma,’ he said as we kissed in front of a photo of himself and his mother in front of the Sistine Chapel.

‘I’ll send you a text,’ he said.

I didn’t have his number and didn’t ask for it.

‘Paulo?’ I didn’t finish the question.

‘Paul,’ he said. ‘My mother likes to call me that. My father was Italian.

The moment has been fun, flirtatious, carefree, in a wide-eyed way, but was already fading, like a photograph that would not last.

I saw him at the High, said ‘Hello’.

So did he.
Maybe we could have stopped to talk.
But no.
The sense of loss, and the attraction of blue eyes lasted, for a while.
Without it, what was there?
A memory.
Something to hold, tell one day – a story.

Tasha, Year 11

Angela Sim

Tasha had been working hard and achieving good grades. She thought that some good fun and excitement were well overdue. Spending time with Robbie was what she had in mind during the Whitsun holidays, she’d already planned it. The pair of them were inseparable this term even though they’d had some tiffs in the past.

She was inclined to jealousy and possessiveness, even imagining that Mrs Close fancied Robbie. Well, why else would she spend so much time sneaking around whispering to him after Art class!

Mr. Torrance was a little surprised that at last Tasha was behaving. This he put down to Mr. Bridges seeing her on a regular basis to discuss her temper issues, and help with coping strategies. Tasha was finally maturing, working to her ability and maybe one day she’d be a credit to Chorland.

Imagine her distress when she discovered that Robbie was going sailing with ‘Hers Truly’ and husband ‘Mr Lovey-Dovey’. Oh that would be so cosy! Michael was going as well. Tasha pictured the sordid scenario. She loved Michael as a gay friend, but she’d noticed Mr Close staring at him for a moment too long, especially when he was wearing tight jeans. Tasha was perceptive and clever, but emotionally very immature.

School gave permission for the sailing party to break up two days early, as this extracurricular activity was considered beneficial for those involved. Though Robbie had tried to avoid her she confronted him in a tearful rage the day before the trip. He tried his best to console her and promised to speak to her when he returned.

That was really not good enough! She was very angry, not at Robbie, but at Mrs Close. Tasha had been gifted at Art but never pursued it, because she never got on with Mrs Close. Now she was consumed with rage and wanted revenge. All she could think about was how to hurt Mrs Close like she was hurting now. What could she take away from her for depriving her of Robbie?

The idea loomed large and ugly: destroy her precious art work. Besmirch her beloved art room. How quickly now Mr Bridges’ therapy became unravelled. Was this the same girl planning to destroy what could easily be her last chance to evade exclusion?

She spied her opportunity after school had closed. She sneaked in through an open window with the red aerosol paint and sprayed around the art room in a wild frenzy. Tasha came away and walked slowly home. She felt empty inside, not at all triumphant at her handiwork.

This abomination was spotted and cleaned up the same day by Terry Innis the caretaker, who had witnessed Tasha leaving. She knew she was a troubled girl but had a soft spot for her.

Robbie did come to see Tasha after the sailing trip. He was pale and quiet as he told her of the tragedy. She too was grief-stricken for Mrs Close. She regretted so much her rash temper. She dreaded going back to school to face the consequences. But there were none.

Tasha came clean to Mr Bridges, in confidence of course. He wisely said ‘no harm done’.
Mrs Roberta Close, Art Teacher

Wendy M Stuart

Whitsun holidays had come round heralding fine weather that seemed set to stay for some weeks. Roberta Close looked forward to her break that preceded the arduous summer term ahead, so when her husband Lee suggested a sailing trip in the Menai Strait, she welcomed the suggestion. Although it was hardly a peaceful break and was hard work in their new thirty-foot sailing boat, Lee loved it passionately. More than her, she felt.

Their relationship had become uneasy, even though he was often in the school and helping her with the many jobs that always arose in a busy and thriving art room. Two students, Robbie, 17, and Michael, who was now 18, were building a dark room, and although Robbie was the art student, his six-foot-two older friend often came to help.

Thus it was that the conversation came around to sailing, and before long Lee Close suggested that Michael should join them on the trip. Known as a bit of a plodder academically, he was also very reliable, strong and into all sports. He asked if Robbie could come too. Roberta knew that extra crew would make it easier for Lee to sail his craft, and perhaps she would be able to resolve some of the issues that kept arising between them. She wanted to please him, although he was subtly ignoring her at every turn. Lee was becoming increasingly stressed.

There was a lot of excitement and chat amongst the two boys that excluded any of the girls whom they mixed with. Robbie knew that Tasha resented this, but was not prepared to jettison his chance of a sailing trip, in case she wanted to join them too. He had only got his chance because his friend Michael had included him in the deal. So he said in an offhand way, ‘Don’t pester me! I’m only going for a short holiday with Michael!’

Tearfully she replied, ‘You’re going with Miss Close! You can’t fool me! I’ve seen you talking secretly together!’ And with that parting shot she stalked out of the room. Robbie had to leave the matter alone and resolved to talk to her another time. Green eyes of jealousy had entered the arena, he thought.

At the end of term, and suitably equipped with wet-weather gear for all of them, Roberta packed everyone with their provisions into her estate car and set off for the marina in North Wales. It was a fine day which augured well for their plans, and soon they arrived to stow away on the boat their provisions and all the equipment they needed. Each had a safety harness to be worn at all times, and Lee went through all the safety procedures before explaining the roles of his new crew. They were willing pupils, spending the first two days learning how to sail in the Menai Strait, and then mooring up in the evening by the shores of Anglesey before making an evening feast.

In the increasing twilight the lamps were lit. Paul went up on deck to stretch his legs, and was soon followed by Lee.

‘I need to have a smoke. Don’t ever light up below decks!’ he said casually as he ascended the companionway. Meanwhile Roberta, ever mindful of her star art pupil, Robbie, chatted animatedly about his work and progress until his head drooped.

‘Get into your bunk, you’re tired out! I’ll find the others!’ she smiled, but Robbie was instantly fast asleep in his sleeping bag, and Roberta, walking about carefully so as not to wake him, stepped up through the companionway.

At first she could see nothing, having come out of a lighted cabin, but gradually she recognised the deck fittings, the shrouds and seats, but couldn’t see anybody around as she peered into the darkness. So facing the foredeck where the sail bags had been stowed on the deck, she could now make out figures in the dark, and clearly hear the low tones of Lee and Michael who were lying amongst the sail bags, wrapped around each other in a lingering embrace.

Her shock was intense, but she backed off and said nothing. What could she say? It explained Lee’s behaviour, his working with her in school, and his invitation to the boys to join the trip. Michael was practically an adult now, but she wondered if Robbie was at all involved, and
resolved to talk to John Bridges, the pastoral care worker, about it. But Lee was definitely her problem! She decided that she would get through the next few days saying nothing. She lay down in her bunk thinking about what to do, and eventually slept very fitfully.

By morning, it was evident that the weather was not so kind as the previous day. A strong wind blew from the west, and the forecast was not good.

‘I think we should head for home!’ Lee shouted through the rising wind, as the rain started to lash the decks. So with grim determination they all worked with shortened sails, taking it in turns to helm the craft through the increasing storm. It was now very cold and slippery, and at every tack the wind slammed the boom over with great force. The boat corkscrewed through the troughs and peaks of angry water as they made slow progress towards the coast.

‘Lee’s gone overboard!’ Robbie shouted. Michael rushed to look, realising that Lee was still attached to his safety line, but was floating out of sight. Roberta grabbed the radio control.

‘Mayday! Mayday! Mayday!’ Urgently she made the calls for help.

When they were rescued by the coastguards, lifesaving procedures failed to revive their skipper, who had drowned beneath the boat. Roberta eventually drove home. A dejected group faced a battery of questions from police, school and parents alike. Everyone was stunned by the news of the tragedy, for the art teacher’s husband was well liked.

Roberta’s problem had evaporated.

**Robbie, Year 12**

Jeanette Greaves

The sixth form centre had spaces as yet unexplored, offices as yet untenanted. Behind the new Humanities building, past a pile of rubble, was a hastily paved area. Robbie knew that in the original plans this area had been the canteen space for sixth form students, but the money had run out, and the official choices were sandwiches in the common room, or a trip into Chorley to a cafe or a chip shop. Sixth formers were discouraged from lunching with the schoolies. On this rainy nearly lunchtime, Robbie had decided that helping this grey and desolate area to fulfil its planned function was his good deed for the day, and he leaned against a forgotten skip, staring at the moving silhouettes in the windows of the school chemistry lab whilst he unpacked the lunch that Dad had packed that morning.

As he carefully unwrapped the Warbie’s wax paper from his sandwiches, he saw movement at the perimeter fence, someone short, wiry, and in uniform. He sighed and put his sandwiches away.

‘Tommy, c’mere, stop skulking.’

The figure approached him, and leaned against the skip. ‘Wasn’t sulking …’

Robbie grinned. ‘Skulking – creeping around. With a K. What do they teach you kids these days?’

Tommy shrugged. ‘I’ve not got to S yet, still on B. I’m only a Year 7.’

Robbie smothered a laugh. ‘Still, what’s up? You’re on school dinners aren’t you? Why aren’t you tucking into cold pizza and dry chips?’

‘Avoiding Bridges, aren’t I? He thinks I need counselling. Over what happened. You know? When I saw that kid get run over by the bus, in Year 5. It was ages ago, I don’t need counselling. Do I?’

Robbie considered. ‘Well, I’d be shaken up if I’d seen something like that, but young brains bounce back, I’ve heard.’

‘His didn’t,’ Tommy muttered. ‘Or maybe they did, and that was the trouble. We learned about concussion last night.’

‘Last night?’
‘On the telly, Casualty. On Demand.’
‘Oh.’ Robbie tried to restrain the question, but it popped out. ‘We? You and Tash?’
‘Told you, can’t talk to you about Tash. She’ll kill me. Horribly. Slowly. With great pleasure.
Big sisters eh?’
‘Wouldn’t know,’ Robbie shrugged. ‘Anyway, I won’t pry. Not really interested anyway.’
‘Yeah.’ Tommy sighed. ‘We miss you, you know? There’s nobody to fix things any more.’
‘We?’
‘Not Tasha, she keeps saying. But it would be nice, she says, if someone knew about stuff,
like fuse boxes, and how to put a hinge on the door. You’re wasted on A levels. Everyone says. You
should be earning, you know how to do stuff.’
Robbie glanced up, a girl was silhouetted against the chemistry lab window, looking out. He
turned away quickly.
‘Well, I like A levels. I like learning stuff. But I like fixing stuff too. How about I come round
one night after school, maybe when Tash’s got a club, or something? Which door is it?’
‘Bathroom. JoJo locked himself in. Tash’s got French club tonight.’
‘Daft kid.’ Robbie sighed. ‘OK. I’ll bring Dad’s toolbox.’ He paused. ‘Is Bridges really bugging
you, or do you want to talk to him and you’re just trying to be big?’
Tommy shrugged.
‘Go to see him, after school. He has an appointment with a sixth former at half three, but I’ll
persuade them to bunk off so he’s free. I’ll wait and walk you home, pick up that toolbox on the way,
and we’ll fix what needs fixing. Deal?’
Tommy scowled.
‘I said, deal?’
‘OK.’
‘Good.’ He glanced up again, the chemistry lab was empty, the windows dark.

Lynne Taylor

Lindsey sat in her favourite place, the back of the class, from where she knew all she had to do was
keep watching the teacher and he would believe she was listening to him. Like, really, she thought.
Their new English teacher, The Dashing Dashwood as he had been nicknamed, stood at the
front and was trying his best to instil enthusiasm in his pupils but he knew he was failing. However,
he continued with his lesson, ‘Language, any language, is only a set of valid sentences. What makes a
sentence valid? Two things: “syntax” and “semantics”. The term syntax refers to grammatical
structure whereas the term semantics refers to the meaning of the vocabulary...’
On and on, he droned, endless meaningless words as far as Lindsey was concerned. All she
wanted to do was get out of the classroom and into the sunshine. Taking a sneaky look at her watch
she frowned as she realised it would be another three quarters of an hour before she could escape.
Eventually lunchtime arrived and class was dismissed, but not before The Dashing Dashwood
had given them their homework.
Lindsey and her best friend, Stella, sat on the grass pretending not to watch a group of lads
kicking a football about.
‘Look at him,’ Lindsey said as a tall, gangly youth kicked the ball towards them.
‘Hmm, not bad I suppose,’ Stella agreed, ‘but I fancy his mate meself. He’s gorgeous.
Anyway, aren’t you going out with Jack?’
‘Who told you I was going out with that drip?’
‘Your mum, this morning.’
‘I wouldn’t be seen dead with that nerdy guy.’
Lindsey lay back on her elbows and slowly licked her lips and fluttered her eyelashes at the tall gangly youth kicking the football. She had seen many films where a beautiful woman did this to attract the attention of the handsome star and she hoped it would work for her. Unfortunately, it only served to make her look gauche and ungainly and the youth merely ignored her, kicking the football back towards his mates. She tried hitching her skirt up in order to show off her legs, however when she looked at her legs encased in their thick black tights she quickly returned her skirt to its regulation height and stormed, ‘God these bloody tights are awful. They make me bum look big. It’s not even winter yet and we have to wear these bloody things.’

‘Stop moaning. Your legs are great. You’d have something to moan about if you had my tree trunks holding you up,’ Stella declared and then asked, ‘anyway, are you coming on Saturday night?’

All thoughts of the tall gangly youth fled from her mind as Lindsey remembered the unfair punishment she had received over the weekend.

‘Sorry, can’t. I’ve been grounded.’

‘Grounded! You! Never. Why? What’s happened?’

‘Don’t ya know what happened last weekend? You mean Pat’s not told you? You must be the only person round here she hasn’t told. Well, I’ll tell you what bloody happened. I had to cat-sit, that’s what happened.’

‘Cat-sit?’

‘Yeh. Cat-sit. That soddin’ sister of mine, Emma, and her dozy boyfriend, Phil, were going to Spain for a week. Right?’

‘Right.’

‘Well they asked me mum to look after their soddin’ cat while they were away and she agreed. Okay?’

‘Yeh.’

‘Okay. So what happens? Saturday morning they turn up and drop the soddin’ cat off. Along with a crate o’ gear I might add.’

‘A crate of gear?’

‘Yeh, for all the cat’s soddin’ toys and things. You know. Feeding bowls, food, shit tray, that stuff you put in t’ tray, scratching post, fluffy mouse, fluffy ball on a bit o’ string, stupid rubber fish, bed, cardigan, slippers’

‘Cardigan and slippers?’

‘Yeh. Cardigan and slippers. Emma’s given it her best mohair cardigan and Phil’s given it the slippers his mum bought him for Christmas. Mind you I don’t blame him for giving them away, have you seen ’em? But, honestly, her best mohair cardigan? And all so that “the poor little thing won’t get cold and she’ll be able to smell us and know we are coming back,”’ Lindsey added in a wheedling voice.

Stella burst out laughing, ‘Honest Lindsey you should be on the stage. You sounded just like Emma. Anyway, what happened?’

‘Saturday night’s the night they’re opening The Shuttle. You know the new pub on t’corner o’ Market Street? Now I knew Mum and Dad wouldn’t let me go to the opening so I told them I was going for a sleepover at Lauren’s. They’re so thick they believed me.’

‘So? What’s that got to do wi’ cat-sitting?’

‘Only that at the last minute Mother decides she wants to go to the airport wi’ Dad, Emma an’ Phil, and I have to stay and cat-sit!’

