



Aware

edition 8

featuring
Dangerous Liaisons
national short story competition 2012

www.chorleywriters.org.uk



Chorley District
&
Writers' Circle

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Introduction

Aware

Once again it gives me pleasure to introduce *Aware*, the annual publication of writing by members of Chorley and District Writers' Circle and the winners of our national writing competition.

Most of our members are keen on reading short stories even if they don't all write in that form. This year our annual competition was for a short story with a generous maximum word count of 3,000 and with *Dangerous Liaisons* as the theme. The winning entries and all the shortlisted stories are included in this edition – we're delighted that two of our members, Elle-Marie Hinchcliffe and DJ Harrison, were shortlisted this year.

Other stories of various lengths by our members on this rich theme are also included in this edition of *Aware*, together with stand-alone verse.

Then there's the Group Story! This is written by Circle members in succession, with each contributor writing a chapter of around 500 words.

Finally, the whimsical illustrations are by our member Brian Preece, who is a talented artist as well as a writer.

We hope you enjoy this eighth edition of *Aware*.

Dea Parkin
Aware Editor
November 2012

Chorley & District Writers' Circle

As a group, we meet every month, and as well as feedback sessions we also have guest speakers, writing bursts and workshops. Our members have varied interests and write novels, short stories, plays, poetry and non-fiction. Some of us aim for publication; others prefer to write for their own pleasure and that of fellow Circle members alone.

We compile and distribute a newsletter every month and maintain a website at www.chorleywriters.org.uk. To contact us, please email mail@chorleywriters.org.uk or call 01257 233614.

Chairwoman	Dea Parkin
Secretary & Newsletter Editor	Hayley Noble
Vice Chair	Rebecca Peers

Venue & Time of Meetings

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

Dangerous Liaisons

National Short Story Competition 2012

Judge's Comment

The shortlist as a whole was of an exceptionally high quality, without a single story at which I could have levelled any criticism in terms of how the theme of Dangerous Liaisons was fulfilled. The prose quality of each entry was strong and engaging, and judging the entries was largely based around originality of content or handling of challenging content, since every shortlisted writer proved him- or herself to be a competent and engaging storyteller.

1. Plum Orchard by Corrinna Toop

This is an exceptionally strong story, ripe (excuse the pun) with vivid descriptive details that give a strong sense of time and place and engage all the senses, and cleverly bracketed with lines about the narrator's hatred of plums, which takes on such a different meaning by the end of the story. Character descriptions are strong and engaging – I was particularly charmed by Sally-Ann, "as spirited as a hedgerow bird, wrapped in plumage of tie-dye". The twist is both unexpected in advance and satisfyingly fitting and believable in retrospect, and the theme of Dangerous Liaisons runs through the story on a number of levels, resulting in a textured and emotionally satisfying read.

2. Facing Up by Steve Brodie

This story engaged from the outset with little details like salmon paste sandwiches in Tupperware boxes and "five pounds to see us by till Tuesday", and quickly took a turn for the dark. The theme of Dangerous Liaisons was competently fulfilled, but what really made this story rise above the usual was the nuanced portrayal of the central character, at once monstrous and sympathetic, which needless to say is a difficult thing to achieve with a character who is a paedophile. The repetition of "Oh, James" was, in my opinion, particularly effective.

3. Comrades by John Dixon

There was a definite sense of a Dangerous Liaison in this story, with the narrator's desire for the victim of the accident to be an unknown so that he might give her an identity, escalating into an obsession in which his real relationships were pushed aside to make room for an impulse to "frequent crowded, enclosed, vulnerable places...where I can lose myself – and find her." My one caveat is the story was perhaps a little slow to start – although the accident itself was an impactful opening scene, I would have liked to see a stronger focus on the psychology of the narrator earlier in the narrative.

Prize-winners were judged anonymously by critique service **Fiction Feedback**



www.fictionfeedback.co.uk
aware@fictionfeedback.co.uk

Fiction Feedback provides a professional critique service to writers. Customers regularly return for the option to select multiple appraisals at keen prices and for constructive, helpful, encouraging advice. Their editing service is also very popular.

FIRST PRIZE WINNER

The Plum Orchard

Corrinna Toop

Even now I still can't stand plums. The sweet smell of their flesh crawls into my nostrils and the thought of their tight, purple skins turns my stomach, immediately taking me back to the orchard and those long, childhood afternoons picking the fruit.

Our orchard was small but the trees were old and so heavy cropping that Father and I could never harvest their ripe offering quickly enough to prevent some of it spoiling on the ground.

'Don't throw money to the pigs, Sarah!' He would shout, urging me on by reminding me that after we had gathered the good stuff he would let the pigs into the orchard to gorge themselves on the damaged, fly-blown windfalls. I hated that time of year; there were a hundred other things I would rather have been doing on a summer holiday afternoon than slipping around on a mulch of yellow and purple, with sticky juice on my fingers and wasps dancing around my ankles.

Father would sell the plums to a local jam company. They didn't go for much but the extra money was a welcome addition to the meagre income he made from his smallholding and every year he always put aside £40 into what he called 'The Plum Fund'. That was no mean amount in those days and by the time I was in my teens the fund was well over £400.

'It's a nest egg for your future,' he would say, 'for when you are grown and need a start in life.' It was the one thing which kept me focussed on picking that awful fruit.

In the early days Father held some of the plums back and Mother would make her own jam to sell in fancy jars at the farmers' market for five times more than the company paid us, but since she had run off with 'That Bloody Spaniard,' he had turned it all over for commercial production.

I didn't remember much about my mother, she had left when I was about five years old, but I knew I had her red curls and blue eyes and that it made Father miserable to look at me sometimes. Apparently she had sent postcards from Spain to start with although, my Father admitted, none were ever kept or replied to, and after a while she stopped bothering.

'If she had cared about you she would still be here now,' Father would tell me, 'so don't waste your time thinking about her.'

I was happy enough not to but it was *he* who kept referring to her again and again over the years, the bitterness eating away at him like cancer. If a Spanish person ever came on the television he would swear and turn it over and as for women, well he seemed to dislike them whatever their nationality for he never tried to be friendly to any and, as far as I know, up until I was sixteen he never had a girlfriend.

When I was young I always imagined 'That Bloody Spaniard' wearing a matador outfit, arriving at our cottage in the dead of night and stealing my Mother from us. I was pretty sure it must have happened that way because I had gone to bed one night when she was

there and woken the next morning to find her gone. I imagined she would be living in a villa in Spain, clothed in a flamenco dress and making marmalade from Seville oranges instead of jam from our plums. I hung onto that belief for many years.

When I was sixteen a young woman arrived looking for work during plum picking time. She was twenty years old, with straight blond hair which hung to her waist. She wore a brown skirt with tiny bells sewn around the hem, a cheesecloth shirt and a denim jacket with badges on it saying; 'Ban the Bomb,' 'Save the Whale,' 'Heath Out!' Her name was Sally-Ann Smith and she was as spirited as a hedgerow bird, wrapped in a plumage of tie-dye. I found out later on that she had hitchhiked down from Leeds, working and screwing her way across the country until she ended up in Dorset and at our home. She helped us pick the plums that year, her slender arms stretching up alongside Father's thick muscular ones, laughing her way through the days. For the first week she slept on our sofa. By the second week she was sleeping in Father's bed.



'You don't understand, so don't comment,' he had said when I tried to complain. He waved a hand to show that the conversation ended there.

He kept back some fruit and she braided her hair in a long plait and toiled, red faced over a huge pan of plopping, hissing jam which splattered the tiles all around our ancient cooker with congealing, dark red droplets staining the grout. I watched as she decanted the thick, syrup into the fat bellied jars, scooping the cooling dribbles up with a long finger.

'You're not my mother,' I announced sourly when she saw me watching her from the kitchen door.

'I wouldn't want to be!' She laughed, sticking out her tongue. From then on I knew we could be friends.

By the winter she was still living with us, to the amazement of the villagers and probably to Father as well. I don't know why a young and attractive girl like that would tie herself to a dull, middle aged man like him; he was so pedantic and brusque while she was so easy going and gentle. I could often hear them fighting, especially late at night and I know she was bored of the countryside because she made no secret of it. I guess she had her reasons – perhaps she just needed somewhere to lay low for a while.

Then I met David. He was nineteen and looked like Marc Bolan. He had a motorbike and a leather jacket and he didn't have a job, but, like many young men before and since, he had a dream that one day he would move to London and become a musician. The trouble was, with no money he didn't have any means of supporting himself there so he loafed around the village instead, annoying the locals, who considered him to be a waster and a fool. He spent a lot of time with a friend he had made called Asa; a long haired, bearded hippy who lived in a camper van at the edge of the common which he let David and I use to make love in. We would all smoke pot and drink beer together and I felt very grown up and liberated. Until the day someone in the village saw us together and told Father.

'Don't you dare sneak out and meet that oaf! I will not have you seeing him again!' he shouted as I prepared to go out early one evening, his fingers clenched as though he wanted to punch me. 'I did not bring you up to waste your time with that idle git!' I started to protest and tried to push past him to the door but he slapped my face and then bundled me to my room where I lay face down in the carpet howling in despair.

When David turned up at the door looking for me Father took his shotgun out of the cupboard and waved it in his face, threatening to blow him sky high if he ever came back. Afterwards I could hear Sally-Ann pleading with him.

'But they are only young, let them be themselves, they need to be free,' she tried to reason.

'And you would know all about that and I wouldn't, I suppose,' he hissed furiously, 'you being young and me being so old, is that what you are thinking, you bitch? Well you chose to stay here and share my bed. You're nothing better than a whore.' I could hear her crying late into the night through the bedroom wall long after my own tears had subsided.

The following Saturday I received a brief, poorly written letter, postmarked London.

Sarah

I have finally followed my dream and moved to London. I am going to make a demo and try to get a record deal. Wish me luck. Goodbye. Have a nice life.

David.

There was no address, no explanation and no apology. I clung to Sally-Ann and poured out my tears into her chest. I told her about the reason for my despair and the secret I was holding in my belly.

'But it will be OK,' I sobbed, wiping my nose on the back of my hand, 'there's the Plum Fund which Father has been putting aside for me. I can use that when the baby comes and we will survive. Perhaps I could even rent a flat if Father doesn't want us here.'

Sally-Ann hugged me closer until I could feel her heart beating fast against my own chest.

'I'm so sorry, Sarah,' she whispered, her voice soft and sad, 'your father gave the Plum Fund to David on the condition that he moved away from here and never came back. How do you think he could afford to go and live in London? He didn't need asking twice.'

'All of it?' I stuttered in disbelief, 'All £400 of it?'

'I'm afraid so, he wanted that boy out of your life for good. He saw it as an investment in your future.'

I stood up and stormed out of the house, round the side of the building and down to the orchard where Father was digging a drainage ditch. As I strode across the grass the last of the fallen plums squelched underfoot and I could smell their rotten sweetness rising in the morning mist. My stomach turned queasily, as it had often done over the past few days. He turned towards me, face streaked with dirt and expression hard as stone. Before I could even open my mouth to tell him I hated him he spoke.

'I suppose she has told you then? You will thank me one day; even though you don't realise it now everything I have ever done has been for your own good. Now go away and think about it.'

'I'm pregnant,' I cried out bitterly and he stared at me for a second with disgust in his eyes and then turned back to the ditch and began shovelling earth angrily, each thrust of his spade slamming heavily down into the dirt, his broad shoulders shutting me out. I went back inside knowing I was trapped.

Two days later I was reluctantly making my way home down the lane from the village when a distinctive rattling sound approached me from behind. I turned to look and recognised the familiar blue and white of Asa's camper van heading towards me, I waved, expecting him to stop, but he looked sheepish and just nodded. In the passenger seat was Sally-Ann. As they passed slowly by she mouthed,

'I'm sorry,' and they sped away into the distance, gone, I knew, forever.

When I pushed open the kitchen door I found Father sitting at the table with his head in his hands.

'She's gone,' he looked up with an ashen face, his mouth set in a thin line.

'I know; I saw her go with Asa.' I shrugged, feeling nothing.

'Hippy Bastard!' he slammed his fist down on the wood and I wondered if the 'Hippy Bastard' would now supplant the 'Bloody Spaniard' as the family demon. 'She didn't even take her stuff, the stupid cow. And she left the place a tip!' he spat, then, noticing the red jam stained grout, he leapt up and yanked a bottle of bleach out from under the sink. As I watched him scrubbing viciously at the tiles with a J-Cloth as though he was scrubbing Sally-Ann out of his life, an idea formed itself in my mind. An idea of revenge.

*

Three months later I had to take three buses out of the county to post the letter to the police. I couldn't risk a Dorset postmark.

'Dear Sirs

I am concerned about the whereabouts of Sally-Ann Smith, last seen...'

I detailed where and when and explained that she had not been seen for a while. I mentioned a violent partner and mysterious bruising and that they should check it out. Of course, I knew they would uncover it as a fraud as soon as they looked into it but at least they might pay a visit and Father would suffer some humiliation, as I felt he had humiliated me.

Unfortunately, or maybe fortunately in retrospect, the nice P.C. in uniform called round while he was out; he said his name was Robinson.

'Do you know the whereabouts of a Sally-Ann Smith, who was last known to be at this address?' He flipped open his notebook and looked down at my belly, which now stuck forward slightly under my cotton smock dress.

'No, I don't – she lived here for a while and then one day she had gone. Funny thing though, she didn't take any clothes with her.' I informed him innocently, 'I'm glad she went though because they rowed all the time and it was all getting a bit, well, you know, violent.' I dropped my voice, as though it were a great secret. 'I think Father was glad to see the back of her too. He scrubbed the whole kitchen down with bleach afterwards.'

'Can I look round?' He peered through into the hallway, scenting a possible promotion.

'Of course, though I'm sure I don't know what you'll find. Not much goes on here you know.' I smirked, enjoying the moment. P.C. Robinson rummaged through the house, making the odd note but not finding anything and I could tell his interest was waning.

'I'll take you outside,' I suggested, so we circumnavigated the outside of the house and he turned over a few wooden pallets and made a few more notes.

'What's that over there?' he asked, pointing to the Plum Orchard.

'Just the orchard, but we don't do much in there at this time of year; although Father did dig a big drainage ditch recently.' I could sense his interest rising again.

'I'll have a look if you don't mind.' The young man strode over to the gate and let himself in. The plums had long since gone and the leaves had fallen, leaving skeleton trees pointing to the grey January sky. He walked over to where the earth had been disturbed the previous year and prodded it with his yellow biro. He soon came across the rotting sleeve of the blouse I had strategically buried in the spoil all those weeks before.

'Do you have a spade I could borrow?' His voice had an excited tone now. I ran to the shed to find one and he began to dig. Of course, once he had pulled up the blouse there was nothing else to see in the ditch. As he stood there, spade in one hand, ragged, rotting piece of material in the other Father returned home.

He took in the scene in the orchard; the policeman, the shovel, the earth, the rags, and then did the strangest thing. He ran through the gate, hurtling forwards, arms outstretched, a strange howling noise coming from his lips which eventually I recognised was the word 'No!' but it was so long and drawn out that it sounded like an animal wail. For a moment I thought he was going to attack the young man and obviously Robinson did too because he raised the spade across himself defensively. At the last minute Father stopped and sunk to his knees in the dirt and began to weep with great heaving sobs.

'I didn't mean to kill her,' he gasped through his tears, his hands squeezing clumps of the earth beneath them. 'It was an accident. She was leaving me you see; said she was going to take my daughter away with her. I lost my temper and she hit the tiles,' he howled, 'I loved her.' He was shaking and rocking, his eyes pleading for understanding.

I stood open mouthed and nauseous, trying to grasp what was happening. This was supposed to be a set up, a trick. Why was he saying this? Who had he killed? Shock began to creep over me, weakening my legs and I had to sit down quickly in the damp grass as I watched Robinson suddenly spring into action, handcuff Father and radio for backup. After they had taken him away, still sobbing and mumbling his confession, they sent a squad of men with shovels and sniffer dogs to start the digging. They decimated the orchard and churned the ground over like pigs looking for truffles. In the end they found her buried four feet deep near the corner of the field.

It turned out there was no 'Bloody Spaniard', no flamenco dress and no marmalade; just a bundle of bones down among the roots of one of the old plum trees. It occurred to me then that, every year since she had first been laid to rest there, the tree must have been nourished by her body, the purple fruit growing bloated and juicy on the dark soil enriched by her flesh and therefore, in a round-about way, she had continued to make jam after her death.

It occurs to me still, just as it occurs to me that if I had not tried to cause trouble she might have lain there forever and Father would have stayed a free man and not died broken in prison, leaving me alone in the world. I named my daughter after Sally-Ann, even though I never heard from her again. One day I will explain why it is I have such a hatred of plums.

SECOND PRIZE WINNER

Facing up

Steve Brodie

I could date the source of my problems to the day, to the hour, to the minute. A summer camp by Windermere when I was eleven. It was back when a group of boys could take a tent away for five days and no one mentioned accountability or supervision responsibilities. We just hopped on a train with tents, sleeping bags, salmon paste sandwiches sealed in Tupperware and tucked in our rucksacks by our mothers along with five pounds to see us by till Tuesday. That summer was one that only lives in the memories of childhood. A hot, drowsy sun complemented by the clear, glittering water of the lake. I swear I can still hear the bees droning somewhere in the distance.

He was called James.

I have no idea how, at that early age, he knew the things he could do to me when we had left the others to 'go exploring'. Or indeed how he knew that I was the one in the group that would be amenable to his advances. All I know is that the bliss I experienced, wrapped in those sweet young limbs marked me for the rest of my life. From that moment onwards, my 'type', should I have ever been honest, was an eleven year old boy. It never wavered from that. Maybe it always was going to be that way. No trauma of abuse as a victim of the system for me. No threats or assaults from rogue uncles or so-called family friends. Just James, curly headed and carefree in a hollow by the lakeside.

His parents moved away later that summer. I never saw him again. Would I have been any different had he stayed? Would my tastes have grown with him as he turned from a child to a young man? I would never know. He corrupted me but he was the only person I've ever loved and I think I love him still.

I'll pass over my adolescence. It's far too horrendous an experience for me to return to. All you need know is I forged a career as a quantity surveyor, a career I made a conscious effort to take up as it offered no avenue of temptation for me. I hated sports and team games and did not own a television set so on the few evenings I was not working, I explored my love of classical music and I was involved in local heritage group committees. I studiously stayed away from families or community events. I understand was known as a cold fish. I am slow to humour and more than happy in my own company.

I dislike flamboyance and dress in dark, anonymous tones. As I aged, my hair became peppered with white and I combed it straight back from my forehead, aided by a little oil. I was neat and fastidiously clean in the way many men who choose a solitary existence often are.

And what of my carnal desires? I was strong. I denied who and what I was, for what I am is utterly unacceptable. There were men, I admit. Grown men who themselves preferred grown men. Men who lived in houses with neat hedges, mown lawns and garages where wood was sawn. Some lived alone but many lived with females, be they mothers, sisters or wives. We find each other. The meetings with these men were perfunctory, almost on a par with a lavatory visit. They served a purpose for both parties and no emotional bonds were ever formed.

Oh, James.

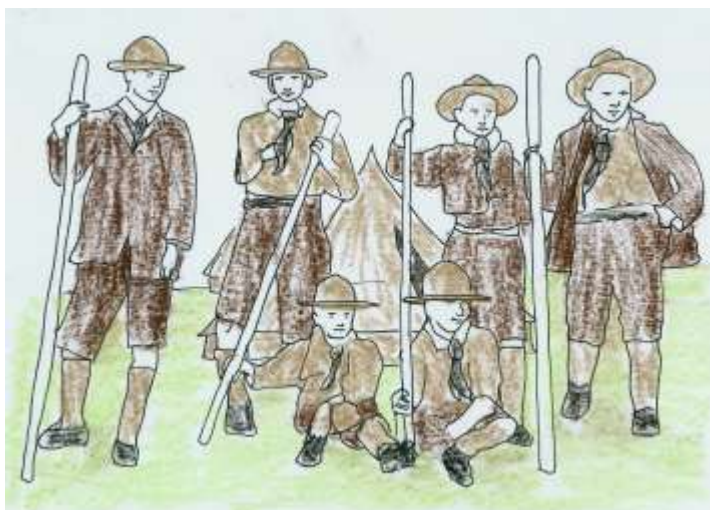
The internet was my downfall. Trust me here, I never actually visited the web sites. You know the websites I mean. But I did search for them and my fingers often hovered over the final mouse click before I tore myself away. I tried turning to drink but never really had the stomach for it. I was also conscious that in that period before alcoholic

oblivion took me to its disgusting bosom, my shackles could have been loosened. Loosened enough for me to look and to give in to temptation.

It was on one of these unrequited searches that I came across a site offering a solution, a cure. A self help group which, so the page told me, would guarantee to turn me to some semblance of normality. I told myself this was what was needed. I would change myself.

The self help group offered a two week intensive course. It was expensive but I had the money. It was to take place in Thailand. Yes, Thailand. I can hear you pause, take a breath and nod knowingly. I was desperate, I tell you. By being close to temptation, temptation can be crushed all the more powerfully. Or so they said. I'm sure you don't believe that and, I suppose, neither do I. Sexual desires can hoodwink a conscience to lead it to believe anything but the truth. I went to Thailand.

When I arrived at the course, run by earnest Dutch people, good people it seemed, I learned that God was my salvation. The same God that made me the deviant I was. My hotel was comfortable, the country itself was beguiling but the course, ten of us in an air-conditioned complex on the outskirts of Phuket, was just so much tosh I could hardly believe I had agreed to come. There was no mention of religion in any of the pre-course information they sent out. I descended into a white fury with myself, that I could have been so stupid.



After three days I had had enough of scripture and homilies about the strength I could gain from Him. I got up from the chair I was sat on, threw the pad I was expected to compose my prayers on to the floor and told the Dutch tutor that this wasn't for me. 'If you abandon God now, he will abandon you also,' he shouted after me as I stormed out the room. 'And there are no refunds!'

A loud American, Cambresi his name was, and a fat, bald German called Kessler also followed me out the room. 'Hey', Cambresi said, 'we gave it a shot. We got nothin' to be ashamed of here. If I'd known they'd be trying to save us with this God crap, I'd have never agreed to come. I'd have saved my dough.'

I nodded in agreement, not wanting to get too familiar. These were men like me, after all. Men who deserved to be hated. Cambresi suggested we go for a quick beer and, stupidly, I agreed. I needed something to take the edge off my rage. Kessler, a man whose body odour could have dropped a horse, came along too.

One beer led to another. Normally I would have avoided the company of men with appetites for things, bad things, bad things like my own perverted desires, but the heat and the unfamiliar surroundings made me drop my guard. I felt woozy. I have told you I was not a man for alcohol but the beer had seemed to affect me more than usual. I told Cambresi I needed to go back to my hotel but I stumbled off my stool in the wooden

floored bar we had retired to. The American helped me up and told me there were a few rooms just down the street where I could sleep it off. He knew the guy that owned the place. 'You're never going to make it back in your state,' he told me and I agreed. I wasn't safe. I was dizzy and nauseous and I couldn't control my legs. He led me to a scruffy house just off a dirt track where I slumped into a grubby cot in a small room with bamboo walls.

I don't know how long it was before the boy came in. I was still affected by the drink but that is no excuse. I could tell myself I was caring, loving, even. That the boy, my boy, hadn't gone into Kessler's room and so was saved some of the brutality that Kessler earlier revealed was to his taste but it was not a valid argument. I had spent thirty years repressing my true side but it seemed it would never give me peace.