‘Scuse me being thick, but why?’

‘Cos Mother and sis says to me,’ in an imitation of her mother’s notorious attempts at adopting a posh voice Lindsey continued, ‘You can’t leave her alone on her first night. She’ll be lonely,’ and then returning to her normal voice she carried on, ‘Lonely! I ask you. A bloody cat being lonely. I reminded ’em I was supposed to be going to Lauren’s for a sleepover but I might as well ha’ talked to mesel’. We began to argue and then Dad put his foot down and said I had to cat-sit.’

‘So you didn’t get to the opening of The Shuttle? An’ I was going to ask you what it were like.’
'Wellllll!'

'Yes?'

'The flight was supposed to be at two o’clock but at about one o’clock Mum rings and says that the flight’s been delayed so they’re going to take Emma and Phil out for lunch and will be back later. They tell me that there’s a tin of salmon in the fridge for the cat’s lunch but don’t mention anything about what I’m supposed to eat! I remind them I’m supposed to have a sleepover and Mum says they’ll be back in plenty of time. Then at half past four they ring again. The flight’s not going out until eight o’clock, and then they remind me to feed the damned cat and add that they’ll be having dinner out but still nothing about me and what I’m supposed to do! Anyway, this means that they’ll be home dead late so bang goes my sleepover, or in other words, getting to The Shuttle’s opening. I was dead miffed I can tell you. Then Sara came round wi’ Alexis an’ Lauren. They nearly wet their knickers when I told ’em I had to bloody cat-sit, and then Sara suggested that we took the cat wi’ us. Like she said, people take dogs to t’ pub so why shouldn’t we take a cat? Well, before I knew what were happenin’ the cat were on th’ lead and we were on our way.’

‘A cat on a lead?’

‘Didn’t I tell you? This poor creature ain’t allowed out on its own. They take her for walks, bathe her, talk to her, probably have nappies for the damn thing at home. Anyway where was I? Oh aye, we were taking the cat to the pub. It raised quite a few eyebrows I can tell you when we walked in wi’ a cat on a lead.’

‘I bet it did.’

‘Of course I had to keep a low profile as they say. I mean someone might have recognised me and given me away to the landlord. I don’t suppose he’d have been happy about having an underage drinker in on his opening night. Anyway we had a good time.’

‘What happened? Did Greg turn up?’

‘Greg was there, so were Tony and John. Do you know Tony has a new chat-up line?’

‘Didn’t know he had an old ‘un.’

‘Yeh, he used to go up to a girl and say, “Sup up quick. You’ve just bagged off.”’

‘Bet his love life’s full.’

‘Well, his new one won’t improve it.’

‘Go on. What’s his new one?’

‘Now he goes up to a girl and says, “Your eyes are like spanners. When I look into em me nuts tighten.”’

‘I bet he’s spoiled for choice wi’ women now. Did he try it out on anyone?’

‘Nah. He was too busy droolin’ o’er wet T-shirt competition, joining in karaoke and getting ratted on half price beer.’

‘I can imagine. Anythin’ else happen?’

‘Not a lot.’

‘So why have you been grounded?’

‘Well, we found out that the cat likes brandy. It got ratted and fell asleep under seat. Oh, and Stuart were there wi’ Gloria. They’re an odd couple. He wears a suit and bowtie and she dresses in a kaftan, turban and Doc Martens. People are getting used to seeing em now though. Not many gawped at ’em.’

‘They seem happy enough. So what else happened?’

‘Just Pat and me got chatted up by some guy.’

‘Who?’

‘Didn’t catch his name. Just some creep.’

‘You can’t leave it at that. What happened? Was his chat-up line any better than Tony’s? Not that it could have been much worse.’

‘I think he thought it were a fancy dress night. Well I hope he thought it were a fancy dress night. White suit, black shirt open t’ belly button, hairy chest wi’ a medallion dangling on it. Very 70s. Well he walked o’er to Pat and me, sat between us, put his arms round us and asked, “Who’s the lucky girl then?” Pat looked at him and said, “The one that ain’t lumbered wi’ you, mate,” an’ bogged
off. He turned to me and smiled; he had yellow teeth and I swear he wore a wig. His chat-up lines were as old as his suit. He actually asked me, “How do you like your eggs in the morning?” Naturally I answered, “Unfertilised”. He laughed and snuggled closer. I thought I was going to be lumbered with him all night, but he fairly ran off when I asked him a question.

‘What did you ask?’

‘Well, what wi’ Tony sitting on one side o’ me, this guy on t’ other an’ table in front I couldn’t make a dive for t’ loo. So I tried to find something to talk about, and then I remembered about the cat sleeping it off under t’ chair.’

‘So?’

‘So, I asked him if he wanted to stroke me sister’s pussy, an’ he ran off.’

Wiping tears of laughter from her cheek Stella said, ‘Sorry I missed it. But it still doesn’t answer the question, why have you been grounded?’

‘Ah, well, you see, like I said, we found out that the cat liked brandy and it fell asleep under my chair. Well I had to carry the damn thing home. It couldn’t walk, it could barely stand up. Mum and Dad went ape when they found out what had happened. I had to tell them see ‘cos the cat was zonked out, completely gone. I thought it was dead! Dad took it to an emergency vet and it cost a hundred and fifty quid! Can you imagine it! A hundred and fifty flipping quid for a dratted cat! They spent a hundred and fifty flipping quid on this damned cat and they won’t even buy me a new mobile phone! Honestly, they have no sense of proportion. Surely I’m more important than a soddin’ cat! They never even asked me what I’d had to eat! They just don’t care about me. I’ve been grounded and the cat gets fresh fish!’

Suddenly they felt spots of rain fall and the lads hurriedly picked up their football and headed for the hall and Lindsey and Stella, with the loss of their entertainment, decided to head for the school canteen for lunch.

Bertie Ramsbottom aka Rammo, Year 8

John Winstanley

‘At boarding school, when one reached eleven years of age one could wear long trousers instead of shorts. What, pray tell, Bertie, have I got to look forward to when it is my twelfth birthday?’ Henry demanded from Bertie while observing Lindsey Swift saunter across the main corridor outside the Library.

As usual, Henry rarely looked directly at whoever he talked to, even the teachers. His stare was fixed at some point above whoever’s head he was talking at. It annoyed Bertie who also hated being called Bertie and had given up telling Henry to call him Bert, or even Rammo as he was known to his friends. Bert was losing patience with the number of times he’d pulled him up about that and using the ‘one’s’ this or ‘one’s’ that – ‘Prat!’ whispered Bertie under his breath.

‘Bertie!’ Henry chirped like a hungry cuckoo chick.

‘Total prat!!’ sucked in Bert and he strained his forehead and shook his head wearily.

‘Did you hear me, my good man?’ the prat continued.

‘Shhhshhh!’ Miss Bateman, the librarian, hissed at the pair of them.

They returned to their reading. Henry was peering down his half-moon spectacles at a copy of something by Oscar Wilde. Bert was Henry’s best friend. In fact, he was Henry’s only friend. No one bullied Henry even when Bert was not about, despite having every reason to – no one liked him and his stuck-up ways. Bert was five foot eleven and had started with hair stubble over a year ago when his voice broke. Like his dad and elder brother, Jake, he had been ‘an early developer’, which is how Doctor Phillips summed it up. Bert and Henry were the casualties in the chaos of a broken home situation. Bert’s dad had had an affair with Henry’s mother. She took Henry with her and moved in with Bert just as Jake moved into a squat two years ago. When the divorce came through her ex-
Chorland High School

husband refused to pay for Henry’s private school in Rugby. Henry had started at Bert’s school two terms ago and had been a pain in Bert’s backside ever since.

Bert was re-reading a feature in last week’s edition of the New Musical Express about a band called Dirty Laundry who Bert had been to see at The Ranch Bar in town six months ago. ‘All right but nothing special in a Slush Puppies meeting the Rabid Dogs with moderate violence provided by Chanting Skeletons kinda way’ is how he had summed up their gig in his diary.

Bert haunted The Ranch Bar and never had a problem getting in. His height, deep voice and muscular build from starting judo lessons at six years old gave him an appearance way beyond his age. Jake is Head Barman at the Ranch Bar and no one seemed to mind when Bert came in as he collected glasses and was a reliable source of information in passing band names to the sound engineer and venue promoter Wesme Giro. Wesme Giro wasn’t his real name but it was in keeping with the punk tradition to dodge the benefit snoopers.

Wesme, or Wez as Bert called him, was the elder brother of Tasha who Bert secretly adored, both at school and whenever she came to The Ranch – which was most nights.

Tasha was always in trouble at school but she was one of the select few given legend status by the Year 8s. She never wore her full uniform to the standards of the school dress code. The teachers had always been on her case until she moved up to the fifth form. Maybe, Bert thought, the Head had had enough and declared a truce in the fashion war on Tasha – who never once backed down – never. Bert admired her ability to argue back at teachers whenever she was challenged in public. He had been in the schoolyard that day at the start of last term when Tasha almost got expelled for smoking when caught by Miss Innis – the school caretaker. The schoolkids referred to her as the spy of Valarie Short, the Deputy Head – Shorty’s Stooge, or, as Bert had dubbed her, the Undertaker as she was always sneaking about measuring the kids up and working out ways to bully pupils she took a dislike to! On that day, just before the 9 a.m. bell, Tasha was walking into the playground from the Mason Road side entrance that few people used as it went via the council estate where muggers and druggies hung out. Tasha and Charlotte were sharing a cigarette and, as Tasha was about to stub it out as she crossed the boundary line at the gate at the edge of the football pitch, up went the shrill cry from the Undertaker –

‘Come here this instant, Natasha Ashcroft and Charlotte Rostron, and bring that cigarette with you!’

The pair didn’t break their stride even when she yelled, ‘Hurry up, you two!’
They sauntered up to her casual as you like, and Tasha asked, ‘What?’
‘What!’ roared the Undertaker.
‘Yeah, what – is something up with your hearing, Miss?’ said Tasha.
The Undertaker’s face boiled red as she wrestled with the impudent remark yet confident in the belief she had finally secured undeniable evidence to get the pair expelled. Most of the pupils in the schoolyard had circled for the showdown.

‘You know that smoking is not permitted on school grounds and it will get you both expelled...what have you got to say to that before we go and see the Head?’ the Undertaker declared with glee.

‘This is homework, Miss, we had to do in the holidays – a debate on smoking, to argue a case in favour or against the continuation of the tobacco industry.’ Just as the Undertaker’s lips started to open for a rebuke Tasha continued, ‘Yes I know what you’re going to say, Miss, we are taking our research far too seriously by actually smoking but we felt we had to be able to appreciate how disgusting this habit is to have any credibility for our argument to ban this horrendous Industry that kills thousands if not millions of people worldwide each year and has done for centuries – when is it going to stop!’ Tasha turned to the audience, who all knew she smoked like a broken exhaust pipe whenever she was outside school and had now latched onto the mocking speech she was delivering. ‘And so I say to you all – especially you kids in Year 7.’ Tasha’s eyed the smallest in the assembly and nodded in unison with Charlotte.
‘I have purposefully come into school on this first day of term to warn you of the poison that is in cigarettes to make you aware of the dangers to your lungs and I am grateful to Miss Innis in calling you all to witness the pair of us ceremonially put a stop to smoking once and for all.’

She held up the stub of the cigarette for everyone to see and then let it fall to the ground and stabbed her gaze at the withering Miss Innis.

‘Miss Innis, will you join Charlotte and me and make a stand against this abhorrent practice by stepping on to that stub and stamping out smoking forever?’

All eyes focused on Miss Innis who was gawping like a fish, nodding and waving her head from one side to the other, not sure what to say when Tasha grabbed her left hand and Charlotte her right.

The two girls raised them up and Tasha shouted, ‘Three cheers for Miss Innis who will stamp out this cigarette butt with us – let me hear you cheer in support. Hip-hip...’

‘Hooray!!!’ the roar went up from everyone in the schoolyard.

‘Hip-hip!'

Again the crowd cheered with stifled laughter and on the final chant Bert could see the Head and Deputy Head with a few teachers peering out of the open window in the staff room that overlooked the yard. He was certain he could detect a look of disgruntled admiration from the Head.

That was what fascinated Bert in Tasha – her disarming rather than confrontational manner. It gave her a unique charm amongst her peers. He identified with that and her aura, which lit up any room she was in or the school corridors along which she appeared to float rather than walk. All the boys in Bert’s year lusted after Tasha in that immature way pre-pubescent kids do while waiting for the balls to drop – egging each other on with tales of sexual exploits with celebrities or the select few older girls at school. He had listened to their rumours about how Jamie Rostron had spied Tasha semi-naked one day when she was on a sleepover at his house. Jamie’s sister Charlotte was Tasha’s best friend and he snatched a glimpse of Tasha through the key hole as they got into their pyjamas. Apart from demonstrating how big her tits were with both hands not only in a groping way but also how fishermen would gauge the size of the one that got away, Jamie boasted another detail that Bert refused to believe, but one that elevated Tasha to legend status. He said that in that briefest of moments as the pair of them were jiggling about in excited girliness he had seen a tattoo of a pair of hearts under her ample breasts and a daisy chain triangle around the border of her pubic hair.

‘Yeah, right: all that in a brief second and through a keyhole – bollocks’ is how Bert dismissed it whenever Jamie brought the subject up.

Charlotte, Year 11

Dea Parkin

I don’t know how she does it, my best friend Tasha. She messes about in class, she’s always forgetting her homework, she gets detention after detention – but all the teachers love her and every week she gets straight As. In almost every subject.

Me, I swot away, I don’t go out with the girls because I’m sweating over an essay or researching a geography project or revising for another horrible maths test – and if I get so much as a B it’s break out the bubbly.

And she’s pretty without trying. In the loos, me and most of the other girls hustle in front of the mirror with all our little bags and pots and wands and gels. We’re not allowed to wear make-up, of course, but we do, well all the girls we bother with anyway. We spend ages making ourselves look as fantastic as possible without it being obvious. All except Tasha. She waltzes into the loos, always having a laugh with someone; she glances in the mirror, slides her fingers over her cheeks and then puts her hands to the bottom of all that thick smooth hair and gives it a bit of a bounce, and that’s
that. Honestly, it is. Yet all the girls in the years below think she’s Pixie Lott or somebody and all the lads fancy the pants off her. If she wasn’t my best friend I’m not sure I’d like her so much as I do.

Anyway, today’s a bit different. It was her birthday at the weekend – we went to Bella Italia and the cinema, a big gang of us – pity I didn’t get to sit next to her – and she’s brought in some really cool earrings she’s got from her sister. Real diamonds. Course, she was told not to bring them into school but this is Tasha we’re talking about, never does as she’s told. Only now, she’s lost them. We’re not sure when – she had them out of her bag showing everyone at registration before Miss Short came in to take class, and she thinks that’s when she put them in her desk – we must be the only school left in the twenty-first century that still has old-fashioned lift-up wooden desks in a couple of classrooms – but after first period they weren’t there.

‘Charlotte,’ she says to me, eyes all huge, ‘what have I done with them?’

It’s rare you see Tash at all put out, she usually smiles and takes everything in her slinky stride, but this is really important.

‘Have you checked your bag?’ I whisper.

‘I’m sure I put them in my desk,’ she says, but pulls her satchel – brown with pink and yellow owls, really cool – into her lap and starts decanting the contents on to her desk. Then Mr Raddish comes in to take us for physics.