At dawn, my faculties returned. I sobbed. The boy, the beautiful boy, was sleeping. I extricated myself from beside him, emptied most of the contents of my wallet, left the notes next to his sleeping head and returned to my hotel. Once there, I stood under the bathroom's shower spray for what seemed like hours, crying softly, consumed by sorrow for the boy, sorrow for myself. I heard a knock at my door and put on my bathrobe before answering it. A young dark haired man wearing ray bans and a cream linen suit stood there. He was slapping my passport impatiently against his hand. "Mr Julian Chambers?" he asked. I confirmed that was my name. "I'm Stapleton, British Embassy," he said, brusquely. "Can I come in?" I moved aside to let him enter.

"I'll cut to the chase, Chambers," he said as I closed the door. "We have a very good idea why you are here. We have noted the company you are keeping. This is a warning across your bows. If you get yourself into trouble, the British Embassy will not assist you. You will face Thai justice alone. If we feel the Thai police have benefited from your benevolence, we will make moves to immediately deport you and prosecute you in the UK for any crimes we can prove you have committed here."

"I don't know what you mean. What crimes?" I protested, but as I spoke the words, I blushed and could not look him in the face. An image of the boy came to me. "I think you know well enough," he said with utter contempt. He threw the passport onto the un-slept bed. "Use this in the very near future," he ordered and turned on his heels and left. Before he reached the hotel lobby, I had begun packing.

I returned to my previous life and lost myself in my work. I put the episode with the boy and the whole ghastly trip into a wardrobe in my mind and locked the door. Did it really happen to me? I told myself not. A month later, an envelope arrived in the post. Over my breakfast toast, I opened it and took out photos within. They were, of course, pictures of myself with the boy. There was a letter accompanying the photographs. "Dear Mr Julian, I have posted these pictures to you of us together. My name is Peng and I'm hoping you will contribute to my education. Mr Cambresi tells me he will share these images with your employers and your local police if you decide not to help me with my schooling.' There was a sum of money mentioned that would have taken my breath away had it not already left my body at the shock of the images. I took some kitchen matches, placed the photographs in the sink and set fire to them. As I watched the images blacken and curl in the flames, I knew what I had to do.

So, here you catch up with me in Scotland. The Forth Road Bridge is busy and bustling at all times, even very early on a Sunday morning. The bridge over the Tay to Dundee is an all together different matter. Dundee is a city that stays up late on Saturday and is too hung over to trade much on a Sunday. I had the bridge to myself. I looked back at the purple hills of Angus as the sun crept above the heather and I knew this was the right decision. As I stepped on to the bridge wall, I could hear an alarm sounding. Someone must have seen me and a police car was speeding towards me. It was too far away. I ignored the alarm and stepped forward.

Oh James.

THIRD PRIZE WINNER

Comrades

John Dixon

I don't remember the crash itself. Nor any screams. Or sirens. Only that a woman, a total stranger, died in my arms.

I was too stunned – by whatever it was that had happened – to call for help. A paramedic came up. I looked pleadingly into his eyes.

'Can't you help her?'

He shook his head.

Her head lolled on my chest and her glazing, unfocused eyes stared up at me.

'Someone'll be back for the details,' the Medic said and left.

I couldn't leave. I couldn't leave her. I was accountable, as never before, to a fellow human being. She had almost made an offering of herself, a gesture no-one could refuse.

The ambulances and emergency services began to arrive. All the space was needed. The other bodies were taken away. We were left till last. I heard someone say, 'They can't have been married long.'

I assumed her details were in her handbag. I didn't want to open it. I wasn't sure I wanted to know. As it was I felt like a looter.

I took a visiting card out of my wallet and wrote 'So very sorry.' I tucked it into her hand and walked off in the general direction of home.

I had a frantic text message from the hanger-on who calls herself My Partner. I didn't reply – and unthinkingly turned into a side road, then turned right, and right again and again, then left and found myself back at the scene of the event. The whole area had been cordoned off. There were no ambulances, just hoists and cutting machines working by arc-light. A crowd had gathered round the barriers, not relatives or friends, just ghouls, craning their necks, hovering round the film crews, moving forward every time a workman in protective gear arrived or left. There was nothing to see. The real players had moved on. The bodies had gone. She'd been taken. I had left.

There was no point in staying. I went straight home.

I looked at the report on television. An in-yer-face journalist was shrilling up-to-date snippets. 'Professional counsellors are to be helicoptered to the bereaved. Even now as I stand here...'

The phone rang. It was an official from the scene.

'We got your details from your card. You didn't come to our Information Desk?'

'I didn't know there was one. Anyway I've little to tell. I didn't know the lady.'

'I'm sure,' he said quietly, 'but we'd like to talk about it. Not just the woman. We need to know as much as we can. There's to be an Official Enquiry.'

'I can't remember much,' I protested. 'Anything at all – really.'

What have I to tell them? What's he accusing me of? I'd never noticed her before it happened. She must have been standing next to me on the train, gripping the hand rail. I

didn't touch her. If she'd bumped into me I'd've recoiled at the touch. Muttered an audible apology. Without meaning it. Possibly even mouthed an expletive.

'You're entitled to counselling help,' the voice said and rang off.

The woman who calls herself My Intended rushed in, thanked God, and smothered me with solicitous questions.

'The moment I heard I knew you'd been involved. I just knew.'

I didn't respond.

'I can quite understand you don't want to talk – yet.' She paused, presumably hoping I might blurt something out. 'Well, at least, have a bite to eat.'

I shook my head. The news bulletin said that information about the victims couldn't be released till all the bodies had been identified and the relatives informed.

I felt a pang of resentment. Please say she cannot be identified. Let her be a total unknown. Then I can give her an identity.

The phone rang again. My Erstwhile Partner answered it. 'It's a man. Says he's her husband. He wants to talk to you.'



She did not live far away, quite near the train station after mine. I dreaded I'd see a more domestic side of her. The semi-detached was undistinguished, drab almost. The front garden was crazy-paved in a very tight-lipped way, with hardly any cement between the stones, several of which were buckling.

A middle-aged woman answered the door. She looked too young to be the mother or mother-in-law, possibly an older sister. I was shown into the front room and introduced to a horseshoe of relatives, all women, who sat on the sofa and armchairs, like items of furniture themselves.

'So,' one of them muttered. 'So. You were the last person to see her alive?'

They stared at me, as if I'd done something wrong. I didn't answer and looked round the room, wondering if the décor reflected her taste. I attributed all the kitsch to the

husband, and the few good pieces to her. There was no other evidence of her existence but a small photo on the mantelpiece. He must have dominated her, stifled her with these relatives – his relatives, almost certainly not hers. How she must have hated him! She was looking for someone else. She did choose me. She did single me out. Do not pretend that In Extremis she didn't know her own mind.

'I'll get her husband,' said the slightly older woman. 'He's in the garden.'

They all hung their heads. At the thought of him grieving? What did he know of grief?

'He says he'd be pleased to see you. It might be better if you met – outside.'

She took me via a conservatory to the patio.

The husband was about my age, the same build, the same colour hair. He had tired, swollen eyes. He looked drawn and cadaverous. I suspect he always looked like that, even before the accident.

'Thank you for coming,' he said. 'I just wanted to ask – if I might – if you don't mind, that is – well, not ask, not prepared questions, of course – really for you – to tell – to tell me – if...'

How could I help despising him? He was unworthy of her. He hadn't protected her when she needed it. And it was me he seemed concerned for!

'It must've been very harrowing for you – not knowing this person – this... my wife.'

Was he implying she'd been forward and familiar? Wanton, deliberate even, in latching onto me as the last person she was ever to see?

'Bit surprised that she was... actually on that train.'

'Well, funnily enough, as it happens,' I said. 'I was on it only by chance. An announcement said there were delays and changes of platform. Yet there was a train waiting. I ignored it at first, but when I heard the whistle I instinctively ran – before even checking the destination. It turned out OK. I would normally have got a later one.'

'That's interesting,' he said. 'She usually went – earlier. It's a pity she wasn't on the usual one or...'. He looked wistfully into the darkened garden. Perhaps he wanted to say 'Why couldn't it have been you who died?'

He shifted position and stared at me. 'In your arms, you say?'

I hadn't mentioned this. I assume he'd found out from the paramedic or the Information Desk.

'She must've been standing very close to me,' I said. 'Then – before we reached the next station – it all happened.'

There was a long pause. I really wanted to say to him – I'd seen her from the start. So close, so tender, trusting, she came to my arms, without asking my permission – still less yours. She knew I'd accept. She was not a total stranger. She was in my arms long before she died.

'We had difficulty tracing you,' he said. 'The police said someone had disappeared without reporting properly.'

'Not exactly true. I left my card.'

'Oh, yes, indeed. So you did. I forgot. The police gave it to me.' He handed it back. 'I'm glad we met. Despite the circumstances.'

You mean despite the fact she died in my arms.

We shook hands.

So, he wants me to hand her back to his arms, does he? No, I will lay her gently in the earth.

'May I come to the funeral?' I asked.

He looked on the point of asking another question. I think it might have been – 'Did she call out my name? With her dying breath?'

The woman who keeps calling me Her Soul-Mate is getting on my nerves. I can't bear to touch her anymore. There's nothing there. She suggested I get counselling.

'Oh,' I said. 'You mean – talk about it, relive it, then get on the next crowded train?'

'I'm serious,' she insisted, and phoned to invite a counsellor to the house. He was there within the hour. He looked like one of the ghouls.

'You're one of the lucky ones,' he assured me. 'Near the worst fatalities.

Miraculously you survived. Not bereaved either. Nonetheless, we have enough counsellors to deal with your case as well. We'll need an hour for the first session, half an hour thereafter. It's a free service.'

His questions were endless. I sighed.

'This is for your Peace of Mind,' he said. 'Do you get flashbacks?'

'No.'

'What? None at all?'

'No. Not even of your questions.'

'My questions? Flashbacks of my questions? You mean my questions dwell in your mind? You hear them echo and resonate?'

'No. I think my hearing was damaged in the blast.'

'You can't hear what I'm saying! I hadn't thought of that possibility.'

He summoned my Would-be Partner. He spoke to her quite loudly. 'Typical. Seen it all before. In denial.' He patted her gently on the shoulder. 'Not to worry. I've no doubt my services will be called on again.'

From that moment till the day of the funeral was the most motivated time of my life. I conducted an investigation parallel to and surpassing the Official Tribunal.

Once all the victims had been identified and the relatives informed, a list of names appeared in the newspapers. She appeared much younger in the photo, so I was able to reconstruct her life on a more than conjectural basis. I photocopied the reports as newsprint tends to turn brown. They became Exhibit A in my dossier, which I hoped soon to laminate.

Her name surprised me. The husband, so-called, had not mentioned it. He just said My Wife or She. And in a way I was grateful for this. A name ties one down. The surname – his name – was easily forgettable. Her first name was not the one I would have chosen for her. I have yet to decide how I'll address her.

Her age did not surprise me. She was my age. She could have been a lost twin. I checked the exact birth date in the Public Record Office. A few days separated us – even more a chance. Twins are Ordinary Fate. But we – we could have married, without incest.

The newspaper reports did give the date she had married – not long ago I would have thought, but long enough for her to have regretted it. There were no children, which, with him as her husband, came as no surprise.

She had worked in the City. I checked the firm, and went to the wine bar nearest to the office. I spent lunchtime and evening eaves-dropping on her former colleagues, occasionally catching her name above the hubbub, trying to establish her role at work. I sat there for hours drinking, slowly. At closing time, I went the journey she'd have taken home.

I was careful not to be seen waiting outside her house at night. I had an unimpeded view through open windows, un-drawn curtains with the lights full on. The slightly older woman – the one I'd thought could be a sister – seemed very close to the husband. In times of grief there is much hugging. But to that extent?

It was clear they were going through all the cupboards, having a turnout. The dustbins were full. I sifted through them, hoping for a keepsake. I was surprised they had chucked the newspapers. They couldn't have been keeping a scrapbook.