‘Tasha Ashcroft,’ he says, in that false smiley way we all hate, casting a glance at the heap of books, purse, notepads, pencil case, cosmetic bag, tissues (clean and wrinkly), hair clips, water bottle, sandwich box, tennis ball, screwed up jacket, charging cable, mobile and Kindle, ‘I thought the table-top sale was yesterday. Am I mistaken?’

And she mutters, ‘No, sir,’ and he waves an arm towards her stuff like he’s casting a spell, but really he’s telling Tash to shift it. Pees me off when teachers don’t tell you what they mean.

‘That’s a mess, Tash, put it away,’ would have done, and never mind the dig about the sale. Why be unpleasant?

Anyway, no sign of the little green velvet case that contained the earrings, and I think she emptied the bag.

At break, quite a few of our mates came over.

‘Let’s have another eyeful of those sparklies,’ says Rebecca.

Tasha looks too stressed for words so I help out.

‘She’s lost them.’

‘Yer what?’

‘Gone missing.’

‘God, no! The other girls stare at me, and then at Tash, but her head is back under the desk lid again, as she goes through all the books and piles of crap she keeps in there.

I help her by taking everything out, text books, the lot, and piling it on my desk, but the earrings have vanished.

By the time the bell goes for lunch she’s started to think somebody must have taken them.

‘You can’t believe that,’ I say, though I can understand why.

‘I don’t want to,’ she says, looking around the classroom from under her fringe. ‘But where’ve they gone, Charl? They can’t just disappear into thin air.’

‘What do you want to do?’

‘Hang on a min,’ she mutters, ‘wait and see if everybody goes out.’

But they don’t; even after the last knot of lads finally dawdle their way out, still analysing some soccer game, three or four girls hang around offering sympathy in the form of unhelpful suggestions, and Tash can hardly start a classroom desk search while they’re here.

We end up sloping off to the canteen, but Tasha can’t eat her butties and I end up scoffing her goat’s cheese and chutney on oatmeal. Very nice too, though I was worried I might come over a bit unfeeling, but she doesn’t seem to notice. She just sits there and frets. Still looks good, though, and one of the sixth form lads goes past and wallops her kindly on the back.

‘Happy birthday, Tash,’ he says. ‘Hope you had a good one.’
Tasha turns and smiles and murmurs something but as the lad strides on I see her eyes move beyond him to the table he’s recently left, where more sixth form boys are eating. Robbie is among them and I swear I hear her sigh. It’s at times like this I know she misses him.

This afternoon, poor old Tash pays even less attention than usual and as the hands on the classroom clock head inexorably towards three o’clock and home time, her face becomes a grey colour like a lighter shade of her school skirt and her hair hangs lank. Apart from when it’s dripping wet, I’ve never seen it like that before. No one came over in afternoon break, and Tash spent the time frantically hurling her stuff out of her bag and chucking it back in again for the third time.

The bell rings, everyone kills themselves to dash out of the classroom and soon it’s just me and Tash, who doesn’t move, and a few of our mates who wander over. Ghouls.

‘What ya gonna do, Tash?’ asks Lisa. ‘What ya gonna tell your sister?’

Tash just shakes her head. ‘I don’t know what I’m going to do.’ She doesn’t seem inclined to get up and Lisa and the others, spouting words of encouragement, sidle off. I stay sat at her side, silent till they’re gone. Then I lean across, pat her hand.

‘It’s OK. We’re going to go through your desk again, nice and steady. Every time you’ve looked so far you’ve been panicky and rushed. So, let’s be calm and methodical, and see what turns up.’

We take our time, and Tash perks up a bit at the activity, and as we move aside her brick-like Chemistry text book, I feel around the edge, and where the hard cover overlaps the pages there is the little velvet box, trapped invisible between.

Tash shrieks and flings her arms round me, and we dance around the classroom together, laughing and yelling, and suddenly it’s a good place to be.

‘You’re the best friend ever, Charl,’ says Tasha, ‘I’d never have found them without you.’

‘Course you would,’ I laugh, as we open the box and admire again the diamond studs gleaming inside.

‘No, really. No one else was any help, were they? There was only you that properly bothered. You’ve been brilliant. Thanks ever so much.’

Her bus comes first and I wave her off as it belches and judders away from the stop. She looks so happy at the window, entirely back to her glamorous, glorious self. Well, good. I wanted to see her without her fizz for once, but only for a day. She is, after all, my best friend.

Fred Raddish, Physics teacher

Walter James

Science labs were always on the top floor, some relic of the days when ignorant designers thought the chemistry lab might explode. Fred usually cursed as he climbed that last flight of the stairs, but today, even though it was Monday, he didn’t. Smiling and whistling, in a world of his own, he almost bumped into Vera, the Physics lab technician.

‘Morning, Vera, how are you?’ He went on, smiling, ‘Is everything ready for period one?

‘Yes, Mr Raddish, you’re doing electrostatics with Year 13, I’ve laid everything out for you.’

During morning break, Fred, as usual, did not grace the staff room. It was a long walk down all those stairs and then all the way back up again. He sat doing his marking as Vera busied herself laying things out for his next class.

‘Vera, who was that young teacher I bumped into this morning? I’ve not seen him before.’

‘Oh, that’s Francis Dashwood, the new English teacher.’

That solved the mystery of what he had overheard in his walkabout of the Year 13 class in period two. Fred always saved time by writing up his progress notes as he watched the class working. He had noticed how the girls, even Scilla who he’d always thought to be level-headed, seemed to have the hots for some new man.
Fred winced, remembering how Scilla had even referred to him by his Christian name. Clearly, he thought, it won’t be long before he’s out of here. Marking had always been easy, but those lesson plans he had to write, with targets and progress records for each pupil were not to his liking. It had never been like this when he’d started teaching. No matter, soon all this would be behind him.

Glancing up from her work, Vera watched as Fred diligently continued his marking. She was almost certain she’d seen the ghost of yet another twinkle in his eye. The thought crossed her mind; he’s never this cheerful on a Monday. If I didn’t know better, I’d think he’d been taking little white happy pills over the weekend!

A clairvoyant Vera was not, but right at that moment Fred’s thoughts were not so far away from little white pills. The pills he was thinking of were the hundreds stolen from the hospital by his dear wife Agnes. Agnes, also coming up to retirement, was Matron in one of the recovery wards and for years now she had been signing off larger numbers of morphine tablets than the patients were actually consuming. Fred, in turn, had been selling them on.

Over the years, it had all been so easy. Agnes was so proud of her Fred. It had all been his idea. The ‘salami technique’, he had called it. You took just a small amount each time so it always went unnoticed. For his part, Fred had been quite the salesman. Finding regular customers for drugs that could only be had on prescription had proved all too easy. The hand-overs had always been the hazardous part but there’d never been a problem, and tonight was to be the last of them.

He and Agnes now had more money than they would ever need. Their villa in Spain was finally paid for and the Spanish bank account was brimming over. Fred’s teacher’s pension, when it did come, would only be the gilt on the gingerbread.

Just a tinge of sadness washed over Fred as he thought of missed opportunity. Physics teachers were now in such short supply. If only he’d not been so greedy. Old Albert, Ted Torrance’s predecessor and Doris, the previous Deputy, had both been such soft touches. Ofsted, being the way it was, had replaced them with the present two dragons, and they both insisted that his early retirement would have to wait. Then he smiled again as he remembered all the suitcases of cash he and Agnes had salted away in Spain. The sleepless nights from all that could now come to an end. Tonight was to be the last of his deliveries.

Pacing yet again round the multi-storey car park carrying the last of his packages in an Asda bag, Fred’s old bones were feeling the cold. The customer was never this late. He wished that all those years ago he’d learnt to drive and right now had a warm car to sit in. A Jaguar’s tyres squealed as it came up the ramp, and seeing that its number plate was the right one, Fred walked confidently towards it. Then his heart pounded, the familiar face he’d expected was not there and men were getting out from its back doors. He turned quickly to walk away as firm hands took him by his arms.

Vera, as always the early bird, entered the lab the next day to find a note from Mr Torrance saying that Fred, for the foreseeable future and for all his classes, was being replaced by supply teachers.

Mrs Dawn Hepworth, French & History Teacher

Sarah Calwell

Type out the observation for the SLT. Write up the lesson plan for the EAL. Teach MFL, teach AQA History. Intend to dye hair. Buy some hair dye. Buy some YSL foundation online; birthday present for sister. Use next day home delivery service. Deliver to the school. Tell the receptionist there will be a parcel arriving. Apologise for the inconvenience. Buy the school receptionist some M&Ms to say thank you. Buy a card for sister’s birthday.
Mrs Hepworth clawed at the sticky tape, trying to find the end. Sealing the French grammar poster to the wall she overlapped sticky tape over sticky tape. She remembered a crack in the wall. A crack that had preyed on her mind for a while. It had preyed on her mind for at least a whole term. Someone had inserted a tiny camera into the crack. A camera with a microphone. The sun burnt through the windows spotlighting the cracks in the walls of the classroom. Mrs Hepworth was irradiated with UV for her daily dose of Vit-D.

She had a small cyst on her neck that itched and tightened as it filled with liquid. Every few days she scratched at the cyst and the juice was sticky on her fingers. She wiped her fingers on the back of the handouts and inspected the transparent smear. A probe had once been inserted into her neck. This was the scar.

Arrange an MOT for the MX5. Decide what to do with the YGT pupils; challenge them. Book the laptops from the ICT technician. Arrange a meeting with the SENCO for an update on the ASD and AD(H)D pupils. Make a to-do list during PPA time. Buy some work trousers from M&S. Book the iPad for the TA. Re-read the CAF.

The pupil – her nemesis – was a boy. The first day Mrs Hepworth had taught him he’d said ‘Excusez-moi. Je suis Mikel. Je suis de la France. C’est un cours de français.’

A white hair fell onto her cyst. She scratched at the irritation. Five years ago her hair had started going grey; she was twenty-nine years old. When the boy had started at the school her hair had started to turn white. This couldn’t be a coincidence.

His greased-back hair, his smug demeanour. The confusion in her mind had begun when he had started at the school. Her brain had felt hot. Her scalp was crusty, her hair was dry. Her hair had started to fall out. Was she being poisoned with $^{210}\text{Po}$? Microwaved at 300GHz? She placed the handouts on the pupil desks in preparation for the lesson. She sat down at the teacher’s desk and squeezed the warty cyst on her neck to excrete the toxic fluid.

She wrote the boy’s name on some paper: Mikel, Mikel, Mikel, Mikel, Mikel.

Gather information from NQTs and the HLTA and the TAs. Gather information on the boy. He came from an EU country. Gather information from everyone. Raise the concern in the RACS briefing. Get his CATs and SATs scores and find out how intelligent he is.

Mrs Hepworth put down her pen. She looked at his name on the sheet of paper. Lines and lines of his name, Mikel, Mikel, Mikel. She felt the boy watching her. The boy had slipped into her classroom, silently. For a moment, he had lingered by her side, undetected. He had watched her writing his name over and over again. Mrs Hepworth jolted. The skin around the cyst was tight, stretching the sweaty skin on her neck. The boy had disappeared. He had made himself vanish. She looked back at the page. She spoke his name, Mikel, Mikel. She wrote his name backwards, lekim. Le Kim. Kim Philby.

In her mind she repeated the to-do list. Adding one more crucial item:

Find out who the boy is working for. MI6 or the KGB? Or both?
'S is for Sell the benefits not the features,' Leonard Breck hissed as he began his lecture on the seven steps to closing a sale. Each word vacillated between the serpents of Eden to Moses, fresh from his chat with God. The Executives Board referred to him as LB – the bank’s most successful salesman in the post Financial Services Act world of Howarth, Sterne, Beresford and Co. Lying Bastard is how I remember him and the pinstriped grooming he did with me and countless other employees during the late 1980s and early 1990s when all common sense evaporated like the company’s profits during the decades of mis-selling.

‘A,’ he continued, ‘is for Acknowledge the customers’ questions and...’ he held out the index fingers on both hands and slowly pulled them onto his lips, then added in a hushed whisper, ‘pause.’ The spell of silence mesmerised the innocent and naive trainees we once were. He captivated, intoxicated and lured away innocence, ruining all our futures. We didn’t know any better and believed in the cult of LB because of the position of trust the firm had bestowed on him and the others he recruited to his ‘ring team’—so called because they made the cash registers ring with the sound of commissions!

The court case confirmed the sordid details...too late. He was an unlicensed bookmaker’s clerk when a one-night stand with the tipsy teenage daughter of one of the executives enabled him to force a junior role with the City’s oldest private bank in return for marrying her once the pregnancy was confirmed.

‘L is to Let them continue to exhaust all their,’ he paused, faked a bemused smile and continued, ‘I was going to say objections but I like to refer to them as...’ he waved his hand dismissively,‘...as ...concerns.’ LB beamed his searchlight smile across the audience, drilled his eyes into the centre of the room and carried on, ‘Before you I—Identify that they have valid points which,’ he nodded the next words, ‘many satisfied customer had in the past, before you G...’ he brought both sets of fingers together and pointed them like a pair of pistols, ‘...Gather your closing summary together by way of asking for their...’ he raised his smoking pistols to his mouth and blew, ‘I—Informed decision to... AAAAAyyyyyyyyyA’ another pause, and then, slapping both hands together with a loud clap, he raised them above his head in triumph, ‘...and the crowd went wild...ask for their Agreement to proceed!’

On cue, the auditorium crescendo into applause. Those at the front stood up causing a ripple effect as the others did the same all the way to the back. LB stabbed the air like the many backs of those who got in his way...

That flashback to the glazed expressions of euphoria melted into the reality of despair on the faces of the customers giving evidence. The beguiled and misguided were seduced by LB’s promises of fantastic investment returns or the addition of payment protection to loans and mortgages which he introduced.

At my first and only meeting with Regional Sales Manager, Morris Richardson, he handed me his silver fountain pen to sign my employment contract. He said my integrity shone out during my interview when I stressed that as sales spiralled up, their rise had to be matched by an increase in the level of paper work necessary to ensure quality was not compromised.

‘Integrity,’ Mr Richardson said, seizing my hand and, as his grip tightened, he added, ‘is like your virginity, once you lose it you never get it back!’

He was ‘retired’ a month later. His generation had maintained the pillars of the bank’s reputation carved through centuries of wars, famine and governments.

Six months into my appointment, I submitted a request for extra staff to cope with the administration. I was told to squeeze more out of the resources I had. I complained about the inefficiency and warned that our best advice principles would be compromised. My memos were
ignored at the time but the copies I kept were used as evidence of whistle-blowing that was not investigated by the senior executive.

Yes, my lord, I was there when Leonard Breck and his disciples penetrated our loyal client lists and slaughtered their assets. But I was a lone voice in the desert, preaching compliant sales to a hierarchy brainwashed into the cult of this new religion. Eventually, I was told that my services were no longer required following a reshuffle of the sales divisions.

‘Has anyone any questions?’ LB asked dismissively as he glanced at his gold Rolex.
No one had anything to say – stunned by his brilliance, he thought, no doubt!
‘What if they still say no?’ The feeble voice of a pin drop sent a wave of heads 180 degrees in the direction of a delicate flower of a girl two rows from the back.

‘What?’ LB said incredulously.
The girl sucked in her bottom lip.
‘Speak up!’ LB barked like a border guard.
The girl gasped as if prodded with a cattle iron. She shook her head and whispered, ‘Nothing. S-s-s-sorry to interrupt.’

LB sneered and mouthed to the majority of men who made up the sales force, ‘Women!’ He shook his head in disdain and declared, ‘Right, lads, the bar is open and the first six pints are on me!’