These investigations took up my waking hours. They helped put in perspective a recurrent dream, which even sleeping by day and waking at night could not dispel. It was a peaceful setting, in the eye of the storm. I drowned in the gaze of her eyes. They encompassed horizon after horizon. I couldn't close the lids. Even when I awoke from the dream, hers were still there, still open.

Not even the coffin lid could close them. I wanted to look at her again in her entirety; uncorrupted, enhanced, fleshed out by the facts I'd learnt.

The funeral service was dull. The relatives I'd seen were there, some work colleagues from the wine bar, and several other people who seemed to think they had some right to attend. I could hardly wait for them all to go.

I stayed at the graveside all night. The flowers were beginning to fade. I pushed them on one side. The earth was fresh. I could easily have dislodged it.

I sat at the end of the grave, like a faithful dog on a tomb top. I'd have liked to alter the name on her gravestone to mine, or even add my name to hers and join her there.

Her immediate family dropped in intermittently over the next few weeks. Their numbers soon dwindled, and their stay was progressively shorter. I, myself, was forced to return home on occasion.

The woman who says she is soon to be My Wife is becoming utterly insufferable. So is the doctor who gave me the certificate. So are the people from the job I had. But she is the worst. Every half hour she says 'Are you alright?' She shows me pictures of wipe clean show-houses, travel brochures, bright sunny places, meals out. She seems to be wearing a new outfit every time I bother to look at her.

'It must've been awful. It could've been you. It was a miracle. Don't you see. . . Someone – Up There – wanted us to remain together.'

I laughed and almost replied... Someone – Down Here – had other plans.

I never go to the cemetery on her birthday or the anniversary of her death. When the Investigating Tribunal finally reports the whole issue will be brought to life again, like Judgment Day itself. There'll be a resurgence of grief. The family will make a special pilgrimage.

I need not fear them. We are all beyond recognition now. They cannot take anything away from me. She is not in the coffin anyway. She is out there. Waiting for me. Looking like her double. Waiting for another calamity. I can meet her only in an extreme situation.

I frequent crowded, enclosed, vulnerable places – full trains, buses with standing room only, sale queues, capacity audiences. Places where I can lose myself – and find her.

We'll spot each other at the same time. We'll greet each other with the same kind words.

SHORTLISTED

Dangerous Liaisons

DJ Harrison

Arne watched his grandson's deft eight year old fingers tie a spinner to his fishing line. Despite the swell out in the bay, the boy was working patiently and methodically.

As he told the story, Arne felt the breath crackle painfully in his blackened lungs. 'After Gilgamesh had rejected her, Ishtar unleashed the Bull of Heaven to destroy him and all of mankind.'

Søren's eyes widened in the fading light. 'Gilgamesh will fight it, won't he? He's two thirds a god and one third human. He had superpowers like Spiderman.'

'I'd say he was more like Superman.' Arne smiled.

'Tell me what happened next.'

'I will, but not today. Now we have to start the engine and head back to shore. Don't forget we still have to prepare these fish for the smoker. It's getting late and you have school tomorrow.'

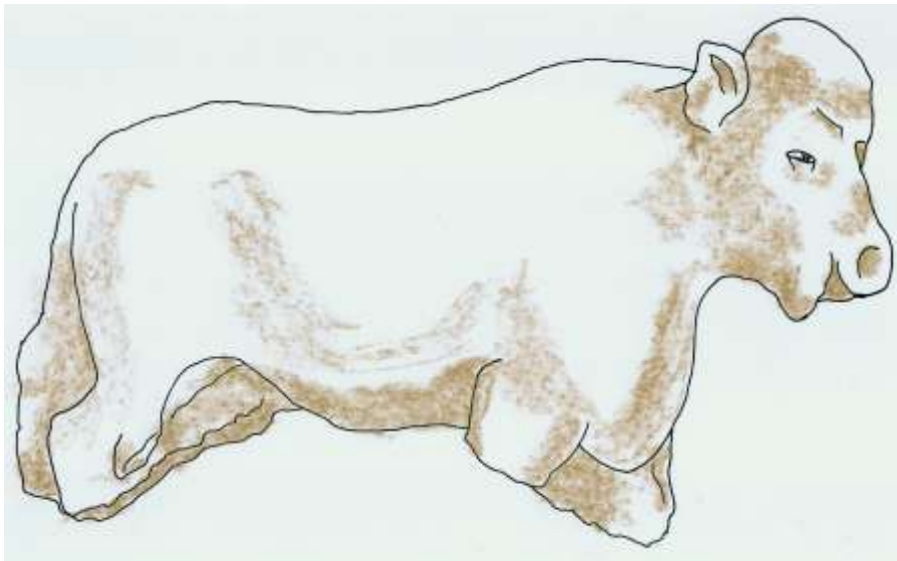
'Aww,' Søren's face screwed up in disappointment.

The frustrating bile of regret rose in Arne's throat. All that precious time wasted in the desert while his wife and daughter learned to do without him. Now he had so little time left to get to know her son the way he never knew her.

'Tomorrow,' Arne insisted, 'I promise.'

They were coming for him tomorrow but he had no heart to tell the boy.

*



The police arrived in the early hours, a dozen cars and vans, swarms of officers making preparations. The beach was cordoned off, armed units patrolled the woods, local men blocking the road and clearing the camp site. Arne watched from the terrace of his summerhouse where he sat enjoying the late spring air drawn gently through a cigarette.

It was almost noon when the first helicopter set down on the beach, its insane clatter destroying the peace, battering his ears with percussive waves of sound. Two more landed in quick succession, churning up the sand and discharging a gaggle of besuited men bending low to avoid the rotors. Arne wondered if all that ducking was really necessary, a means of transport that decapitated its passengers on exit was not something a Dane would have designed.

The visitors crammed themselves onto his terrace, some of them reduced to perching unsteadily on the slatted wooden fence.

'I want to remind you that you are not at liberty to divulge anything said at this meeting. These are matters of utmost significance to our national security.' The Danish Ambassador to the United Nations was one of the lucky ones afforded a seat. He was there, Arne guessed, to give Danish authority to what was being discussed. The other men seated at his rough table were American.

'Actually we're talking world security here.' One of the Americans, introduced as Ed Whitton and the man who decided the seating arrangements, took over. 'This is Jim Patterson from JPL, he'll give you the heads up.'

Arne reluctantly offered his crumpled pack of Prince around the table, to his relief all except the big American declined. This had all the hallmarks of a long meeting and his stocks were low.

'JPL?' Arne drew gratefully on his cigarette.

'Jet Propulsion Laboratory,' Jim explained. 'We're responsible for the Voyager Project. The two spacecraft were launched in 1977, they both carried what we called a Golden Record.'

'I don't see what this has to do with me, I'm not a space scientist, I'm a retired archaeologist,' Arne said.

'Bear with me please, sir,' Jim continued. 'Our spacecraft travelled to the very edge of our solar system carrying this data. Included on the record were spoken greetings in many languages. There was also a diagram which gave the position of our planet.'

Arne lit another cigarette, this time not bothering to offer one to Ed. He was beginning to relax in the near-certainty that they had mistaken him for someone else and that he would be back on the boat with his grandson that evening.

'Until the middle of last year, both Voyagers were functioning normally and had travelled about twenty billion kilometres away from Earth.' Jim paused, Arne could feel his pride in the achievement he was describing.

'So last year they stopped working?' Arne asked.

'No, last year they both suddenly arrived back in Earth orbit,' Jim said.

'How could that happen?'

'They were sent back with a message.'

A shiver of fear ran through Arne's body. 'What message?'

'It's actually a reply to the Arkkadian greeting on the Golden Record. That said *may all be very well.*'

Jim pushed a single sheet of paper across the table.

Arne picked it up, examined the cuneiform inscription. 'It's Arkkadian. It reads *the uncertainty of the future may not be positive* or words to that effect.' He breathed a sigh of relief. 'Is that all you needed, a translation?'

Jim looked at Ed. 'No of course not. Our guys already translated it as *there's very little chance of that.*'

'Let me get this straight,' Arne said, 'you sent two spacecraft out of our solar system with a map showing where we live and a message in a language that nobody has spoken for six thousand years?'

'Yes,' Ed grimaced, 'when you put it like that it does sound a bit stupid.'

'Nobody expected anyone to find them,' Jim said. 'Not for tens of thousands of years, anyway.'

'But now they have,' said Arne, 'shouldn't we be telling the world? It's surely something everyone should know about.'

'We don't want to start a panic, you know, food hoarding, stock market collapse, things like that,' Ed said. 'Also you have to think about the significance of what has

happened. Whoever sent them back did it almost instantaneously. It takes light 35 hours to travel that distance.'

'When we retrieved Voyager 1 its Radioisotope Thermoelectric Generator was gone but it was still powered up,' Jim said. 'There's a tiny device that replaced it providing electrical power in unlimited quantities.'

'So you see,' Ed continued, 'we have two things here, unlimited power generation and faster than light travel. If we can get those for ourselves then we are in business. That's where you fit in. We need you to meet with these interstellar beings and make the necessary arrangements.'

'I still don't understand what you're doing here talking to me,' Arne said.

'Quite simple, really,' Ed replied, 'you're the only man on earth who fits the bill.'

'But there are dozens of scholars that have at least as much knowledge of the language as I do.'

'But not in Denmark,' the Ambassador explained, 'think of the honour, you, a Dane, the first contact with interstellar beings, representing the whole world in the most momentous meeting in all history.'

'Not exactly the first,' Ed cut in. 'The Chinese have had one crack at it.'

'Yes, but the UN decided that the official approach would be made by a Dane,' the Ambassador insisted.

'Granted,' Ed said, 'there was one hell of a squabble, everyone wanted to be in on the act. In the end, Denmark was the only candidate that nobody objected to. Well, at least not violently anyway. You Danes are really popular guys, at least in comparison to the rest of us.'

'And you are the only Dane with a good knowledge of Arkkadian.' The Ambassador smiled.

*

Less than an hour after the helicopters landed, they battered their way airborne again, this time with Arne gritting his teeth to stop them vibrating out of his gums.

From Genner Strand they clattered to Skystrup where a military transport plane took over for the flight to Copenhagen. By the time they boarded the small passenger jet, the entourage had dwindled to three, Arne, Ed and Jim. As night approached, Arne wondered what Søren would make of his grandfather breaking his promise and disappearing without any word of explanation.

He was in no mood to talk but Ed insisted on occupying the seat next to his.

'There are a few things you should know about now that you've volunteered for the mission,' Ed said.

'Volunteered?' Arne said, 'is that what you call it? I think kidnapped, press-ganged, abducted are all better words.'

'Look, buddy, don't shoot the messenger. Your government is cock-a-hoop about the whole situation. Puts Denmark on the map, all that stuff. Also, in view of your medical condition...'

'What?' Arne felt a surge of bitterness. 'Do you think my life is less precious because I've only a few months to live?'

'Not exactly, I wouldn't put it quite like that.'

'You have no idea, do you? For me, every moment is valuable, every breath has meaning, every moment has to have purpose and awareness. I can't afford to waste a second. I want to spend what time I have left in Genner with my family. That's what I deserve, not this.'

'OK, I get you. If matters can be expedited, I'll make sure they are. I'll get you home as soon as I can.'

'Where exactly are we going?'

'The Interstellar Being's sent a map back with Voyager, it indicated a rendezvous point about equidistant between Basra and Baghdad.' Ed opened the folder and took out a map of Iraq.

'Uruk,' Arne said, his heart hammering in his chest.

'Exactly, one of your old haunts, I believe.'

'Yes, I spent many years excavating those ruins. Is there anything new there?'

'We don't know. The Chinese have had a look but we're none the wiser for that,' Ed said.

'I presumed we would be the first.'

'The Chinese very kindly retrieved the other Voyager for us. They sent us a long apology when they told us it had been lost on re-entry. By some strange coincidence, though, they showed up mob-handed in Uruk and began to search around.'

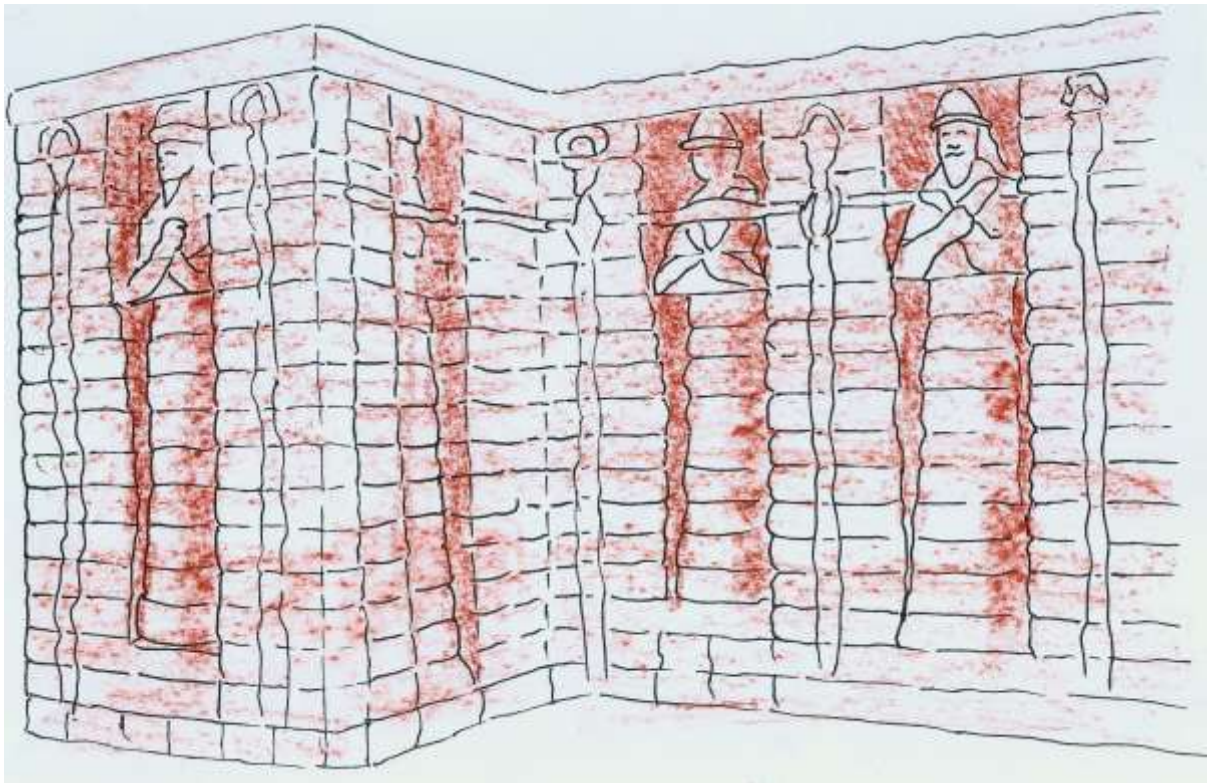
'So what's the point? If there's anything there, the Chinese will have it by now.'

'I doubt they got anything. Their entire mission was wiped out. We only found out about it when the Chinese accused us of being responsible.'

'Dead?'

'That's the normal effect of being wiped out. Yes, dead, all of them.' Ed gave a thin smile.

*



Arne clambered up the riverbank and surveyed the ruins of Uruk. It had changed very little since his last visit over twenty years ago unless he included the dead bodies that littered the ground.

Uruk, the city built by the great hero Gilgamesh, protected by Ishtar, Goddess of War, Love and Sex. Arne had always felt that combination to be a poignant one.

The Americans had provided him with a back pack containing food and water then instructed him to walk alone into the ruined city. There was vague mention of issues associated with any closer approach using vehicles but these issues were never elaborated upon. 'Best you go alone,' Ed had concluded, 'we don't want to risk a repeat of what happened with the Chinese.'

When Arne was young, the literature he read frequently described the oriental visage as 'inscrutable.' As he encountered corpse after corpse, Arne saw that this was far from the truth. Each one of these dead faces was easy to read. The same expression adorned them all. It was as if they had been frozen at the exact moment surprise turned into joy.

Fishing his water bottle from his pack, Arne sat wearily on the crumbling brownstone walls of the ancient city. In front of him, a single Chinese soldier of senior rank lay sprawled untidily forming the apparent epicentre of the carnage. The hot desert air blew dust across the body, motes dancing eerily in the air above it as if trapped by some unseen force.

Arne's nervousness had increased as he encountered each dead soldier and now, as he rested, he was beginning to panic. 'This is it,' he thought. 'I'm here, waiting for death.'

The wind was picking up, raising clouds of dust that whirled around the excavations that his hands had helped to make. He remembered the long hot days, tedious concentrated work with trowel and brush punctuated by occasional joy and excitement at the discovery of an artefact or inscription. Arne realised he knew this barren place more thoroughly than his own home.

As his eyes followed a miniature whirlwind around the jagged stones, he saw something new revealed in the all too familiar landscape. A stone, polished and glistening, tall as a man and pointing to the sky like a huge index finger.

He walked unsteadily over to it, the dust storm died, the air settled and the stone was clearly revealed. It was a stele, the earliest known form of written record, yet it was in perfect condition. The inscriptions looked as if they had been cut into it very recently.

Reaching out to feel the carved letters, his hand hesitated to touch the surface of the stone. Something, some old instinct perhaps, held him back while his conscious inquisitiveness pushed him forward. Before one aspect managed to hold sway over the other, he became aware of the woman standing next to him. All his attention was diverted away from the inscriptions and a shock that was much more than surprise went through him. Desire flushed through every part of his body. His arousal manifested as a fully hard erection, something that his anti-cancer medication had been denying him for over a year.

Her hair hung in plaits secured by heavy golden clasps, her neck was adorned by a necklace of bright round stones, her wrists were festooned with bracelets of gold. Apart from the jewellery and the charcoal smeared around her eyes, she was naked.

She smiled an invitation to him, held out her arms to receive him.

'Ishtar.' Arne spoke her name almost involuntarily.

'Come,' she replied, 'let me taste your passion, come to me, reach out and touch me.'

The urge to obey was almost irresistible. Arne fought with his desire to take her offering, to couple with her, to feel the ecstasy one more time. His tumescence threatened to overwhelm him, his brain began to release dopamine in anticipation of that glorious rush, his testicles tightened in preparation for the ejaculation that was so close and so desperately needed.

A vision of the sea intruded, his dinghy bobbing in the swell, his own voice telling the tale of Gilgamesh's rejection of Ishtar. Of Søren listening intently as he recited the list of her lovers, how each one had been sucked dry of power and left to wither. How Gilgamesh had stood firm and the terrible price exacted by the angry Goddess.

The urgency in Arne's groin had reduced, he was no longer on the verge of spilling his seed involuntarily. She was still pulling at his desires, reminding him of the warm softness she offered. All the longings he had ever harboured about any woman were being concentrated into a single moment of exceptional lust.

Again, his mind went back to his grandson and the questions of a boy yet to succumb to the insistent prompting of adolescent desires. 'Why did she get so upset? Is what she wanted from Gilgamesh that important?'

Fundamental. The word stuck in Arne's mind. It's all about fundamental power. The power that's in all of us, the power of being human, the power born from struggle, the power derived from knowing we are not gods and that our time is limited.

'Nej!' Arne shouted. 'What of all your other husbands, Ishtar? Where are they now?' He pointed at the corpses that littered the ruins of Uruk. 'Is this the fate that you would have me embrace?'

'Come now. Ishtar is waiting.' The voice, soft but imperious, provoked another surge of genital engorgement that he narrowly managed to control by clenching his buttocks and breathing hard. The overwhelming urge to ejaculate slowly subsided to the intensity of an itch that urgently needed scratching. He resisted the temptation, his mind winning the battle over his body that cared for nothing beyond an immediate climax. The Goddess disappeared, his last glimpse of her face left him in no doubt as to her anger.

'Great,' Arne thought, 'I'm stuck out here alone apart from a bunch of grinning corpses and now I've managed to make an enemy of the Goddess of War.' A cold chill enveloped him despite the desert heat. He braced himself for the imminent arrival of a great monster intent on destroying him and all mankind.

*

Ed Whitton was very relieved to see the old man emerge from the dust storm that had been denying them any view of what was happening in Uruk. Now he at least had something for the President to watch, sitting expectantly in his Oval office. Ever since the Bin Laden affair, it was as much a matter of providing a show for the President as getting the job done. Disappointingly, there didn't seem to be any E.T.'s holding Arne's hand, which was a pity. Neither was he carrying anything that might be a faster than light drive or an unlimited power source, unless they were inside the bottle of water in his right hand.

'Did you meet the Intelligent Beings?' Ed asked.

'Yes,' Arne replied.

'Did they tell you how they travel faster than light?'

'Yes.'

'What about unlimited power? Do you know about that?'

'Yes.'

'Great, you can tell the President of the United States, he's watching us right now.'

'Mr. President, they are Gods. They created us to amuse and to feed them. They don't think we're funny any more and they have no need of the kind of nourishment we provide. They may leave us to our own devices or they may destroy us, they're still having a bit of an argument amongst themselves about that.'

'What about the technology? How do we get to travel faster than light?'

'They said we should use our imagination. And if we need power we should stand in the sunlight.'

The dark cloud over Uruk hardened into the shape of a giant bull and the earth began to crack beneath their feet.

SHORTLISTED

True Love

Elle-Marie Hinchcliffe

*To give to you what you give to me.
True Love...*

Charmaine, her name was Charmaine.

The odd thing is that, try as I might, I cannot remember her face, but remember more the colour, the texture of her hair. It was the time of leaf-fall, the time of year when the brightness of the trees hides the truth. So it was with Charmaine. No, try as I might, I cannot remember her face. I remember that she had tawny, auburn hair, not fair exactly but lighter than brown, and when the sun shone, it turned, with the leaves, to gold. I remember her size, her grace of movement, her voice that could whisper gently, sweetly, terribly. I remember her beauty, the slenderness of her form, her pleasure at my homecoming, her deceptive loyalty, but her face, no, try as I might I cannot remember her face.

Perhaps it is because I cannot bear to.

The blue of the sky was changing to a palate of yellow as I drove home. A streak of orange from out of a hedge crossed the grass verge which separated road from pavement, a small but definite jarring. My foot in inappropriate city shoes, a stretch of unfamiliar road – humans are not as sure footed as animals, whose doom is curiosity.

I knew before I knelt it was dead. A trickle of blood came from its mouth, staining face and crest, emerald eyes were glazed. I had killed it. I remembered that James, walking away, had said I could do that, that one day I would hurt too. I did already, I had wanted to shout, but humans find it hard to admit they are wrong. They are fickle creatures. Off with the old, on with the new, is a true saying. James would love again, probably did already, and I had the freedom I craved. It was a hollow victory.

This time, I would admit what I had done, confront an angry or distressed owner of the cat, who lived in the cottage behind the hedge. I opened the gate and went up the path.

The cottage huddled, almost crouched, against surrounding trees, yet rather than offer shelter, they seemed to shrink from its walls, their branches cowering against themselves. As if compelled, I felt myself drawn towards the lamp lit windows, to its very heart, for I sensed the cottage breathed with life. Perhaps it was because of the cats, seated on the sills, their unblinking stares watching my approach with a cool intent. No one came in answer to my insistent knocking, no human anyway. I smiled uneasily. It occurred to me that perhaps the owner was in the garden at the back, but, rounding the red brick walls, it became obvious that whatever interests the owner held, they did not include gardening. A wilderness of tangled weeds and unkempt roses struggled for a breath of sky.

There was only one thing I could do. I hastily scribbled an apology on a scrap of paper from my car's glove compartment and pushed it through the letterbox, noting that the brass knocker, though unpolished, was quite discernible as a cat's head, and that at my feet two stone felines guarded the entrance, offering visitors a cold and questioning stare.

As I walked back up the path I had the certain feeling that I was being watched, and not just by the cats. I felt like I was being both judged and sentenced, but to what?