* * *

‘Is this the best contract I can sign, is it my only option?’

Mrs Stone’s eyes sought reassurance from mine. In the briefest of moments I sensed the wax of fate dripping on my soul and sealing my future.

Mrs Violet Stone was recently widowed. Her husband, Jeremy, had only been retired from the Merchant Navy for two years when cancer seized his prostate and sucked away his last breath. The Stones had been customers of the bank for thirty years and Violet had asked for advice on managing the estate she had inherited. This was February 1989 and I was serving a month’s trial at the flagship branch in Manchester. Sales were queuing out the door in the run up to the end of the tax year. It was the dream start to my career and I soared through the next two months, with 200 per cent of my Q1 target delivered in mid March, when I met Mrs Stone for the second time.

‘Violet! You must call me Violet, Mr Chessington.’

‘Yes, Mrs St– I mean, Violet. Now, tell me, what did you think about the booklets I gave you at our first meeting?’

‘Well, they all looked very professional – images of Caribbean beeches, expensive yachts, cars and jewellery – an impressive printing job!’

Was she being naive or mildly sarcastic, I wondered?

Violet graduated from St Martin’s Art College at the turn of the 1960s, making her reputation in men’s fashion amongst the swinging elite of London’s Carnaby Street. She met Jeremy at a party for the opening of her girlfriend’s new boutique. Eight months later they were married and living life to the full in a modest, two-bedroom flat in Wapping.

‘That was the time when all things were possible; liberation from our parents, the grooviest music, coolest styles and mind blowing drugs – oh and the sex of course!’

I liked Violet.

I knew a glossy brochure and LB’s seven steps could not dupe her into signing what she did not trust. But, I was hesitating – what was pulling me back? It was May and my sales had plummeted. Mortgage season had soaked up my interviews and none of the policies I had sold counted until the house moves completed later that summer. I felt all the branch staff were holding their collective breath for me to pull off this deal with Violet, having told them that it would smash the whole month’s commission shortfall. However, investment advice for portfolios as large as Violet’s had to be with a recommendation to the client that they refer to an independent third party to satisfy the Government Regulations of best advice. We did this in a tie-up to a firm who paid us for introductions, but this was a fraction of the value of the business if we did it ourselves. I did not
need to risk drawing Violet’s attention to this detail and the wording was deliberately buried in the small print.

I heard myself saying, ‘Jeremy and you have trusted us for decades and have we ever let you down?’

‘But is it my only option, Simon?’ she interrupted my spiel, and hearing her stress my Christian name jolted me back from the edge.

This was the moment I suspect all salesmen encounter at some point in their career when honesty is put to the test. Do you do the right thing or not? Do you let down all who depend on you and face a barrage of disappointment? To put yourself through the grilling over the one you let get away! I pictured the disaster unfold in the weeks ahead, my career tainted – a small hitter and not destined for the top flight. I’d be passed over and condemned to a sub branch in No-one-knows-where-shire.

Mr Richardson’s word washed over me.

‘INTEGRITY!’ His ethereal voice cleansed my dilemma.

Drawing the deepest of breath out of my own epiphany... ‘No, Violet. No, this is not the only option. There is an alternative, let me show you...’

I went on to explain what I knew I had to. Let the walls of Jericho fall if they must, but this was one soul that would remain intact and pure.

* * *

‘Leonard Breck, the jury has found you guilty of professional misconduct which led to the collapse of one of this country’s oldest banks. The financial hardship of the majority of the customers you dealt with and the reputational damage your schemes and practices have caused at the heart of the City will take years to recover from, if they recover at all. The public can take some comfort in the fact that your miserable career is at an end and I regard your case as the worst example of the cancerous excesses caused by the idolatry of self that I have had the misfortune to preside over. By the power invested in me I sentence you to twenty years in prison. All your assets will be sold to help compensate the customers you stole from and those former employees of Howarth, Sterne, Beresford and Co who were dismissed unfairly.

A roar of cheering and spontaneous clapping from the public gallery and the Queen’s benches went unchecked by the judge. Finally someone was being held to account for the years of austerity and soon there would be a flood of similar cases against other City fat cats and the negligent regulators who had presided over the scandals. Leonard Breck bowed his head in resignation as he had ever since arriving back in the UK after his deportation from Bermuda.

I read an article some weeks later entitled ‘The Seven Deadly Sins’, which had an alternative interpretation of LB’s seven sales steps. Pride, Avarice, Lust, Envy, Gluttony, Wrath and Sloth; the modern translation from the Latin of Superbia, Avarita, Luxuria, Invidia, Gula, Ira and Acedia!
Victoria Walsh

A twitch of their necks, they had found what they sought. If they remained soundless, they would have advantage. Despite the night damp, their bodies were warm from their hearts pumping blood at speed.

‘Hey you!’
The arrogant youth’s mind was pulled from a lingering moment with his boyfriend into a dark reality. His instinct didn’t tell him to run.
The pounding of his heart swiftly followed.
Two faceless men, his mind caught up.
‘Stamp his hands!’
The youth dropped and covered his head, muffling his screams.
My Kit Bag

Jacqueline Pemberton

Mother’s hands knitted these socks,
Which now are caked with mud,
If only I could turn back the clock,
Before my life was steeped in blood.

These boots Father proudly polished,
Before he waved me off to war,
My dreams of glory not diminished,
Alas, now they’re thick with gore.

This is a lock from my sweetheart’s hair,
To give me hope when I felt alone,
Ours was a love so true and fair,
Now in another’s arms she doth roam.

This is my kit bag once packed with dreams,
So quickly I bundled my youth away,
Believed the lies, the old men’s schemes,
Now battered and broken on the earth
It must stay.
I don’t know why I’m writing this. Possibly it’s in the forlorn hope that if I write it I won’t do it, but I will. Tomorrow I will kill my sister, Sally. It’s all planned. I know I could change my mind but I won’t.

For four long years I have slaved for the bitch, but no longer.

It all started when I met Doctor Grainger in the supermarket three weeks ago. Was it only three weeks ago? It seems longer. I quite literally bumped into him with the trolley and we got talking.

He said, ‘Hello, Karen, you’re look a bit peaky, are you feeling all right? I trust Sally’s looking after you?’

I told him under the circumstances she was in more need of looking after than I was. ‘Under what circumstances?’

Surprised I replied, ‘Her heart, doctor! She has pulmonary heart disease as you well know!’ ‘What? There’s nothing wrong with her heart.’

‘Nothing wrong with it? But she could die.’

‘Rubbish. Sally’s heart’s as strong as an ox.’

‘You mean she’s not dying?’

‘Dying,’ he’d laughed, ‘not a bit of it. She’ll outlive both of us.’

I don’t remember leaving the supermarket or driving home but I must have done. I didn’t mention meeting Doctor Grainger. I only told her later, after I’d planned it. With her constant moaning, nagging and demanding, she’d driven our parents to an early grave but she damn well wasn’t going to drive me to one.

It was two days later when I told her. I went into her room, where she lay in bed as usual, arranged her pillows and straightened her bedding. Placing her library books on the bedside table I said, ‘By the way, I met Doctor Grainger in the supermarket the other day.’ Did she really go a little paler or was it my imagination? I thought a little lie wouldn’t do any harm so I continued, ‘He said he thought I looked a bit peaky and suggested a holiday would do us both some good. I agree with him, what do you think?’

‘Karen, you know we can’t afford a holiday. It would cost too much. You only get a pittance at the nursing home and I can’t go out to work, my health simply won’t let me.’

‘I think we can afford a week. It’s out of season so it’s cheaper and quieter now. To be honest, Sally, I’ve not been feeling too well lately and I could do with a break. We can’t afford for me to be ill – who would look after you if I was? And I think a break would do you good too. Do you remember when we went to Hills Point in Cornwall with Mum and Dad? We had a good time and we could probably afford a week there. What about it? Doctor’s orders, remember.’

The thought of my being ill and her having to do something for herself won the day and, with a modicum of reluctance, Sally agreed.

That was all it had taken and here we were, three weeks later, on holiday and everything going to plan. We had been here now for three days and every morning we had risen early and taken a gentle stroll along the lonely cliff walk. Tomorrow would be different. Sally would have a fatal accident and I would be bereft, with everyone telling me it wasn’t my fault, she’d just walked dangerously near, too near, to the edge of the cliff and lost her balance.

In my mind’s eye I could see Sally stumble and tumble over the edge, sailing down to the jagged rocks and the crashing, crushing waiting waves.
22 June

I don’t know why I’m writing this. Possibly to say I did it. She’s dead. I killed my sister. The plan was perfect. We rose early and went for our usual lonely walk. She stood at the edge of the cliff. Nobody witnessed the gentle push I gave her. I saw her stumble and tumble over the edge, I watched as she sailed down to the jagged rocks and the crashing, crushing waiting waves. My sister has had a fatal accident and I am bereft with everyone telling me it wasn’t my fault, she’d just walked dangerously near, too near, to the edge of the cliff and lost her balance. My sister always made perfect plans.

Signed: Sally
Blown-Over Oak Tree

Walter James

An acorn which stayed hidden
As the squirrel came along
Became a tiny sapling
Slowly growing tall and strong.

Centuries later, still standing
On soft and boggy ground
A mature and ancient oak tree
Tall and big and round.

Bending in the face of storms
With slow and rhythmic sway
Till a wind that was too much for it
Made all its roots give way.

After centuries of healthy life
As a lord amidst the wood
It now lies waiting on the ground
To serve another good.

This oak, like all its progeny
That grew in years before
Will soon become a victim
Of the woodsman’s axe and saw.

Our oaks which once made tall ships
The high seas for to roam
Are now the balustrades and panels
Used to grace someone’s fine home.

But ground that once was covered
By the old oak’s leafy bower
Will live again and take new life
With blossom, bloom and flower.
My Father’s Rowan Tree

Wendy M Stuart

We went to Talkin Tarn one day
To walk in woods, sweet smells of pine
Mixed in with graceful native trees
White blossoms mingling, tingling, teasing breeze.
Underfoot twigs snapped and cracked,
Hiding deadwood toadstool ring.
Found tiny Mountain Ash, now seeking light
Stem so fine; green shoot, twin beetle-wings,
The cotyledon, promising a future height,
A four inch embryo seedling.

Long tap-root binding, winding, guiding down,
Strong, determined, searches leaf-mould ground.
My father said, ‘We’ll plant it in this old grey pot,
We’ll guard it well, for it will grow.’
In time my little Mountain Ash
Became my Rowan Tree. Like Bonsai of old,
Restricted by its small glazed cache, it bloomed,
With roots curled round, curtailed its size,
Yet flourished now in miniature, so strong, controlled.
It formed its ancient compromise.

My father aged and shrank in size, but kept the Rowan Tree
Beside his creaking bed. In nursing home he watered it.
‘This little tree will outlive me!’ he said.
‘My Buddha calls me to a higher plane,
The next transient state to meet!’
His wise blue eyes foretold his end, so old, so cold!
In garden patch my warm tears flowed
While planting deep our Rowan Tree
From sapling to maturity, it spread its roots
Beneath old ground now safe, so cool, so free.

Now branches sway in tune to passing breeze,
White fairy flowers that catch the daylong sun
They metamorphose into seeds soon gone.
Red tasselled berries, seen throughout the trees,
Iridescent blackbirds swoop down one-by-one,
Sharp beaks now pluck the fruit they see
So I sit here, watch timeless clouds drift by
Where flocks of wild birds now feed free,
I remember time with Dad at Talkin Tarn,
Who somehow lives for ever in that tree!
Handle with Care

Victoria Walsh

After two months of delay she held her breath. She hoped it evoked what it had in the exhibition.  
Inhaling, her fingers flickered over the words: ‘fragile, handle with care’. She retrieved her only pair of scissors. The only thing they usually sliced were the strips of fat from her bacon.
‘Oh my!’ she beamed.
An array of colour filled her vision and there in the corner in complete contrast stood a young black and white girl with fiery red eyes.
With a love of art but not enough funds to be an original collector she was drawn to amateur exhibitions.
This particular painting had gripped her. Searching into the depths of the little girl’s eyes, a flood of emotion thrust itself to the surface. Finally, the curator had intercepted and she’d immediately bought it.

* * *

‘Tony, I thought I asked for those reports by two, why aren’t they on my desk?’ said Zara in a cool tone.
Tony had only been at the company for two months but long enough to be aware of Zara’s moods.
‘I’ve had to get those spreadsheets to –’
‘Are you having trouble prioritising?’
‘Err, no...there’s just...’
‘Well, what are you waiting for?’ Zara gestured towards the door and Tony recoiled. ‘Sure, no problem, Zara, I’ll get them straight to you.’
For a moment she felt guilty at being so harsh, he came across as so fragile, but she was done with waiting and felt as though she had a renewed energy today.
Zara gave her mind to the black on white page for the afternoon. It was two hours later when she realised Tony hadn’t delivered what he promised, causing an explosion within.
‘Where is he?’ Zara stormed to his desk, making Jane jump.
‘Oherr...he was making the brewsss...’
‘Brews!’ Zara’s head spun towards the kitchen, sniffing.
‘Is that bacon I can smell?’ Tony nearly choked on the sandwich hanging out of his mouth as he saw her, almost scalding himself as tea sloshed over the rim.
‘Don’t worry, Zara,’ he mumbled, quickly losing the butty, ‘they’re done, here.’
Tony put the brews down and picked up the report. Black and white pie charts reflected back at Zara.
A powerful surge of emotion gripped Zara.
‘Colour!’
‘Zara?’
‘I want to see COLOUR!’
Tony tried to step out of her gaze.
‘I see...you’re...’ Tony stumbled as he frowned at Zara, ‘red...’ he whispered.
‘Yes, Tony, colour! Red!’
Zara picked up the scissors on the desk and before Tony could trail her movements her hand slashed back into his sight.
‘RED!’
Screams echoed in the room.
I am writing this as a death-bed confession and if those bloody doctors let me down I’ll kill them so, for their sakes, I’d better die! But before then I suppose I’d better get on with my confession as I’m not sure how long I have left.

Sixty-two years ago I murdered Kevin Watts. I was nineteen at the time; not nineteen like these modern girls, I was nineteen and innocent and naive. Well, we were back then.

Kevin Watts was in his mid-twenties and quite good-looking and I was flattered when he began to show an interest in me. Every night he would ride home with me on the bus, every morning he bought his daily newspaper off me on his way to work, and sometimes I would go for lunch to a small cafe down the road from the newsagents and invariably he would stroll in. We became friends, nothing more you understand, and when he bought a small car I was delighted when he said he’d take me home after work one night. Our friendship had been growing for about five months when it happened.

It was late one Sunday afternoon and I was on my way home after attending church, well you did in those days. I wasn’t surprised when his car pulled up at the side of me, in fact I was quite thankful and more than a little delighted. The road home was fairly long and lonely and although it was not even four o’clock in the evening the dark clouds of an imminent thunderstorm made it seem more like midnight and there were no streetlights along this dark, friendless lane home.

I got in the car and we set off but I didn’t reach home that night. I was found lying in a ditch the following morning. I was battered and bruised and had been raped. The police said that my assailant had obviously left me for dead! At the time I couldn’t remember anything about what had happened. For several days all I could remember was sitting in church and that was all, nothing about walking home or the attack. The police came to see me in hospital but that was all I could tell them. Nothing.

I remained in hospital for about three weeks and when I returned home my parents banned all conversation regarding my ‘accident’, as they called it. The police came again to interview me several times after I returned home but, as I still couldn’t remember anything, they soon left me alone.

One day it was announced that I was fit enough to go back to work. Mr Simpson, the man who owned the newsagents, had kept my job open so I went back behind the counter. He was very nice and I remember him telling me that I could go home if I felt at all anxious or worried at any time. I never took him up on his very kind offer even though I must admit there were moments when suddenly my nerves would get the better of me and I just wanted to scream, run and hide from my demons but I refused to let whoever had done this to me win.

Then my memory started to return. I didn’t tell anyone. It would have been difficult to do so, even if I had wanted to, as my parents still banned all conversation regarding my ‘accident’. It wasn’t an immediate return, more of a gradual one. At first I remembered leaving the church and walking down the road, then I remembered getting into a car, but there was no sense of fear with any of these memories. That came later, in my nightmares.

Eventually the inevitable happened and I remembered everything. I say inevitable because, although many people never remember everything and some don’t remember anything, I knew that this was not going to be a luxury given to me. It came back in fits and starts. First, like I’ve already mentioned, I remembered walking out of church and down the road and getting into a car. Then I recollected that it was Kevin’s car I had got into, and then I remembered driving down the long, lonely, dark lane. I recalled telling him he had missed the turning for home, and how he had laughed and said that he was taking me on a mystery trip. Suddenly I was afraid and I didn’t know why.
Usually that was when my nightmare ended and I would wake up shaking and bathed in sweat. The terror I experienced at these memories would leave me feeling sick and prevent any further sleep that night.

Finally, one fearful night I remembered it all. How he had eventually stopped the car and told me to get out as he wanted us to go for a walk. I didn’t want to go for a walk, I wanted to go home but he shouted at me to get out. It was dark, cold and raining. Thunder shook the ground and lightning slashed open the sky. This was no weather for a walk. I remembered arguing with him and trying to get back in the car. I remembered how we had fought and then my mind would go blank, recalling nothing. I think I have blocked out the next few minutes or hours as the next thing I remembered was him flinging me down in the ditch and his horrible, cruel, hideous laughter slowly fading as he walked back to the car. It was that manic laughter that came back to me so fearfully in my nightmares.

All this had taken time, so much time that he had struck again. I knew it was him. I knew he’d done it. Every day for weeks the newspapers were full of it. They reported that the body of a young woman had been found dumped by the side of a lonely country lane and that she had been raped and beaten to death. The police urged anyone with any information to come forward and I did consider going to them and telling them what I knew but I was sure it would do no good.

You see, I had since found out that Kevin was married and that his wife was a browbeaten woman who was under the doctor for her nerves. I had no proof it was Kevin, and if his wife gave him an alibi, and I strongly suspected that under his brutal influence she would, then I would probably be dismissed as either a neurotic or a vengeful rejected lover. No, not for me such name tags.

I swore though that his last victim would be his last victim, his very last victim. So I set about making my plans. It was all surprisingly easy really once I put my mind to it. My brother, Clive, had often played cowboys and Indians when he was younger and I knew that his bow and a set of his wooden arrows were still in the attic. Also in the attic stood an old tailor’s dummy that my grandmother used to use when she made clothes for her family. This dummy had often been the target for the arrows of my brother and his friends so a few more holes in it would be disregarded. I began to slip unnoticed into the attic whenever I could and practise my shooting. Luckily, probably because I had also sometimes been included in their games, I soon became quite proficient with my bow and arrows, finding the target of the human heart quite easy to hit.

Now all I had to do was lure my intended victim to his grave. This was also surprisingly easy. One lunchtime I rang him at work and told him that I had remembered him picking me up in his car on the day I had been attacked and I wondered if he had seen anybody or anything after he had dropped me back at home. He sounded worried, as well he should, and said that he hadn’t seen anything or anybody but suggested that maybe if we met and talked about it then something may come back to him. I pretended to go along with this theory and happily agreed to meet him and didn’t even baulk when he suggested we meet at the ditch where I was found. Just how heartless could this callous creep be, I thought, as we made our plans. Needless to say he fully agreed with my suggestion that it would probably be better if we told nobody about our meeting as it may appear shocking or gruesome to some and may even alert my attacker.

We agreed to meet on the following Monday evening at seven o’clock. It was exactly twelve months to the day since my attack and six months after his attack on his last victim. I remember thinking his death would be a very suitable anniversary present.

The night was calm but cold and, as I walked towards the woods, I was glad I’d wrapped up well. Earlier that day I had secreted the bow and a couple of arrows in the cleft of an old oak tree where I was pretty sure they would be well hidden and not easily found. This proved to be the case as when I returned that night there they were, waiting for me.

I saw Kevin’s car stop beside the ditch and watched as he got out. Slowly, I crept forward and took careful aim. I knew I only had one chance of a clear shot as after that he would have been warned and would have tried to escape. Although I knew I was quite proficient with my bow and arrow I also knew I was not that good; I doubted I would have been able to hit a moving target.
target was clear and my aim was good and my arrow flew straight through the heart, or what passed for a heart in the body of this cold callous creature.

Now came the gruesome bit. I had to remove the arrow and leave no evidence. These days they have something called DNA but there was nothing like that then, in the early fifties. I ran over to his prone figure and tried pulling the arrow out but it wouldn’t budge. Frantically I pulled and tugged but it remained firmly embedded in his body. Eventually I had to put my foot on his chest and with one frantic heave I dragged the arrow out. Luckily the gods were with me and the ground was nice and dry so I left no tell-tale footprint on his coat. Running back to the woods I collected the bow and the other arrow before returning home.

Two days later father had a garden bonfire which, along with the hedge clippings and tree branches, also consumed a bloodstained wooden arrow. The bow and the second arrow I’d already returned to the attic.

My mother always said ‘Your sins will find you out’ but she was wrong. Nobody ever did find out who murdered Kevin Watts or why. His wife remarried and had two children and four grandchildren and has lived happily ever after. I married and had three children and five grandchildren. I was heartbroken when my darling husband died two years ago, but apart from this I have lived happily ever after as well. Not once have I regretted or felt any remorse about what I did. I am now ready to meet my Maker and my husband with a clear conscience.
Men get prostate cancer
It’s quite common in UK.
Over forty thousand get it
And that could be you one day.

Most will show no symptoms
But just the few who do
Will find peeing slow and difficult
And spend a long time in the loo.

If your dad or brother had it
You will just have to be brave.
It’s at any age over fifty
When our prostates misbehave.

Then it’s a finger up your backside,
Any doctor does it well
They can check if all seems normal
And there’s no unusual swell.

In UK it is the highest
In men’s cancer deaths, we learn.
But it’s usually non-malignant
And then no cause for concern.

But if obesity and high blood pressure
You can just make stay away
You may live into your dotage
And die some other way.
Once upon a time I lived in the curious land of amateur dramatics. It was filled with other people like me, provincial and decent with mortgages and modest aspirations and even more modest acting ability. It was a cozy comfortable world of Alan Ayckbourn comedies and whodunnits with French windows and bodies behind the sofa. Then one day Bill arrived.

Bill was not one of us; even before he spoke, you could tell he was from a different world, an alien land of bed-sits, dirty finger nails and fitful employment. He was very thin and smoked a lot and had the air of a nervous rabbit – always looking round to see if he was being followed. His hair was heavily Brylcreemed and combed into a quiff somewhat in the style of a 1950s Teddy Boy and he wore a suit; always the same suit with trousers which had somehow shrink-wrapped themselves around his spindly legs. He said he wanted to give acting a go so we did our best to be welcoming, albeit in a slightly condescending, middle-class way. He was even given a part in the latest play; only two lines but he seemed pleased enough and to his credit he turned up at every rehearsal and duly said his two lines, but otherwise just sat and watched.

This particular theatrical production involved a leading lady who was a headmistress of mature years. She was tall, slim and rather imposing in a headmistressy sort of way; however, she lacked much in the way of a bosom. I mention this because, for reasons which escape me now, the character she was playing was required to be in possession of an improbably large one. And since it was clearly central to the artistic integrity of the play, this disparity between the actress and her on-stage persona became the subject of much debate and discussion amongst the cast. It was at this point that Bill suddenly discovered his voice.

It soon became apparent that we were very fortunate to have Bill in the production since breasts were something about which he knew an awful lot. For a start he appeared to have an encyclopaedic knowledge of the support structures – bra types, sizes and makes, fixings and adjustments. The sort of detailed understanding which I was sure could only have been gleaned from years spent studying lingerie catalogues. And he left us in no doubt that this scholarship was backed up by extensive field research in the bra and knicker department of his local Marks & Spencer.

All this experience meant that no one thought to question it when Bill assumed responsibility for the design and construction of an appropriately extravagant bosom for our leading lady. To begin with, he brought in photographs to demonstrate the possibilities – presumably for the benefit of those of us who were unfamiliar with big breasts. Bill had photographs of the pendulous and spherical, the convergent and the divergent, the lopsided and the perfectly balanced, of the only just about qualifying and the outright intimidating. Whatever evolution and circumstance had conspired to produce, Bill had pictures of them all. But the one remarkable thing about Bill’s photographs was that they concentrated on breasts to the exclusion of all else; no faces or arms or even torsos – just breasts. Clearly, here was a man whose devotion to his chosen subject would brook the presence of no extraneous or distracting detail. There were those who said Bill had a mammary fixation but I always felt that didn’t do justice to the extent of his single-mindedness and dedication when it came to this particular aspect of the female form. Although, to be honest, I was never quite sure whether his interest was purely theoretical or whether it was backed up with practical hands-on experience.

As far as his current project was concerned, the problem that exercised Bill particularly was the need to devise a bosom which not only satisfied his aesthetic sense but also replicated the weight and dynamic characteristics of the real thing. He mulled over the possibilities for some time and proposed a number of different solutions. The rolled-up socks were not a great success nor were the various pieces of fruit he suggested. In fact the leading lady refused point-blank to go on stage
with two honeydew melons attached to her chest. But after much discussion a compromise was reached and our long-suffering headmistress agreed to water-filled balloons. I have an abiding memory of Bill standing in front of her, with his long thin hands animatedly forming the shapes of impossibly pneumatic breasts. And when he had finished sculpting them to his satisfaction he stood with hands upturned weighing his creations and smiling beatifically because he knew they were just right.

When it came to performing in front of an audience, the play was a great success; Bill said his two lines and the headmistress with the enormous boobies stole the show. We never saw Bill again after the last night – he slipped away as unobtrusively as he had first appeared.

But I like to think that somewhere in a faded seaside bungalow, a Brylcreamed Bill is still sifting through his photographs and remembering with satisfaction his own very distinct contribution to the world of theatre.
The weather had been wet and cold for most of the day and I had thought of not turning up for night school, but it had taken a long time for me to save up to pay for the course. I just had to turn up.

It did not help that the bus was fifteen minutes late and it was standing room only, full of passengers in soggy coats and dripping umbrellas.

The windows of the bus had misted over so I had to keep ducking my head from time to time to check if my stop was next.

It was then I noticed a young man with a fixed gaze on me. He was around twenty to twenty-five wearing a grey woolly hat, and a zip-up cardigan under a tweed coat which had the odour of a wet dog.

He was sitting down and I was strap-hanging with one hand and the other holding my text books in a plastic bag with passengers wanting to alight from the bus. At times I had no alternative but to lean over him, then unexpectedly I felt his hand quickly move up the inside of my jeans and stay there for a moment. Yes, I know I should have said ‘you dirty bugger’ but before I could utter a word he looked up at me and said ‘sorry love’. However the look in his eyes told a different story. They were cold, hard and full of hatred.

My stop was next, and I was so glad to leave the bus and that man behind.

The night school was well attended in spite of the bad weather and all too soon it was over by 9.30 p.m. My fellow students and I decided to go down to the local pub for a quick drink before home.

I left the pub about an hour later and walked to the bus stop. Odd, there was no one but me waiting. I took a look at my watch, damn I had missed the last bus, it had already been and gone.

I only had my student travel card, no cash, no mobile, and no one in my flat who could take a reverse call from a call box.

Only one thing to do: walk the eight miles home. Anyway I was a fit strong walker. Thankfully it had stopped raining but was still very cold.

The main street which by day was a vibrant busy place with people, cars and buses going back and forth now took on a more sinister tone; the dark shadows of the shop doorways, the street lights casting a ghostly yellow veil over the deserted buildings, a cat suddenly flying out from nowhere. Panic set in, I did not want to be here.

Then I became aware of the click-clack of my heels upon the pavement. They echoed with each step I took in this empty street giving out advance knowledge of my presence, so I took my shoes off and continued in my stocking feet.

Then a car stopped just in front of me and my heart jumped. The driver called out, ‘Young lady, can I give you a lift?’

I replied, ‘No, I live in the next street, but thank you,’ and crossed over the road and went down an alleyway and hid behind a large square rubbish container at the back of Morrisons until I was sure the car had gone on its way.

Five minutes later I stood up, collected my text books and shoes and was about to continue the walk home when a hand was placed over my mouth. My eyes met those of my attacker – yes, it was him, the man on the bus.

He said, ‘Bitch, you should have accepted that lift from the old man! You remind me of my ex, she was a very bad girl to me, she had ginger hair like you.’ Then he hit me and I felt the warm blood trickle down my face.

The physical force was too great. All I could hear was ‘DIE YOU BITCH!’ and then nothing.

My dead battered body was found by the rubbish container two days later, my ginger hair cut off, my throat slashed. I was still holding his army dog tags.
The Blush of Greening Apples

Elle-Marie Hinchcliffe

We lay and ate sweet hurt-berries
dreamed, drowsed, touched
while the ripe south wind rose.

Birds began to sing of love,
a ring-a-ting, a ring-a-ting
A bee, determined to sting
before its passing, hovered
We squabbled needlessly,
sun-dappled greening apples
blushed, fell to earth

You began to pack the picnic
Cloud shadowed your profile
darkened your brow –
and how different you seemed
quite plain
not cool
but cold

beneath the fall of rain
The in-flight meal is sausage and mash and I’m reminded of Roberto. It’s our last night in Italy. Derek has had his nightcap and is ready for bed. When I say I fancy another, anyone would think I’d suggested an orgy. ‘Who in their right mind would want to stay up drinking when it’s an early start in the morning?’ Derek is the master of hyperbole – another drink has become a binge.

Our evenings have been rigid: half a bottle of wine with dinner followed by a walk around the cobbled streets of Malcesine before returning to our hotel for the nightcap. One evening Derek let his hair down and had two. The next day he complained of a thick head and refused to do it again. The problem with Derek – one of the problems with Derek – is his belief that whatever disagrees with him will naturally disagree with me.

I look around the candlelit tables and see couples, normal couples, talking in whispers, laughing, drinking. My mind is made up.
‘Early morning or not, I would like another drink,’ I tell him, testily. ‘Then you can have it on your own. I’m off to bed.’

I watch him disappear into the hotel without so much as a backward glance, and I’m suddenly overcome by a sense of giddiness. I feel as though I’ve been chained to a rock and someone has come along and released me. The sense of freedom is overwhelming. From my little table on the decking, I look out across Lake Garda at the twinkling lights between the recesses of black mountains and give an audible sigh. I think about the holiday, the splendour of Italy, and I imagine how much more magical it could have been with the right person. Take the opera. Sitting in that vast arena in Verona listening to some of the finest voices in Italy sent shivers down my spine. Not Derek’s because he wasn’t there. His problem would not allow him to sit on a stone step for three hours even at the expense of missing the best-loved chorus in opera. So I went alone. Ah, Nabucco!