I took a blanket from the boot and picking up the cat's lifeless body I carried it to the back of the house.

There was a woman in the garden next door, a neat and tidy garden with flower beds which she lovingly tended. She gave me an odd look as I placed the bundle quietly at the door.

"One of the cats," I explained, "ran in front of my car. I've written a note to say I'm sorry, left my name and address."

"Most would just have left," she murmured. "I'd tear it up if I were you."

"No," I said, "I couldn't do that, and anyway, I've posted it through. Lady on her own is she?"

The woman nodded. "Except for the cats."

After making complimentary comments about her lovely garden, I made my goodbyes. Later, settled in the cottage I had bought thirty miles away, and with Charlie, my own cat,

purring happily on my knee, I found the neighbour's words reiterating through my head.

"Most people would just have left."

Most people?

"Most people."

I had done all I could. It was an accident. I had not been speeding, I told myself, running my fingers through Charlie's tawny amber fur. "What would I do without you?" I



whispered to her. I had called her Charmaine at first, it had always been a favourite name with me, but graceful as she was, she was such a tom boy of a cat that it had soon become abbreviated to Charlie. "Beddie byes," I said to her, not knowing if she would care to come or not. She was her own mistress, and I loved her for it.

It was almost midnight when the phone rang. I had been taking a leisurely bath, turning down the day, pampering myself into forgetfulness. Not knowing who it would be, I picked up the receiver to a voice which sounded, thin, strained, possibly Eastern European.

"Hello. This is Katie Torzshak. I am the owner of the cat you killed."

I swallowed. Had I hoped it would be James?

"I'm very sorry. It was an accident."

"My cats don't go out much. It was an unusual event. They are careful creatures, not like humans. You must have been going too fast. I don't feel it to be right that you should get away with murder. My people are not easily taken in. Perhaps you think I have other cats, that I won't miss her. "

I was taken aback.

"We must meet," she ventured.

"I don't think there would be any use in that."

"It would be of use to me," she answered, and the line went dead.

The night was long, sleepless. Charlie stretched her supple length beside me, relaxed, though I was not. I felt her warmth, but not understanding, and shrank uneasily from contact, not knowing why.

The following day, I had work to take my mind off events. The phone lines at the agency were hectic, yet did I experience a slight chill each time I lifted the receiver, a tensing of the muscles at the back of my neck? I was being silly. It had been an accident. Katie Torzshak would understand that, and, anyway, she couldn't know where I worked. She did, I remembered the note, know where I lived.

I had been home only long enough to kick off my boots when a car drew up outside. For a moment I thought James, not knowing whether I wished it to be he or not, but it was a woman who opened the door. A woman, perhaps in her forties or fifties, dressed predominantly in grey. She was wearing a large, fluffy textured sweater and her hair, cut short, was as black and sleek as fur. My mind answered.

"Katie Torzshak," she said, walking in.

"I've just come in from work," I began.

"I know," she said, her eyes already fastened on Charlie, who had come to survey this stranger in our home.

She put out her hand and I was just going to say she wasn't usually friendly to visitors when Charlie surprised me by nuzzling her head against it.

"Don't be surprised," she said to me. "Cats know instinctively who loves them. For themselves, they're not very felicitous, I mean to us humans they offer merely cupboard love. Not very loyal. Still, people are much the same, yes? But to each other. That is different. When one of their own is hurt animals close ranks. Protect their own kind."

I blinked without answering.

By now she had seated herself, with Charlie purring on her knee. That she should show affection to this grey-clad intruder was hurtful, to say the least. I mean, it was Charlie and I against the world, wasn't it, free spirits, two of a kind?

"You see," Katie Torzshak continued, "the cat you killed..."

"It was an accident."

"Portia, the cat you killed, was a very special cat, irreplaceable. I am fond of all my cats but Portia, she was, how can I say it, an icon amongst cats. When I think of all that we've been through together, how much I've spent on her food, vet's bills and so on, and I am not a rich woman, as you can see. It wouldn't be right to let you get away with it."

"You're expecting me to give you money?"

Katie Torzshak wiped away a tear, and produced from somewhere in the folds of voluminous greyness, a slip of paper.

"I've worked it all out, all I have spent. The price of murder, you might say. I'm sure you'll realise, that put like that, it is a cheap price to pay."

"But Miss Torzshak, I did not murder her."

"I think you did."

She put Charlie down, reluctantly, and went to the door.

"We'll say Thursday then, for the collection of the money. I hope that there'll be no hard feelings, that you'll come to the funeral?"

Without waiting for an answer she left.

Eight hundred pounds was the figure on the paper. Eight hundred pounds, the cost of loving care for eight years. Eight hundred pounds. Compensation for Portia's death. Justice. Her pound of flesh.

There were no further phone calls. Her arrival was promptly at seven on Thursday. She had brought photographs of her cats. Those I had seen through her windows, and some of which she told me were now deceased and lying at peace in the wilderness behind her cottage, where Portia too, would be laid to rest. Here and there she paused to murmur their names. Petrushka, Larissa, Camille, Anna, Karenina; it seemed that they were all named after fictional heroines. Perhaps in a way it was true that cats had nine lives, I ventured, thinking that perhaps a little humour would not be misplaced.

"They are my life," she said, staring at me. "I thought Monday, at eleven, for the funeral. My sister will attend, with her two Russian Blues, and my friend from the Animal Protection Society."

"And the lady next door...?" I questioned.

"I think not. No flowers please. Donations to the society only."

"I'm afraid I shan't be able to attend..."

"Which brings me to our agreement. You have the money?"

"I'm sorry, Miss Torzshak, I do not. I realise now what I have done, albeit an accident. I do understand the suffering I have caused you, but I'm not in a position to offer such a sum, nor do I think it is relevant..."

"We will have to think of something else then," she interrupted. "Murder must be accounted for."

Charlie, who had been seated at her feet throughout our conversation, purred loudly and pushed her head against grey-clad legs.

"I will, of course, make a donation, and am sorry I will be unable to attend on Monday owing to business." I began to make out a cheque for thirty pounds.

Taking it from me, something which resembled a smile passed her lips and she murmured something about thirty pieces of silver; that she would never betray the animal kingdom.

"I am truly very sorry," I said.

"I certainly hope you will be," she answered, and was gone.

Unlike Katie Torzshak's homing animals, Charlie was a free spirit, used to being self-sufficient during long hours spent alone when I was at work. Like all cats though, she was intensely possessive of her domain and owner and always came when she was called. She did not come now, however, and I felt a chill of unease as I searched the darkening street. What was I really looking for? A body. Charlie having met the same fate as Portia at Katie Torzshak's hand? An eye for an eye. A cat for a cat. Retribution. I was being silly, but Charlie did not come.

Six months went by before I found myself returning to Katie Torzshak's cottage. If her car had been outside I would not have stopped, but it was not. Cautiously, cat-like almost, I crept up the path to look in the same bay windows. The two cats which I had seen before were curled up on either side of the fire, and, between them, looking at me with a cold disdain, queen of all she surveyed, sat Charlie, on a silken cushion, the letters on which, lovingly handcrafted in silk, spelt Charmaine.

To give to you what you give to me...

SHORTLISTED

Loose Chippings

Sal Page

Clive confessed he'd forgotten the picnic just as the car hit the loose chippings. Already driving too fast as usual, Brenda released something that sounded like a cross between a sigh and a groan, and accelerated. Clive's head filled up immediately with the metallic clatter of chippings on the car's underside. He pictured the picnic hamper on top of his Mum's washing machine where he'd left it after loading in the pork pies and cheese from the fridge.

He'd been really trying as well. He'd even packed a bottle of wine and two proper glasses, wrapped carefully in a tea towel. His Mum had watched him doing it, full of disapproval. For the wine, for Brenda, for the very idea of a picnic.



He was such an idiot for forgetting it after all that.

He folded his arms. Couldn't she slow down? The noise of the chippings and her anger were making him jittery. With no warning, Brenda slammed on the brakes, the car came to a halt and they jerked forward in unison. The last few chippings pinged and clanged. Then silence. The car seemed to be floating in a sea of rapeseed, dazzling yellow in all directions. Where were they anyway? Clive shut his eyes.

'For fuck's sake.'

Of course Brenda had to spoil the silence. Clive hated it when she swore and hated himself for objecting to it but not being bothered when anyone else swore. It was where she worked that did it. All those men under her.

Clive often wondered what she was doing with him but once he'd dared leave the factory floor to go into the office to ask her on a date she said yes. Then after their first date she said yes, and again after the second and third. Reluctant, distracted, resigned most of the time but she always said, yes. Yes, to a meal in a restaurant where she ended up paying. Yes, to the pictures, she chose the film. Yes, to the walk in the park when they talked about work the whole time.

'This was your idea. I never wanted to come on this stupid picnic anyway. In this heat we'll be surrounded by sodding wasps the moment we open the food.'

'But ...'

Clive thought this was irrelevant, considering where the food was.

Brenda slammed her hand onto the steering wheel. 'My fucking paintwork will be wrecked now.'

‘Perhaps you should have slowed down?’ He would’ve probably been better not saying that.

‘You can’t drive, Clive. So what do you know?’

He noticed her fingers still gripped the steering wheel. If he just sat quietly her anger would subside. He should have learnt this from last time. Brenda’s face was pink and shiny with sweat and her blouse was gaping, one button undone. He could see the lace of her bra and the curve of one breast above it. Just a glimpse. He looked away.

Why did Brenda have to be so cross today? It made him nervous. He tried to concentrate. She was still talking. Ranting, that was what it was. She said something about if he was a proper man. What was a proper man anyway? Clive wasn’t sure but knew he couldn’t be one. He rubbed the side of his face that was still sore from two weeks ago. His fault. He wouldn’t forget how much she hated noodles now.

He listened as Brenda elaborated. A proper man didn’t live with his Mum. A proper man would stay round at her place occasionally. She wanted him to move in. She’d hinted at it a few times. A proper man wouldn’t let her take charge all the time.

The sun was blocked by a cloud. Was there a storm brewing? Clive tried to peer out of the car window. He wound it down a little to try and get a better look. He wanted to see what the sky was doing. The silence was broken by a noise that surprised him. It sounded like the chippings again. Clip. Clip. Clatter. It couldn’t be, could it? Was it hailstones? No, the tiny thing that just hit the windscreen in front of him was definitely tar-black. But the car was still stationary.

‘What the hell ...?’

There was the usual something in Brenda’s voice, the usual cross blame-it-on-Clive-ness. He opened his mouth to say something then closed it again. Playing dead was always the safest option.

Clive wondered if a strong wind had appeared from somewhere but saw that the nearby rape-seed plants and the weeds on the grass verge were completely still. One chipping pinged through the gap in the window and stung his cheek. He wound the window up again. Just in time. The road seemed to be spitting up more chippings than could possibly be surrounding one little car. They span and whirled and clattered around them. They seemed to be getting higher and higher. Beyond them Clive could see the road and the yellow flower-sea looking perfectly normal. Quiet and still.

Brenda put her hand on the clutch. ‘This is weird. We’re getting out of here right now.’

‘No. No, Brenda. Wait...’

Why did he just say that?

Clive felt he was getting used to the sound of the chippings. The deafening noise was beginning to form a pattern, a rhythm in his mind. His ears buzzed. Brenda was shouting and swearing.

She did this a lot. Not all the time though, that was the thing. Sometimes she was quiet, kind and gentle. She could be happy. She ranged from joyful enthusiasm to just being cross all day, every little thing he did winding her up. Sometimes she threw things at him. He’d had to duck from two hairbrushes, a frying pan and a lemon cheesecake over the past few weeks. They’d laughed afterwards about the cheesecake. Strawberry next time. Or would he be tempted to get lemon again? Did he want the same reaction? What did that say about him?

He’d once dreamt that he was lying on the floor and she was kicking him. He woke clutching his stomach, realised it was a dream and enjoyed replaying it before the alarm went off and it was time to get up. That was the day she came onto the shop floor wearing a particularly short skirt and she glared at him for staring.