There were other disappointments. I wanted to take a trip to Venice, that most romantic of cities, but Derek reminded me we’d already been there once and to pay another visit would be nothing short of extravagance. Some things just wouldn’t be the same on one’s own so I didn’t make a fuss and went along with what Derek enjoyed most—criss-crossing the lake by ferry, occasionally stopping off at a picturesque resort for lunch and the briefest stroll. His other problem, swollen ankles, restricted walking, especially in the heat of the day.

Roberto sends my thoughts tumbling into the night as he steps over to my table with a glass of red wine and collects Derek’s empty tumbler. He’s been winking at me all week but I’ve played it cool and responded with no more than a coy look. Realising I’m on my own, he finds an excuse to speak to me. I’ve been waiting for this moment since I first clapped eyes on him.
‘Would you like some peetza? I’ve got a cancelled order.’
I look up into a pair of dark, smouldering eyes. He winks. ‘I am quite peckish,’ I tell him. Derek was running short of cash so we’d skimped on our evening meal. ‘Only what type is it, if you don’t mind my asking?’
‘No, no. Eet’s funghi, pomodoro and salsiccia.’
I feel myself go limp at the words. The Italian accent is so romantic. ‘What’s salsiccia?’
‘Sausage. Eet’s good.’
‘I’m partial to a bit of sausage,’ I say. He winks.
I eat the pizza and order another red wine. Be damned to Derek. I’m on holiday and it’s my last night. He owes it to me after keeping him in clean underpants and shirts all week. He never brings enough clothes with him.

The tables begin to empty as, arm in arm, contented couples make their way to the hotel. Apart from the sound of water slapping against wooden stilts beneath the decking and the clinking
of glasses as Roberto flits from table to table clearing debris, all is silent. I sip my wine and feel tears prick my eyes as I sit in a state of perfect happiness, my whole being in harmony with this beautiful night. I want this moment to last forever.

‘You are sad, no.’ Roberto is standing in front of me, an empty glass in each hand and a look of concern in his eyes.

‘On the contrary, Roberto. I’m happy, too happy.’

‘Maybe too much happy make you sad.’

I laugh. ‘Yes, something like that.’ I hesitate before asking, ‘Will you have a drink with me, Roberto?’

He glances around the empty tables, clicks his heels together and bows. ‘Sì, señora. What you like me get you?’

I look at my empty glass but don’t fancy another red wine. I suddenly wave my hand in the air in a grand gesture, at the same time shocked at my own impulsiveness as I call out, ‘Fetch champagne, Roberto! Tomorrow I go home.’

‘Ah, Dom Perignon. Mmm, perfect,’ I say with no idea of cost or quality. Derek doesn’t care for champagne, says it’s not worth the money. I watch as Roberto carefully untwists the wire holding firm the cork and eases it out with his thumbs. A loud bang and it flies into the air, creating a parabola before dropping into the lake with a gentle plop. Expertly, he catches the foaming champagne in each flute and passes one to me. Our glasses touch with a chink, and we sip the cool bubbling wine.

We soon fall into easy conversation interspersed with laughter. We talk about families, jobs, our respective countries; anything except married life. Roberto makes me feel alive. He takes out a packet of cigarettes and holds them out to me. I haven’t smoked in years but I take one anyway. I can feel the devil breathing down the back of my neck as Roberto flicks his lighter and holds the flame next to my cigarette. The familiar taste hits the back of my throat as I inhale deeply. Apart from a slight fit of coughing, it’s as though I never quit. He refills my glass and we smoke and drink in silence for a while. Though we speak no words, there is language in our eyes. Our fingers touch across the table and twenty thousand volts surge through my body. I lean over to him and whisper, ‘Kiss me, Roberto.’

‘Are you going to eat that sausage?’

‘What?’

‘Your sausage.’ Derek has noticed I haven’t touched my lunch. I shake my head and swallow hard. The sight of food does little to help my nausea.

He leans across and stabs it with his fork. ‘Mind you, I’m not surprised you can’t eat after last night. When Roberto dragged you to our room at 3 a.m. he told me you’d necked the best part of a bottle of bubbly. Talk about embarrassing. What was the last thing I said to you?’

‘Oh, shut up, Derek, I feel queasy.’ I reach for a sick bag.

‘And then you throw up over my going-home clothes. You couldn’t even speak properly you were that far gone. All you kept saying was, “It must have been the sickia.” Well, you can say that again. I’ve never seen anyone in such a state. And another thing, have you any idea how much that champagne cost? We could have stayed another week for the price of that overrated rubbish.’

My drunken antics are beginning to shape themselves into a vague reality. I shudder when I recall that violating Derek’s clean clothes was not the worst of them and I dread to think what Roberto must have thought of me. Still, seeing Derek down on his hands and knees rooting through the ‘dirty bag’ to find the least soiled shirt and underpants for his journey home brought some solace to my dented pride. That’ll teach him to bring enough clothes, I thought as I raised the brown paper bag to my mouth.
Coach Travel

Wendy M Stuart

Lorry driver sits in cab, with hairy arms stretched out
Tweaks the wheel, watches all with slovenly disdain,
Amongst personalised rubbish, discarded packets, maps –
Other vehicles pass him on speeding outer lane
Coach passengers peep in, inch past this secret world
A thousand miles, a poker face, with automatic brain.
Flicking ash and changing gear to meet approaching rise –
Over crest swoops down again, adrenalin surprise.

Coach sleek and long, moves on with ease and speed
Passengers packed tight in cars, move nose to tail, and sigh;
Grey roads wind endlessly through gaps in hills and trees,
Snake over bridges, roundabouts, whilst other routes pass by,
Violent movements left or right, manoeuvring the curves
Breaks up soporific dreamland, leaving travellers awry.
Acclimatised to swaying coach, see cooling towers loom large –
Fade away through buttercups and mists that camouflage.

Land with shades of greenish mauve, May blossoms shouting Spring!
Overhanging trees race by – thatched hamlets suddenly appear –
Well-trimmed hedges surround vast crops, not yet ripe to cut
Fields of rapeseed flowers bright, its yellows domineer.
Assorted groups of wagons pass, like packs of hounds bunched close.
Neat drills of green potato tops, in brown fields now appear
Lines drawn with ruler straight, like well-pressed pinstripe suits;
Arrows painted on the road, invite to try these routes.

Above this trail of noise, past patchwork spreads of land
Hovers now a hunting bird beneath the puffed up clouds,
That spreads out like elephants with trailing, waving trunks,
Its mauve ears move closer, as a summer storm enshrouds.
Grey slate roofs that sit astride the redbrick, worn with age,
Yellow thatched cob houses, walls, and churches attract crowds.
No time to stop, the coach sweeps on, past hill and deep ravine
Leaving merest memories of things we thought we’ve seen.
A Quiet Place

Jacqueline Pemberton

I came to this place
With ringing ears and aching head,
It took years before I heard the silence,
Before the echoes stopped their circling.
Finally I thought I was safe.
But you found me and now
The raw wind tears again
Through my punctured heart.
The Suitcase

Dea Parkin

I’m standing in the railway carriage, shoulder-to-shoulder with a tattooed teenager, casting a worried eye towards my suitcase by the door. I’d prefer to stay with it, but the mass of people pushing on after me propelled me past three, four seats, all occupied by a myriad of commuters, holidaymakers and young people with nothing better to do than take the train into the city.

I crane my neck to make sure the new, pink glittery case is still sparkling, still upright on its wheels, still there. As people edge around in the area by the doors finding a more comfortable place to lean or getting ready for a smooth exit, it becomes tricky to keep it always in view. I catch a woman’s eye. She’s probably four or five years older than me. Something tells me she knows why I keep looking over. She half smiles. It reminds me of the way those girls used to look at me in the classroom before they cornered me in the loos. A malicious promise. I shiver.

I turn back and gaze at the patterned biceps of the youth who has shuffled rather too close to me as he changed his grip on the overhead loop. He needs to upgrade his brand of deodorant. I hope mine is doing the job it’s meant to, as I cast a hasty glance back at the suitcase and again meet the stare of that woman. The sweat is prickling a sticky path down my spine. Before I snap my eyes away from the nasty humour I see glinting in hers, I register her clothes. Smart. Probably expensive. She has no need to steal my suitcase. A flicker of envy rises in my gorge. Her hair is rich brunette with honey tones, curling to her shoulders, bouncing with health. My hair is mousy brown, cut short. I could do something about that.

I twist round a little so the tattooed boy isn’t so close, using my shoulder to nudge a small space for myself. A small tut escapes him but he readjusts his position and looks pointedly away.

The train is slowing now and people are pushing and pressing as the station is announced. It is the one before mine. A family including two squawking toddlers with luggage and a pushchair are between me and the door and I no longer have a view of my case. The train comes to a halt and the family clamber down, bags, kids and all, and the space where my suitcase was waiting for me is clear – I panic, but then see it’s been moved to nearer the open door. I gasp, my stomach lurches, but I can’t move an inch.

The case handle feels satisfying as ever in my grip as I trundle it easily away from the train. A small noise, some disturbance, makes me look back towards the carriage. The doors are swooshing closed and for a second I see a face I think I should recognise, but it melts into the melee of commuters, holidaymakers and young people with time on their hands. I half shrug and march on down the platform, my old pink glittery suitcase rolling smoothly alongside.
Dear Mr Bacon

With reference to the new house you have recently built: it has been brought to our attention that you did not obtain the proper planning permission prior to starting construction.

I also note that the principal building material appears to be straw. Whilst this may be an ecologically sound material, its use in this case is in clear contravention of Building Regulations. I would also be particularly concerned about the ability of such a construction to withstand high winds.

Perhaps we could meet to discuss the matter further.

Yours sincerely

A Wolf.

Damsel in Distress

Bitter-sweet memories of a punctured bicycle tyre and a young man, a white knight on a Claude Butler, who stopped to mend it for her. Muscular thighs, she remembered, and a smile which promised danger and excitement. But courage was not screwed to the sticking post, discretion smothered impulse and the moment slipped by. You can fit a lot of regrets into a lifetime.

When you’re 55 and your tyres are flat there are no passing Galahads or Lancelots, no young men ready and eager to bring their pumps to your aid. In fact, no men at all: just a husband.
'Officer, Officer. Come on. Hurry up. I think The Queen of Hearts is about to murder Father Christmas. Hurry up.'

The sergeant behind the desk lazily blinked his owl like eyes and said, 'Yes miss. I'll be with you shortly.'

'But he may be dead already. Hurry up. Come on. What are you waiting for?'

Drowsily he lifted his head and informed me that there was such a thing as 'paperwork to be completed' before idly picking up a pencil, licking the end, coughing and saying, 'Now what was it you said, miss?'

I practically screamed as I banged my broom on the floor and repeated that Father Christmas was in serious danger of being murdered by the Queen of Hearts.

I could well believe that he didn't get many witches charging into the police station and maybe that's why he didn't believe a word I was saying.

'The Queen of Hearts you say, miss?'

'Yes.'

'Now why should the Queen of Hearts wish to murder Father Christmas?'

'Because of the fairy!'

'The fairy. Hmm, the fairy. Now which fairy would this be, miss? The one off the top of the Christmas tree?'

'Probably. How do I know which fairy? I've never met her before. Oh, come on. Hurry up.'

'Where is this incident taking place, miss?'

'It's taking place at The Grotto.'

'Would this be Santa's Grotto, miss?'

'No!! It's where, well, I think it's where Bluebeard lives with Cleopatra, but I'm not sure really. Does it matter?'

'It might to them, miss. Now let me see if I've got this quite right. The Queen of Hearts is going to kill Father Christmas because of the fairy off the top of the Christmas tree, and this is all taking place in The Grotto, where Bluebeard lives with Cleopatra?'

'Yes.'

'May I ask you how much you have had to drink tonight, miss?'

'Certainly.'

'Well?'

'Well what?'

'How much have you had to drink tonight, miss?'

'A couple of shorts, that's all. I'm not drunk. I know this sounds sort of crazy.'

'Only "sort of" crazy?'

'But it's true. I haven't made it up.'

'I can well believe you. Can you tell me from the beginning, please?'

'I was talking to Worzel Gummidge when a scream dragged my attention to the Queen of Hearts. She had a fairy by her hair and was hitting her with a wand screaming, "You tramp," as she did so. Then Old Father Time started shouting, "Get your hands off her." "Only if she gets her hands off him," screeched the Queen of Hearts in reply. Then Father Christmas appeared out of one of the rooms trying to tuck his shirt into his trousers, fasten his coat and rearrange his beard all at the same time. Looking round him he seemed to sense the danger and tried to retreat back into the room from which he'd just come. Unfortunately, Old Father Time made a grab for him and fell over, landing on top of the Queen of Hearts. In the ensuing melee the fairy flew through the door. The Queen of Hearts picked herself up and ran after her knocking Snow White over, she landed on top of Maid Marion who wasn't very happy; personally I think she's been having a bit of trouble with Robin.
Hood but that’s got nothing to do with it. Well, at least I don’t think it has. Anyway, meanwhile The Grim Reaper had a tight hold of Old Father Time who had been trying to punch Father Christmas. Father Christmas took his chance and escaped, ran off calling to the Queen of Hearts, who by now was outside chasing the fairy round the garden and waving the wand over her head in a very menacing manner. Tweedle Dum and Tweedle Dee were also in the garden running after them and trying to catch them, Father Christmas joined in the pursuit and he was followed by Old Father Time and The Grim Reaper. Then King Tut came in with Scrooge and an Egyptian mummy, they thought this was a game and joined in the chase. After that things got complicated.’

‘Yes, well they would after that, wouldn’t they.’

‘Well anyway, it was at about this time that the tramp entered the scene. He joined in the chase round the garden and managed to grab the Queen of Hearts round the waist. He seemed to think that if he caught her he was entitled to kiss her and promptly did so. Father Christmas saw this and ran towards them shouting “Floozy, hussy” and things like that. The Queen of Hearts took one look at the tramp, screamed and started to hit him with the wand but then she saw Father Christmas and set off in hot pursuit after him. He realised his mistake and legged it into the bushes. Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum gave up the chase. I think they’d run out of breath. But the Grim Reaper and Old Father Time were still going strong as were King Tut, the tramp and Scrooge. Personally I thought this was a good time to leave the party and get some help. So here I am. Now will you come?’

‘A party you say. Just let me get my helmet, miss. Where did you say it was happening?’

‘The Grotto and you’ll probably need backup.’

‘If only half of what you say is true I’ll need more than backup. Just let me ring through, although they’ll never believe me.’

Whilst waiting for the telephone to be answered he ruminated, ‘Assault and battery charges against the Queen of Hearts, sexual harassment charges against a tramp, physical assault charges against Old Father Time, The Grim Reaper and King Tut and possibly an Egyptian mummy, possible charges against Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum for damage to private property! Who have I missed out?’

‘Loads. But never mind them for now. Come and save Father Christmas.’

‘Christmas will never be the same again,’ the sergeant said as he picked up the telephone.

‘Hello, Inspector Reeves. There appears to be an incident in occurrence at The Grotto.’

Turning to me he said, ‘The inspector wants to know where The Grotto is, miss.’

‘Tell him I have no idea of the address, but I can direct him. It’s next door to the Pink Pumpkin. Do you know where that is?’

‘Yes, miss. It’s in Teddy Bear Lane. Why did they have to give the houses such daft names I don’t know. Personally I wouldn’t fancy living at Peter Pan Lodge, Teddy Bear Lane, Little Puddleton, but then it wouldn’t do for us all to be the same, would it?’ Suddenly he seemed to remember the inspector was on the other end of the telephone and said, ‘I’m sorry sir. Did you get that?’

The answer must have been in the affirmative as he continued, ‘I’ll call for ambulances for the injured whilst I wait for you.’

He replaced the receiver and instantly picked it up again and dialled the Ambulance Service. Having explained in as little detail as possible what the trouble was, he was just replacing the receiver when a gentleman entered the foyer through a set of dark glass doors.

‘Hello,’ he said walking over to me, ‘I am Inspector Reeves. What exactly seems to be the trouble?’

Glancing at the sergeant I was annoyed to see a smile spreading across his face.

‘Go on, young lady, tell the nice policeman,’ was all he said.

‘Well,’ I angrily replied, ‘as I have already explained to your sergeant here, the Queen of Hearts has beaten up the Fairy and is, or was, chasing Father Christmas round the garden. King Tut, a tramp, an Egyptian mummy, Old Father Time, The Grim Reaper, Maid Marion and goodness only knows who else by now, are all running madly round the garden trying to get them to refrain from
killing each other, and if we don’t hurry up I will hold you personally responsible for the death of Father Christmas. Do you understand?"

‘Perfectly, miss.’

Turning to the sergeant who stood grinning behind the desk, Inspector Reeves murmured, ‘Have you... I mean, do you think she’s drunk?’

‘I am most certainly not drunk. I have had two glasses of brandy. That’s all,’ I shouted. Really some people can be quite insulting!

‘If you are not drunk, miss, then I can only assume you are insane or this is a practical joke.’

‘Assume what you want, but come to The Grotto and see for yourself, if you dare.’

Shrugging his shoulders he turned and followed me out of the police station. I had run down the steps and across the road before I heard his voice.

‘I have a car, miss. Much quicker,’ he shouted.

Running back over the road I followed him to the car park.

Flinging myself into the passenger seat next to him I began to bark out directions. With the assistance of his blue flashing lights and wailing siren we were soon back at The Grotto which, by now, resembled a scene from a horror movie.

Father Christmas lay on the front garden with blood pouring from a head wound, Tweedle Dum and Tweedle Dee were both sporting black eyes, Worzel Gummidge sprawled backwards in a hedge moaning, the Queen of Hearts was marching round, shouting and waving a wand over her head, Old Father Time stood hugging an hysterical Fairy off the top of the Christmas Tree (at least that’s who I think she was), a tramp held a muddy and dishevelled Snow White in his arms and when he tried to kiss her he received a knee in his groin for his efforts, Maid Marion was crying on the shoulders of King Tut whilst an Egyptian mummy was attempting to bandage The Grim Reaper’s blood-soaked arm, Robin Hood sat across the front door nursing his head in one hand whilst his other arm lay limp at his side, Scrooge limped down the path holding his stomach and a witch appeared to be supporting a dazed and blood-splattered Wee Willy Winky. Even Cleopatra was having an hysterical fit whilst Bluebeard appeared to be trying to drown it all away with a bottle of brandy.

Looking on the scene Inspector Reeves asked, ‘What exactly was going on here, miss?’

‘A party. It was an innocent Halloween Party that seems to have got a bit out of hand.’

‘You can say that again, miss,’ he replied as he got out of the car and walked towards the carnage.
Grass once ripened my nostrils in the flare of a country gallop.
Now each breath is clotted with the stench of mud.
Morning trees sang with the innocence of birds who
Are silenced, their bellies hard as stone.
Now I plough the fields of a different land.
My harvest, the golden hair of fallen youths
Who leave no seed to flourish,
The blood of their cry seeps through this carrion earth.
The sun smothered by a coat of flea-infested khaki.
Kit bags are scavenged by those who cling to living.
Ill-fitting boots bequeathed to ones who still can march.
I leap billowing clouds which conceal garlands of wire,
Buntlings of bayonets.
The scars of each battle deepens these furrows.
My neck a criss-cross of blunder and mistake.
With blinkered eyes I search the far horizon.
Somewhere, a girl in a torn white petticoat,
Dances.
At the end of January 2014 I went to my doctor suffering from symptoms of mental illness. He gave me a sick note for five weeks and told me to do something that had nothing to do with my day job. I mentioned I’d been writing an autobiographical story about the five years I promoted local/grassroots music in and around Chorley, Lancashire. He suggested I finish it which I did and it has aided my recovery from Reactive Depression... But it all began when...

One day I walked into a bar in Blackburn to watch a tribute/covers band to The Sex Pistols. Six months later I am responsible for bringing the Sex Pistols’ original bassist and songwriter, Glen Matlock, to perform a show on the same stage. Wow! How did that happen? The first three chapters join up the dots and provide an insight into the negligible talent I had for everything that followed since that hazy summer of 2002.

In 2003 I managed an Emo/Skate/Punk band of teenagers from Chorley called Let’s Not Lose Mars to the Commies (Chapter 5) and I arranged for them to have a video made to help promote themselves. To subsidise the cost I offered the opportunity to 19 other bands and organised, promoted and ran the one day, ten-hour music festival “It’s Not Cricket!” held in June 2003 at Strettles on Fylde Road, Preston (Chapter 6). For £50 the other bands got an interview and a live recording of one of their songs together with five copies of the finished DVD package (RRP £15). No one had done this before and the menu and sub features included tracks by bands that could not perform at the festival but still wanted to be part of the end product. It was a tremendous success and a vibrant visual document of the popular unsigned bands around the area at that time. It helped me establish myself as an innovator and the DVD became my calling card for what happened next.

What follows is an insanely factual account of music and venues along the M65 and from Chorley to Bolton during those years through to September 2007. Chances are if you were out and about or part of making things happen during those years you’ll be in those 367 pages. If not but you want to know what all the fuss is about from a social studies point of view at a time before Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, this is required reading. Relatives and fans of the main protagonists and those who watch The X Factor or Britain’s Got Talent will find answers as to why they and Joe Nobody and Tracey Who? never made the big time. Local historians relish the details on the origins of Chorley FM, Chorley Community Music Consortium and Music and Arts for Chorley Youth. The 500 bands listed in the index, and the nine pages of who was who, will serve as a testament to anyone that was part of the underground, the ignored and unseen side of every small town in Lancashire and beyond.

In Chapter 9, Shaun Maxwell from Chorley (the Penniless Playboy), enabled me to understand the book’s unique selling point. This was the fact that no one had written a book that covered the topics in it and is, at its core, the celebration of the unsigned music scene and all the talent that will remain unknown but not forgotten to the few who witnessed it and those who now own a copy of the book.

Pretendgirlfriend (Chapter 8) were essential to everything I did from the beginning. Equally important is their story which demonstrates the rollercoaster of emotions, creativity and the fact that sometimes, despite everything, you need luck to favour you. They are a case study for any manager, musician or band’s education and practical development.

The challenge from 2008 was to write a book that accurately captured all that happened and was relevant to others not directly connected to that subject matter as well as appealing to new musicians of the future. Hence, Chapter 12 reaches out to the next generation of aspiring promoters, band managers and journalists. Furthermore, the book had to be commercially successful to cover...
the costs of printing and promotion – something that my business had not been (Chapter 10) – an educational self-discovery exercise for me in how I was a good business manager in my day job, but a very poor manager of my own business!

Fast forward to 2014 and how to produce an eye-catching cover for the book by creating my own picture taking the Digger figure I had used for my Digger Movement CD compilation (Chapter 11) and surrounded him with CDs and DVDs from bands and musicians I had helped over the years. As the deadline reached critical point I scattered the disc cases on the lounge carpet, stood on top of the coffee table and took a picture looking down at the collage. My neighbour, a reprographic technician, showed me how to superimpose the Digger figure over the CD/DVDs and, crucially, the only other manipulation we did was to place the Chorley Battle of the Bands disc to the centre left of the front cover. Sometimes I work better under pressure and have moments of divine intervention aided by the co-operation of others. No man is an island no matter how much we consider ourselves to be a rock in isolation as writers!

Writing is a noble and educational process of self-discovery. I am immensely proud of what I have created and I envy my younger self for the variety of the tasks I tackled and the integrity I applied to everything I accomplished. Now the book is published and available to the public, part of me has felt that some portion of my soul is no longer private. I have moments of highs and lows and, through them, gained an awareness of the equality and diversity in what I have written about and encountered as a consequence of what the book stands for and leads to by its existence.

If you would like to buy a copy of John’s book, Unsigned Unscene, it’s available from Ebb & Flo and Bygone Times in Chorley, and Waterstones in Preston – or get in touch with John via Chorley Writers’ Circle: info@chorleywriters.org.uk
Walter James

Born into the world
with parents who nurture
Children embark on a path
To an uncertain future.

By the time they are ten
In this world of men
They may have been well prepared
Or perhaps downright scared.

Through the years of their teenage
To life they must waken
They’ve opportunities a-plenty
They will miss or they’ve taken.

Carefree and strong
At sports they may excel
Those who train and who practise
Can do anything well.

Perhaps by twenty they’ve partnered
Maybe wearing a ring
Seeing themselves as invincible
They can do any thing.

At thirty they’re at
Their most potent and best
They’ve stamina to work
without thinking of rest.

But in this spring-time of life
It’s good to remember
In thirty more years
They’ll be in their September.

By forty, credibility is made
And, hopefully, foundations laid.
For a future secure
With their judgement mature.

If they’re lucky, at fifty
It’s all still to play for.
New vistas are out there
They’re what each new day’s for.

If at sixty they are still in excellent form
Diet and exercise must have been the norm.
A wealth of experience they now have to give
To others less fortunate. They too must live.

Strength in their muscles
May yet still be there.
If they’ve avoided the hours
Spent inert in a chair.

Eighty and ninety are now increasingly common
So many at that age still sprightly and switched on
Filling their days with purpose and better
Till Elizabeth sends their centenarian letter.
They watched the woman scything her way through the wanderers with their British newspapers under their arms and their scorched skin. Her staccato speed drew the eye. Now and again she paused to pluck angrily at the sandals that were obviously killing her. Jen, squinting into the sea glare, caught the glint from the woman’s jewellery. You didn’t have to be a fashion expert to recognise the designer cut of good linen trousers and classic silk shirt, both in a dazzling white that showed off a flawless tan and an insouciance for the trials of laundry. Jen took a sip of coffee, which was black and bitter and appropriate. When the woman got closer, Jen could see that she wasn’t as young as she’d looked at a distance. Beside her Rob murmured and Jen gave a lopsided smile.

The two black women in African dress who accosted every passing woman every day veered towards the woman in white. Hair braiding, lady? Hair braiding? The woman’s lips were tight beneath the dead black circles of her sunglasses. She shooed them like farmyard hens. The African women were serene in their contempt. They went to sit on the wall, talking in low voices, eyes fixed on the big TV behind the bar.

The woman took a seat beneath the Bedouin-style awning. The waiters, who usually skimmed through the tables like gulls, were huddled at the bar, ignoring everything behind them. The rolling news showed the bodies of illegal immigrants washed up on a nearby beach that morning. The woman snatched up a laminated menu, consulted it quickly and then flapped it. When a waiter approached, she was already making a call on her phone and jabbed a manicured finger to indicate her order. Rob raised an eyebrow.

As soon as the call began, the woman unleashed a flurry of cut-glass swear words. In between the furious cursing, Jen caught ‘ex-wife’, ‘school fees’, ‘economise’ and ‘unbelievable’. Rob’s lips were twitching. The woman flung herself back in the black wicker, lifted her sunglasses to sit high on her beautiful platinum bob. The waiter deposited her cappuccino and she glanced up at him without interrupting her conversation, then across at them. Jen saw herself being seen, saw the woman turn her head, then her shoulder, then her whole body. She practised her serene contempt expression, but already her muscles were tired. Rob offered her the drinking straw, but the dregs were too bitter. He smoothed more sunscreen on the back of her neck and the tips of her ears, planted a kiss on her bare scalp and settled the baseball cap on top. He pushed her out into the sunshine and past the two Africans. The women glanced in their direction then went back to watching the TV.
This Apple Has a Rotten Spot

Jeanette Greaves

This apple has a rotten spot
I think I should complain
I’ll write to Asda, double quick
Oh hell, here comes the rain.

My washing was so nearly dry
And now it’s all wet through
The weather forecast told a lie
A quick complaint is due.

My laptop’s ready for the job
I’m going to tut-tut
I’ve got the kettle on the hob
Oh no! A power cut!

I’ll sit down here and use a pen
At least I can still write
To Asda first, and only then
Wow, that lightning’s bright!

The fire brigade are on their way
At least that’s what they said
I’ll sit here tight and come what may
I will not lose my head.

I’ve made a list, it’s nice and long
Of all the silly twits
Who always get everything wrong
So nothing ever fits.

There’s something banging at the door
I think it has a horn
I just cannot take any more
Really? Demon Spawn?

Dear Sir or Madam, from these lips
Of mine please hear my plea
This noisy, wet apocalypse
Is really not for me.
Preparations are made and the big day is set.
An inclement forecast said it would be wet.
But blue skies prevail and the rain doesn’t fall
As the car park fills up and the guests start to call.

A coach is there waiting outside in its place
And guests climb aboard, smiles upon every face.
The short ride into town goes by in a twinkling
The registry office waits, warm inside and welcoming.

Now the guests sit around as they wait for the bride
Then the groom and best man are ushered inside.
For a little rehearsal to go through the paces
Then everyone enters to take up their places.

The bride and the bridesmaids all looking resplendent
Arrive and ceremonial is in the ascendant
A reassuring and pleasant registrar plies his trade
As rings are exchanged and promises made.

With certificates signed by those who took part
Many photos are taken, they all look so smart.
Then it’s everyone back on the big cosy bus
To return to the hotel with minimal fuss.

A warm welcome inside and drinks while they wait
Till the time comes to savour the repast on a plate
Then some speeches are made by bride’s father and groom
And the best man adds his own words to the room.

Now everyone relaxes, due process is done.
This is the time for enjoyment and fun.
Friends and more guests all start to arrive
And the man with the disco brings the whole place alive.

Slowly, one by one, people take to their feet
The dance floor fills up and they dance to the beat.
Till finally it’s over and goodbyes are said
And the bride and the groom go upstairs to bed.
Limited Liability

Dave Harrison

Chapter 3

Two policemen suddenly appear behind Abe. His hands are pulled behind him and I hear the snap of handcuffs. Both policemen look very young, clad as they are in short-sleeved white shirts underneath black stab jackets. The baseball-style police caps add to the informality of their garb. They work with an air of practised detachment as if this is another in a long series of arrests. The smaller of the two officers bends down to offer me assistance.

‘We’ll get an ambulance for you,’ he says.

‘No,’ I insist. ‘I’m okay, I’m fine. No ambulance. Please.’ He helps me into a sitting position then looks back at his colleague. Abe’s flaccid cock is still protruding from his fly. The two policemen exchange nods and smiles and mine stands up, grabs hold of Abe’s belt buckle and yanks enthusiastically. The penis disappears like a snake down a rabbit hole. I have a sad feeling that this manoeuvre may be required on a regular basis and that these poor coppers are used to men with their cocks hanging out of their trousers.

Two more officers have intercepted the camouflaged youth at the door and trussed him up in similar fashion to Abe.

‘The police won’t save you,’ Abe spits at me. ‘It’ll be worse for you now.’

‘No,’ I say, ‘I didn’t call the police, why would I? You can’t blame me, they must have been following you or someone heard you breaking in here and called them. Tell me where your party is. I’ll go. I’ll work off the debt, trust me.’