Sometimes Brenda dashed everywhere trying to do everything perfectly all at once and other times she just wanted to sit in a chair for hours doing nothing. Occasionally she

would burst into tears for no discernible reason. Brenda was complicated. Clive accepted all this. Never a dull moment with Brenda.

The chippings seemed to be tapping on the car window. Did they want to come in? They were obviously trying to tell him something important. He heard himself speak.

‘Brenda, Brenda!’

Clive realised he was raising his voice over hers. It was now even louder than Brenda’s. Louder than the chippings even. She stopped talking and looked across at him. The chippings fell silent. Just like that. One second clattering all around the car, the next nothing. They sat staring at each other. Brenda’s hair was damp around the edges. She looked lovely. She appeared puzzled. Impatient.

‘What?’

‘Eh?’

‘Clive. You were shouting. You *never* shout.’ A tiny quiver appeared on each side of her mouth. Was she smiling?

He took a deep breath before he spoke. He’d got her attention and was rather enjoying it. He had an urge to surprise her even more. The chippings had given him something. Courage, perhaps?

She started talking again. The chippings were clearly his fault. The whole thing had been his idea. Why she kept agreeing to go out with him she did not know. This was the last straw. She had had enough. She spat all this out before pausing for breath.

‘Why don’t you fucking shut your fucking mouth before I fucking shut it for you.’

Did he really just say that?

Silence. He glanced sideways at her. Her mouth had dropped open slightly. She was stunned. Then a smile flickered across her lips. Clive was shaking. He couldn’t believe he’d just said that so could fully understand her surprise. No, surprise wasn’t the word. Shock. He had shocked himself. Could he blame it on the chippings? Brenda put her palm to her neck in mock shock.

‘Any other man saying that. Any other man than you, Clive. I would think he wanted to hit me, but...“before I shut it for you,”’ she gasped. ‘What do you mean, Clive? What are you going to do?’

Clive didn’t know. Of course he wasn’t going to hit her. He would never do such a thing. She could hit him over and over but he wouldn’t retaliate. Never. Was that what she wanted? He ignored all the possibilities that crowded into his head demanding to be considered, and acted on impulse.

‘This.’

He grabbed her arm. He could feel her skin through her thin blouse. He leaned towards her and kissed her while they sat side by side in Brenda’s tiny car among the now silent loose chippings and the seemingly endless ocean of yellow flowers. Her lips felt impossibly soft. He leaned in further and felt his glasses twist to the side. He dared to put a hand on one of her breasts. The material of her blouse slid under his fingers. He felt her hand in his hair.

When Clive eventually released her he sat back in his seat. Brenda got out of the car and lit a cigarette. She did up the buttons on her blouse then walked round the car, inspecting it.

‘Nothing, Clive. There’s nothing. Not a mark, not a scratch. Nothing.’

Clive got out of the car to have a look. It was true.

Brenda was staring out across the yellow sea. Clive watched her face and wondered what she was thinking. There wasn’t a scrap of breeze and, maybe for the first time in his life, Clive felt confident about what he was going to do next. When he got home he would let himself in by the backdoor, throw the warm pork pies away and walk straight into the living room. Then he would tell his Mum he was finally leaving and moving in with someone called Brenda.

SHORTLISTED

Gypsy Cab

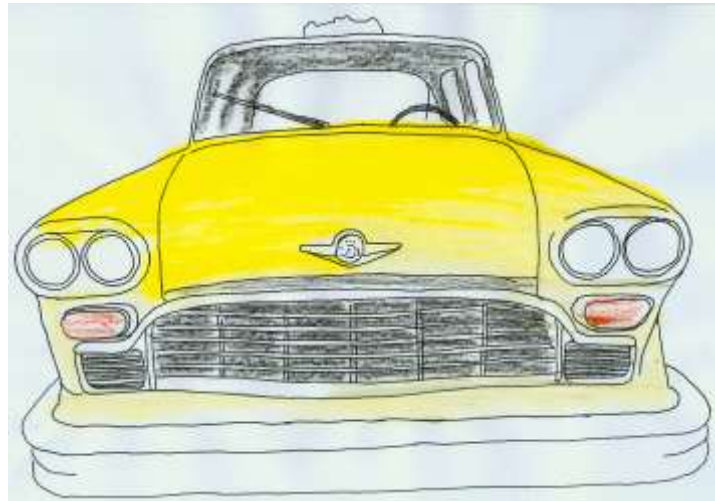
Susanne Roff

In the evening gloam she saw a fat woman sitting in her nightdress in a dentist chair eating doughnuts in front of the television. Clothes that looked ready for the wash hung over rusted fire escapes to dry. The track was elevated for the first two or three miles so the train passengers looked in on shabby apartment bedrooms and kitchens and lounges.

It took an hour for the train to get out beyond the ugly city. The billboards were hard to distinguish from the trash piled up high on the sidings. Oily bundles of rags that looked like corpses caught under the bridges were just as likely to be tramps sleeping rough. There was the river with its oil slicks and sewage barges. The commuter car parks ran alongside the stations, thousands of cars waiting for their lawyers and businessmen and secretaries in the early evening. The lights on the tall stanchions turned on to protect the drivers; she'd seen those from the aeroplane as it came in to land the night before. She could imagine a time when the whole city was lit up all night to cut the murder rate.

Two hours up the river she got off at the college town stop. Main Street ran a quarter mile north and a half mile south. The unisex hairdresser also sold cotton butterflies and homemade fudge. But it was closed now. She needed a taxi to the college a couple of miles up the road. There'd be pizza joints and whole food cafes open there in the student union. She might go a week without fruit or vegetables in these stints as a visiting professor.

There was a beat up gypsy cab across from the station. It looked to be her only option. The driver was much her own age, coarse featured but fit. He came out from under the bonnet wiping greasy hands on his trousers. "You wanna go to the college? Eight



dollars." But he didn't reach to put her bag in the cab for her. He drove past the white frame houses and churches; family names on the letter boxes above ads for the local newspaper. Large lawns, no fences. Garages for two or three cars. No pedestrians in this part of town but when they crossed the rail tracks they were in the midst of children and teenagers and buxom women and thin men. Not a blade of grass. The wooden houses here were falling down at the edges, sometimes in their centres. Ancient armchairs sagged on the verandahs and large people sprawled in them taking in the evening air. Occasionally a brown geranium in a broken pot. Bicycles lay strewn where they had fallen.

The cabbie drove on past the used car dealership and a factory that had a sign advising "Under eminent domain negotiations for employee purchase." She ventured a

question: “Has that company gone out of business?” “Never went in for business” said the cabbie.

She reached into her briefcase for cigarettes and was striking the match when he said “Don’t smoke that shit in my cab, lady.” “Sorry,” she said, “I didn’t realise this was a non-smoking taxi.” “Sure it’s a non-smoking car, lady. You smoke that shit and I get it too.

Passive smoking. You can kill yerself if yer like but not in my cab. You wanna smoke something, I give you something real nice to smoke. Only five bucks. Just say the word.”

He pulled a small leather bag from his shirt pocket and put it on the dashboard with his left hand, next to a spanner. She shrank back into the rear seat, deprived of the busyness of her cigarette and its nicotine. He laughed, looking at her through the rear vision mirror.

“What you afraid of, lady? Them cigarettes going to make you a lot sicker than my mary-juana.”

“Better the poison you know than the one you don’t,” she said feebly.

“That ain’t necessarily so,” he said. “Cigarettes and alcohol fuck you up a whole lot more than mary-juana. I tell my kids, I’m gonna kill them if I ever catch ‘em with cigarettes or spirits. But grass we grow ourselves. Just gotta aks and I’ll give. Here, freebie. First time freebie. Joe’s present.”

He pulled off into a side track next to some lilac bushes. Now that it was happening to her she didn’t know what to do. There didn’t seem to be any point in screaming since she hadn’t seen another car since they left town. She’d been with him less than twenty minutes. She couldn’t read him in that time. He didn’t seem very violent despite the spanner he held now. But he seemed very intent on her smoking the joint he took from the bag. He covered the rear door and reached in to her and put the roach to her lips and lit it with a lighter. She sucked on it. Then he pushed her flat on the seat and said “Trouble with you, lady, is you don’t get no dick.”

She knew he was right and let him do it, watching him through the smoke she was making. When he was done he sat by her on the seat and opened her wallet. He took out the \$50 bill she kept there. “That’s my fee, lady. Now I’m gonna drive you to the college and you’re gonna go in all ladylike and say nothing about our little business deal. Folks round here know me. I got deals with most of them, ’specially the ladies. No jury’s gonna come out to catch old Joe for fear of the shit old Joe knows. You jes end up looking ridiculous saying good old Joe tried to jump your skinny bones. You understand?”

She nodded because she did understand.

She was a continent away before she knew she was pregnant. And on a third, in a new job, a month after the baby was born. She’d only found out by accident when she went for her annual gynae checkup. “You do realise, don’t you, that you’re at least three months pregnant?” the doctor asked her. But she hadn’t, what with all the moving around in the short term teaching post and the interviewing for a tenure-track job.

She never considered giving up the baby. Truth to tell, she didn’t do much thinking about the whole business during the pregnancy. She felt well, people told her she looked beautiful for the first time in her life. Her serenity shielded her against questions, and she was on the move so much anyway. The elderly remnants of her family showed only a polite interest in her announcement of the birth and accepted her implied decision to be a single mother by intent.

She found breastfeeding deeply sensual, there seemed to be a direct connection between the sucking on her nipples and her clitoris. Which was probably why she let him have the breast for so long, until he was coming home from school and demanding a suckle the way other kids wanted their snacks. She kept the rhythm of her college teaching in tune with his day and they were unremarkable in the college town.

The tantrums began when she allowed men who were interested in her to come to the house. The child became almost feral, smelling out the eau de cologne and testosterone

of these few early dates. More often than not they took the child with them for a drive to the lake and a pizza at the pub. But nothing would pacify him or interest him. He eliminated most of the men within three dates, leaving them with bruises and scratches to show for their presumption. The only way she could calm him after a man had gone was to let him suckle and he was not above biting her. The pain in the nipple thrilled her clitoris.

By the time puberty came his sunny personality was long gone. He was growing lean and mean. He took over the garden shed and made it into his 'laboratory'. At first it was birds that had fallen out of their nests or mice left in the garden by the cats or roadkill. Then she began to realise that most of his specimens were still alive when they went into his shed and neighbourhood cats suddenly went missing. He had a collection of bones and gizzards in jars and there were odd chemical smells coming from the shed. But he put a lock on the door and she wasn't allowed in. Her best kitchen knives vanished and her manicure set with its small sharp scissors and tweezers.

She knew he was smoking cigarettes in the shed but she'd only given up herself a few years ago and while she remonstrated with him she couldn't do more than point out the stupidity of it. But then she began to smell the sweeter smell of marijuana.

He had always accepted her explanation about who his father was. There were enough other fatherless kids for it to be almost unremarkable when she said it wasn't someone she knew very well and she would much rather live with him than his father. "You're my man" she would say to him when he was still in short pants. When he was about eight he was sitting on the stairs with his friend. She overheard the other boy saying, "My mum doesn't know who my dad is because she was sexing two guys at the same time." Her son said "What's sexing?" and the other boy stood up and humped the stair post. Later she saw her son in the garden peeing into the bushes and thrusting his pelvis at them.

He had a couple of friends who closeted themselves in the shed with him for hours on end. When he was about twelve, she came home earlier than expected from the college and found the bathroom door locked until two of them came out looking both defiant and scared. Her son was still tucking his shirt into his jeans.

By the time he was fourteen he was a foot taller and twenty pounds heavier than her, beginning to look like what she could remember of his father. They had always played tennis together but now if she hit a good shot past him she heard herself saying "Sorry darling!" She knew he was sneaking out at night an hour or two after she had closed her bedroom door. She suspected he sometimes brought someone back with him. And often there was the sweet marijuana smell.