Abe is looking surprised now; my reaction to being slapped then pissed on is obviously more resilient than he’s expecting.

‘Eight o’clock.’ He calls out an address in Chorlton as he’s dragged away. ‘I’ll see you there after these clowns have finished hassling me. If you don’t make a complaint they can’t hold me. Don’t let me down.’

The police take the men away and leave me to strip off in the bedroom. I’m placing my piss-soaked charity shop ensemble into a black bin liner when Charles Smith arrives.

‘Come on,’ he says, seemingly oblivious to my state of undress, ‘I’ll give you a lift home.’

‘What the hell did you do that for?’ I ask.

‘I was watching what was going on and we moved in to protect you. As arranged.’

‘I didn’t need protection, I was getting somewhere with Abe, he was lining me up as a sex slave.’

‘All the more reason for our intervention, Jenny. You did well, we’ve more than enough video for our purposes. The job’s finished as far as you’re concerned.’

‘Not yet,’ I say, ‘can’t you see what’s going on? These bastards are lending money to vulnerable women knowing they can’t ever pay it back. Then they’re forcing them into the sex trade. I’ve got to follow this up. I can’t just leave it at that, it’s all part of the same horrible business that could be holding Kat. I might even get some information about her if I go there and confront them.’

‘No you don’t,’ Charles says. ‘Your job was to get some good video evidence showing what this payday loan company is up to. Information for the Home Office, something to brief ministers and inform policy decisions. The fact that these men are working for a large, publicly visible organisation is the most important thing. We can demonstrate what happens when people fill in the online form and take out a loan. Threats, intimidation, violence. You’ve done a good job. Time to go home.’
'It’s all right for me, I can just walk away from all this, leave it behind, go back to my nice flat, forget about Abe and his nasty ways. There are hundreds of women who don’t have that option, who are trapped. I can’t forget that, Charles. Anyway, you promised me when I joined that you’d help me find Kat. That’s the deal: I help the security services and they help me.’ I’m feeling much stronger now that I’m fully dressed and wearing my own clothes again. ‘I’m betting she came to Manchester to be with her sister. This might be my chance to find her.’

Charles carries my small suitcase out to his Jaguar. We leave the flat door swinging in the breeze.

‘Look, Jenny, I’ve done everything I can, put the word out about your Ukrainian friend, name, description, photograph, the lot. I’ve even indicated it’s a high priority that we talk to her. That’s what’s going to find your friend’s sister, not putting yourself at risk in some sleazy backstreet brothel. That’s not your job, it’s not our job. Anyway, Hector wants you to give your full attention to what he refers to as the Irish Project.’

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_Limited Liability_ is the third Jenny Parker crime novel set in Manchester and Lancashire by DJ Harrison. For more information visit [www.opencirclebooks.com](http://www.opencirclebooks.com)
Sideways glides grey mottled disc,
White shining marks show randomly,
Matching gravel bottom wealth
Of coloured pebbles casually arranged,
To infinity, in turquoise sea.

Round shell shades pink patterned crab.
Black button eyes, seek fearlessly,
Well camouflaged – rotates with stealth.
Backs into crevice purposely.

Ruthless hunter ’neath this shell
Stretches both strong arms of death,
Hinges pincer’s claws to grab
A lesser being, who carelessly
Streaks seamlessly with silver trail.

Who dares to swim within his frame?
Sea is flowing, calm and warm –
Patience now rewards the crab,
Survival is its game.
I am the power to which you dare not turn.
I am the hammer, the shotgun and the knife
I am what keeps you hastening through darkening urban streets
Don’t look behind! Take quicker strides!

I am the badness you fear like filthy water
Oozing outwards, staining those you love.
I am the threat you lock your doors against
The midnight corner where you dread to look.

I am the undercurrent that drags you into drowning
I am the sparkler of excitement shattering light
I am shadow. I am stillness. I am savage.
Should you put your hand out I will bite.

Blood welling up on a razor blade
Noxious gas in the lounge
Hate running through like sewage
The derelict lost and found.

Mine are the eyes you don’t want to fix on your face
Mine is the hand you don’t want to fasten on yours
Mine is the smile that wakes you sweating from nightmares
Yours is the life I’ll take without any remorse.
The trees turned easily that autumn. Swiftly shedding their full-blown finery with a smug satisfaction, leaving skeletal arms raised to the sky in triumph.

I run my fingers over taut, white flesh and feel each sinew beneath. It is becoming easier to define each muscle, tendon, bone. That is, after all, what is important, what we are. Everything else is excess. In the mirror I see each delicate section of my spine. A row of perfect indentations, without clutter, holding me together, and know I am winning.

‘Hang in there,’ I whisper. ‘Nearly home’.

Tea is as bad as I knew it would be. At precisely five, she puts the big tray beside my bed while she straightens my covers. Perhaps she thinks the conformity of this ritual annoys me. She doesn’t realise how pleasing are the angles of starched, white hospital-cornered sheets. The weight seems stifling as she places the tray on my lap.

‘I hope you’re going to eat your salad tonight,’ she says. Her voice is a veiled threat.

‘I can’t, if you’re watching.’

The excuse is one she knows. She shakes her head, but relents. The race is new.

‘I’ll be back in half an hour’. Perhaps she thinks she can intimidate me, but the real threat is not hers. Hers is not the insidious whisper, ever-present, but I can smile, I am winning.

When she has gone, I draw the curtains around my bed. No one must ever watch me, will me into weakening, spoil my success. I cut the food into tiny pieces, it looks less that way. It’s odd how salad seems to dissolve. It carries so much excess liquid. The bread is harder to dispose of. I wrap it within the paper napkin, squash its spongy bulk between my fingers, feel distaste between my teeth.

Quickly I push it into my bedside cabinet and lie back on my pillows, breathless for a moment, but pleased. Calmly now I can take a small piece of tomato into my mouth, a little cress, before pushing away the plate. See how much white surface is exposed. Pure, clean, without clutter.

She comes back before I have finished, draws the curtains. I shudder, unable to meet her eyes. I know they glitter with triumph. She smiles, the race is advancing.

‘I’ll give you a bit longer shall I?’

She leaves.

I lift the tray and put it on to the bedside cabinet. I feel sick without guilt, unable to bear the sight of my gluttony. I’m desperate to wash myself, I can almost feel the half-digested piece of tomato oozing through my pores. When she returns, she takes me to the bathroom, watches me as I run my fingers under the tap, rub the soap vigorously over my features, until she says ‘enough’ and we return. I comb my hair and scrape it back into a tight, elastic band, as neat and orderly as I can make it. Much of its fullness has thinned now, and it is easier to handle.

‘I’m just going to have a look in the cabinet if you don’t mind,’ she says. ‘It’s the rules.’ If I don’t mind? What choice do I have? Like a child I am forced to scheme and lie to determine the right over what I let go into my own body.

She looks under the bed and in the clothes locker, feels with inquisitive fingers along its top, opens the bedside cabinet.

‘What’s this?’ she asks. We both know.

‘I was saving it, for later.’

She stands there saying nothing. She is working out how best to hurt me.

‘This is hoarding. You know, you can have anything you want to eat!’

The accent is on the word eat. She knows what she is doing. What she doesn’t know is the real reason why I am trembling as she bends to open the second drawer of the cabinet. ‘That’s funny,’ she says, finding it to be locked, reaching at her waist for her gaoler’s bunch of keys.
The sound of their rattle is overpowering. I close myself against it, feel beads of perspiration bubble on my forehead as she turns with insistent fingers the tiny metal key in the lock and pulls the drawer open, revealing their glossy, mocking smiles.

‘Here,’ she says, drawing one out and passing it to me.

I pull the sheet over my face to avoid seeing her expression, so I won’t have to see whether her puzzlement will dawn into understanding the real, secret fear which blinds me, in its intensity, won’t have to see her gloat in smug satisfaction, made all the more sharp by bitter anger at losing to a third contender.

For a moment, I wonder how I must look, the results of months of dedication incomplete, the prize snatched from me, the race half-run. My skin, a bloated greyish pallor, my face, pale, puffy, my eyes staring from their sockets, and on top of me, superimposed, the vivid form of the model on the magazine, slim, taut, willow-thin, her facial features chisel-perfect, each eyelash alert, each tooth dazzling white, and the mouth, I cannot bear it; the mouth, cruel, glossy lips curved with glee.
Cathy Lennon

I first questioned Brian about my suspicions on the concrete patio outside our static caravan in Norfolk. I’d like to say on the balcony of our Mediterranean apartment, because that’s always been a romantic dream of mine. Unfortunately thanks to Brian and his phobia of heights, it has stayed a dream. To be honest, he gets a bit panicky just standing on the caravan step.

I knew I’d hit a nerve because Brian almost spilled his wine. His laugh was very hearty. I’ve been married to him since I was nineteen, I’m not sure what he thinks he can hide from me. ‘Rhona and I have known each other since we were kids,’ he said. Like I didn’t know they’d grown up on the same street, had static vans on the same holiday site and been in each other’s pockets since Jurassic times. ‘We used to share our buckets and spades on that very beach.’ When he starts declaiming and pointing, I know the amateur dramatics is kicking in. Rhona was a magnificent Mabel to his Frederic in Pirates of Penzance. It had a five-star review in the parish magazine. He cut it out and put it in a plastic wallet and tacked it to the telegraph pole at the end of our drive. It stayed there until ‘ignorant village jobs’ removed it two days later. They also put it in our recycling box, which was very good of them.

‘I suppose,’ he smiled, ‘I should be grateful that you’re still jealous after all these years. Keep the flame of passion alive. I’ll just bob along to the shop, I think the gas is running low.’ I finished the rest of my glass of rosé and was about to pour another when I thought I might ‘just bob along’ to Rhona’s caravan.

In fairness to Norfolk, it was a lovely evening. We’ve had appalling holiday weather over the years. The kind where it’s June and you have to go and buy a bobble hat. The one time I persuaded him to try Cornwall for a change it absolutely poured, which would have been bad enough but a sign pointing to cliffs only a mile away put the tin hat on it. ‘It’s supposed to be a holiday, Pamela. I’ll never be able to relax in case I sleepwalk over the edge.’ I don’t need to say that the man snores like a chainsaw and never shifts until he hears me opening the tap when he shouts ‘Tea for me, Pam.’ It’s been Norfolk ever since.

I headed along the path that goes around the site edge, taking in the views. I’d been ready for a showdown but those huge golden skies soon slowed my steps. They cried out to be painted. I felt choked. I’d had my heart set on art college when I met Brian. I was a dreamer who needed to ‘sort herself out’ according to my parents. Brian had been quite ‘arty’ himself in those days. Or so he liked to think. Drifting along the high street in cheesecloth with the beat poets poking out of his satchel. I thought we might escape together but the veneer was peeling by the time we got back from our Norfolk honeymoon. ‘A proper job,’ was what we both needed. ‘To get our foot on the property ladder.’ Bye-bye art college, hello picture framer’s shop.

The desire to lob a brick through Rhona’s caravan curtains left me. Instead I took a few deep breaths and turned towards the exit for the promenade. The beach had emptied and the shutters were down on the souvenir shops and cafés. Outside the pub I stopped to stroke a sheepdog tethered to a picnic table. I considered going in and ordering a drink, slinging my still reasonably pert satchel. I thought we might escape together but the veneer was peeling by the time we got back from our Norfolk honeymoon. ‘Mind the Gap’ was what we both needed. ‘To get our foot on the property ladder.’ Bye-bye art college, hello picture framer’s shop.

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He was a pavement artist. As I approached he started collecting up his chalks, brushing his hands down the sides of his It Ain’t Half Hot Mum shorts. I looked down at the two pictures. Trompe-l’œil you call them. I was staggered at how real they looked. As though you could step inside them, like Mary Poppins and Bert. Have a ‘jolly ‘oliday’. I felt I was entitled to one of those. He wasn’t called Bert, he was Rudy. He had grey dreadlocks and the kind of chest that makes you think of old leather and drumskins. His eyes were marmite brown and they twinkled. I haven’t seen anything twinkle in a long time. I made some remark and he offered me a drink from the cool box he’d left
against the sea wall. We sat and talked about drawing with chalks, about our favourite artists, about
which oils we would mix for this particular Norfolk sunset. He talked about other sunsets in faraway
places and that’s when the thought really struck me.

‘I’d like to have a go at this,’ I said. So we knelt on the prom and he laid his hand over mine
and we swept great arcs and sketched and shaded and rubbed and squinted and smiled. It was a
start.

‘You have a gift!’ he said. ‘Come back tomorrow morning, we’ll do some more.’
In the caravan Brian was cutting up my new black beach towel. He put the scissors down
guiltily and waved two drooping lengths of terry cotton.

‘Pork chop whiskers!’ he beamed. ‘The entertainment manager is going to let Rhona and me
do a medley of Gilbert and Sullivan after the bingo every night.’ When I didn’t say anything he asked,
‘Do you mind?’ I shrugged and went towards the bedroom with my tin of chalks. ‘What’ve you got
there?’ I toyed with telling him to get lost. But I thought, forty years. It’s a long time. So I told him.
About art college and travelling and dreams. He nodded a bit then he smiled and patted my hand.
‘It’s good to have a hobby! Why don’t you set up an art club in the village hall? Fridays would be
good. We never rehearse on Fridays.’

Over the rest of the summer holiday while Brian and Rhona rehearsed and improvised
theatrical props, I headed to the prom with my chalks. My drawing got better and better until one
day Rudy said he was moving on. He gave me a hug and I looked into his twinkly eyes.

‘Go for it, girl,’ he said. ‘It’s now or never!’ So I took over his spot. Soon people began
clustering to watch, admiring, putting money in the open tin of chalks beside me. At the end of the
afternoons I sat on my heels and looked at my artwork. Nothing had given me such satisfaction since
I’d accidentally sent Brian’s golfing wardrobe to the charity shop.

August was almost over. The Gilbert and Sullivan run had been such a success that Brian
ordered champagne to celebrate the last night. I had a terrible headache and couldn’t attend. When
he came in, he aimed a sloppy, Rhona-scented kiss at my cheek, hiccupped into bed and fell instantly
asleep. Out on the patio, under the security light, I worked away all night. When I’d finished I sat,
black coffee before me, at the patio table, watching my last sunrise over Norfolk.

Shortly after eight, the caravan door swung open and Brian stood blinking into the daylight
in his boxers.

‘Thought you’d have made one for me,’ he grumbled, eyeing my steaming cup.
‘Here’s one I made earlier,’ I said, waving my hand at my work of art on the patio.
Brian looked down and literally dropped to his knees. Yawning before him was the Grand
Canyon, in all its terrifying glory. White-faced and shaking he clung to the door jamb, eyes averted.

‘Pamela,’ he groaned weakly. ‘Pamela! I’m trapped. I’ll never get out.’
‘That,’ I said, getting to my feet, ‘is what I used to think.’ I pulled up the handle on my
suitcase and shrugged into my jacket.

Brian tried to get up but his legs wouldn’t hold. ‘What are you doing? Where are you going?’
I looked down at the Grand Canyon and then up at him and smiled.

‘I’m taking a leap into the unknown.’
At the end of the path I turned to give him a wave, but his knuckles only tightened on the
frame.

‘Come back, Pamela!’ he pleaded. ‘Rhona was never anything serious. Come back! We can
start again.’

Poor Brian. He still didn’t get it.

‘There’s a yawning gulf between us,’ I called over my shoulder. ‘It’s been there for years. It
just takes art to reveal the truth.’ And smiling to myself I went in search of a taxi.