She put a lock on her bedroom door and the bathroom. "Why'd you do that?" he asked angrily. "Because you're fifteen now, and it's only right that we both have our privacy. Besides, I'm fed up with you rootling round in my closets and wearing my clothes when I'm at work." That made him smile his sly yellow smile, sexy but obnoxious with a definite whiff of the smell-smock about him.

She knew it was going to happen. It was like the time she was out walking and went too high up the hill to the great skua's territory. Suddenly the bird was circling ever closer to her and then dived at her, its eyes boring into hers and squawking "Get off! Get off!" But she couldn't move fast enough and it swooped an inch over her head. She fell flat on her back in the peat. She crawled down the hill, knowing that if she stood up again the bird would peck her eyes out.

He was high when he came in well after midnight and started pounding on her bedroom door. She yelled at him to go to bed and sober up. He lumbered off but came back with a mallet and broke down the door in two strikes. Like his father, he brought a couple of spliffs. "I'm your man, Ma" he said.

SHORTLISTED

Room No. 13

Corrinna Toop

Look at you laying there, handsome features lined with age but not any of the world's cares. Tucked up in bed; cover spread across your sturdy body like a pall. I move from my position in the sticky, leatherette armchair and look around the room. 'Our Motel,' we called it. This Shangri-La of sinners, this haven of the adulterous masses with rooms like scenes from a bad '60s B movie, all fake wood and Formica. Even the air seems out of date here – stale and trapped; the breath of a thousand occupants exhaled into this capsule for the next dumb souls to breathe in again, devoid of oxygen and morality. I glance at your shrouded form and I see the top of your grey head resting on the pillow. The very top of your head.

'Same time? Same place?' you said in that brief message yesterday, and I knew this would be the last time. Oh, I know I have said that before but this time I really meant it. After all, how long can a girl go on being second best? Believe me though when I tell you that when this started it really was love, "The Real Thing," and you being married to someone else didn't matter – in fact it seemed to add to the excitement at first. As you once told me,

'All I have in common with her is that I once had something in common with her,' – you never exactly had anything in common with me either but I let that pass. Who needed anything in common when we had this all consuming lust? We were star-crossed lovers kept apart only by fate. Apparently.

I touch your cheek and it feels cold. Well it would, wouldn't it?

'Leave her!' I told you once the novelty of being 'The other woman' had worn off. But you just couldn't leave her could you? There was always a reason why not. No need to jeopardise your fun more likely. You could meet me here in this seedy motel every third Wednesday in the month and still ensure you had your dinner waiting at home every night. On that one glorious evening a month we would spend four hours together making naked plans, then you would pull on your trousers and husband skin and go home again, leaving me to cry alone into the grey pillows. But you and her slept in separate rooms. Of course. You said.

There are blue lights flashing outside the windows but I don't bother to look. I take a deep breath.

'Quite frankly my dear you are starting to smell.' I switch off the radiator – let's not make things any worse.

So I let this go on and on for years. Every Christmas spent on my own willing the phone to ring. Every birthday postponed until that third Wednesday when the celebration could be physical. My hopes and self respect fading faster than the dingy lemon wallpaper in 'our' room; Room number 13, unlucky for some – especially you.

I look at the bedspread and see there is some red spreading.

'Bedspread, red-spread, bedspread, red-spread,' I chant. It seems funny, 'Can't hear you giggling though Laughing Boy, lost your sense of humour?'

I remember when I lost *my* sense of humour. I wasn't buying food at my normal store but had travelled to the north of the city for some purpose and decided to get provisions on my way home. As I reached the checkout I noticed the cashier's name badge and saw that she had the same surname as you. First I was surprised; it's a very unusual one, as you once told me, something to do with French religious refugees in the Sixteenth Century. (See, I did hang on every word you said, once upon a time). I quickly realised that it was your wife. I felt powerful and dangerous now – I decided to look her right in the eye and say something which we could laugh about together when I next saw you.

'That's an unusual surname; does it come from the name of French religious refugees in the Sixteenth Century?' I smiled smoothly in a way which I hoped she would interpret as; 'I'm having an affair with your husband,' and then fluffed my hair as if to add the postscript, 'and I'm so much more attractive than you.' She shrugged.

'Supposedly it's something to do with that,' she said, shoving the groceries down the line, 'it was my ex-husband's name and he told me that it had an interesting history, but you know what, honey? I could never believe a thing he said, so for all I know it's the name of a brothel in Istanbul. I've been meaning to change it ever since I divorced him but I never got round to it. Silly really, you'd think I would have after three years. Hey! Lady, are you OK?'

Cold horror gripped my pathetic heart and for an instant I thought I was going to faint, vomit or maybe both. I mumble your name, wild eyed and desperate, hoping that she will look puzzled, hoping that she will not know who I am talking about.

'Oh, you know him then?' She laughed pityingly, but by then I was half way out of the door, leaving my groceries piling up at the end of the conveyer belt.

Someone was digging out my heart with a teaspoon. I swear that for an instant my vital bodily functions started to close down. All the love, all the hope I had was swept away in a tsunami of grief. I was filled with disgust and humiliation, suffocated with the knowledge of my own foolishness. Later, once I stopped shaking enough to hold a pencil, I calculated that over the five years I had known you we had met for four hours once a month. By my calculation that means that I had spent two hundred and forty hours with you and forty three thousand, eight hundred hours waiting for you. Statistically speaking our relationship was pretty unbalanced.

And then I got your phone call.

'Same time? Same place?' you cooed.

'Yes, of course, Darling; we have *so* much to talk about.'

'Bye then, oh – I'll be a bit late tonight but I promise you I'll make it worth the wait,' you said and then you hung up.

'Oh yes, My Darling, so do I, so do I.'

I look out of the window now. More than one police car is spinning its lights outside – how many of us do they think are in here?

And so earlier this evening I picked up the key from the man on the desk.

'Hello Mrs Smith, the usual, room 13? It's a wet night tonight but it looks like sunshine tomorrow. You will be able to wear a nice dress tomorrow, yes?' he chewed on a matchstick and looked down the front of my blouse.

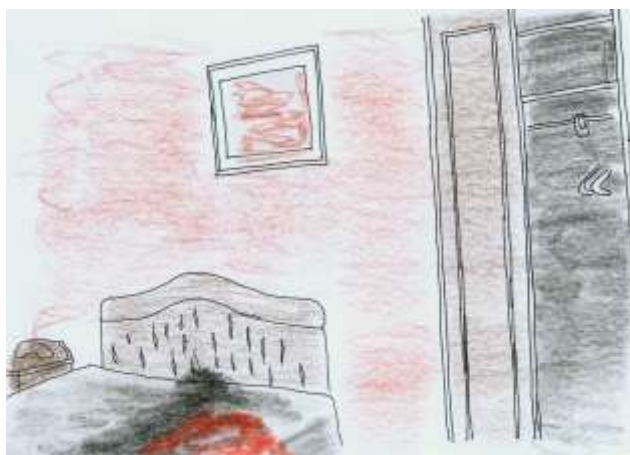
'Is very quiet tonight, is nobody else here.' He leered, 'Mr Smith coming tonight, yes? If not I keep you company? You like some of my special candy, yes?'

'Thank you but Mr Smith will be coming tonight, and we are not to be disturbed,' I said firmly and his face fell a little. He is dark and greasy and when I first started staying there he used to hide away the small plastic bags of powder that he trades to other guests, but now he doesn't bother and leaves them out on the desk next to the coffee. He knows me as Mrs Smith and thinks I'm a whore, which I suppose I am in a way. I'm certainly not Mrs Smith.

I realised we truly were the only occupants in this place tonight as I walked to room 13 and saw no lights apart from the one in the main office. I hurried across the car park in the darkness clutching the oversized key fob and holding my bag above my head as if it could shield me from the torrential rain. Just as well we were all alone, I didn't want to scare anyone unnecessarily; people can be so unpredictable. I let myself in, settled down in front of the television and waited here for you, my father's old gun carefully placed under the bed, waiting for its moment to herald in the start of the New World.

'Come outside, there's nowhere to go!' Shouts the cop through the loudhailer.

'Honey, I've been going nowhere for the last five years!' I shrug to the curtains.



My father's gun was left to me when the old man died of self inflicted wounds, having been drunk as usual and slipped trying to shoot non-existent rats off the back porch. I feel no malice towards it despite its provenance and I have kept it ever since just in case I needed to shoot a rat myself.

I look at you closer now. Your beautiful blue eye is as glazed as an apricot tart. I say, 'Eye' of course because there is a hole where the other one was. Can I see right through to your brain? I peer in and I wonder what bit I blew out, surely nothing to do with your conscience – that must have gone years ago. I tuck you in a bit more and notice that yellowy liquid is seeping out of you now.

'Honestly, have some self respect man! Pull yourself together,' I chuckle.

When you arrived you were as duplicitous as ever.

'Sorry I'm late, couldn't get away from the wife, you know how it is!' You shrug in what you believe to be an appealing way, unaware that this will be your last lie. Oh, I know how it is Mister; I know exactly how it is.

I let you make love to me slowly, then the time comes, just as you do.

BANG, BANG. Twice in the eye.

It wasn't what I had expected – I thought it would be cleaner; a bit more precise. The recoil hurt my arms, the noise hurt my ears and you made a terrible mess of everything. It has taken me all night to clean up, scrubbing muck off the walls the best I could. Not because I don't quite like the pattern your smashed flesh has left on the wallpaper, (very Jackson Pollock), but because it seems unfair to leave someone else to do it, after all, I'm sure the maids didn't sign up on the grounds that they may have to mop up bits of human body on the odd occasion. I had to shower twice but now I am as clean and pink as a newborn baby, blinking in the daylight and wondering what will happen to me for the rest of my life.

And what shall I do now? That's the part I hadn't thought ahead to. Should I walk out of the door, hands up, surrendering myself to my fate? Could I convince them it's a crime of passion if I weep and tug at their heartstrings with my sad story? Or should I put the family gun to my own head and let my DNA join yours on the wallpaper? I don't think so for I suspect that I shall end up in Hell at the same time as you and I do not want us to have to spend an eternity together when five years was long enough. Even the satisfaction of seeing you stoked in fires by Satan himself would not compensate for that.

Perhaps I should run out somersaulting and shooting like Sundance and go down in a hail of bullets? Maybe – I'm going to look out of the window now and see what my chances are. The police are pacing the parking lot but not one of them is looking over here. Two armed officers are walking down towards the main office. Perhaps they are going to get a key. I'll wait a bit longer.

'Very interesting, My Love,' I observe but you don't look particularly interested. They have handcuffed the shifty clerk and are loading him into their police car. Perhaps it's because of the drugs, or perhaps he's a serial killer with a stuffed mother in a rocking chair somewhere – who knows? That would be very convenient; they may assume you are one of his victims when your mottled cadaver is finally discovered and unstuck from the sheets. Or maybe he just forgot to pay his parking fines. Either way they haven't come for me and that might be a good thing really now I come to think of it, although now no one will know what a pig you have been and how much I needed this to happen. I will just have to write the story myself someday.

The cops have gone and we are alone, surrounded by stale air and that slightly rancid smell like steak left out of the fridge for too long. I feel vital and alive, which is, of course, the opposite of how you must be feeling. I laugh at my own wit and pick up my bag.

'Goodbye,' I say, blowing you a kiss but you are beautifully silent, as I expected you to be. I wonder when they will find you. Hopefully when you have dissolved into the mattress and the room is full of flies digesting your meat. That would be fitting payback for forty three thousand, eight hundred wasted hours of my life.

I walk out into the sunshine smiling.

GROUP STORY 2012

Fame and Misfortune

1 Elle-Marie Hinchcliffe

I'm supposed to be on set in five minutes, in makeup before then. The clock says 10:15 but I don't remember sleeping, or going to bed; I don't remember waking. It's been an hour, I've been sat here an hour not moving; I think I've forgotten how. Christian is still there, next to me, dead, blue, eyes open. I didn't scream, I haven't even cried. My head hurts from trying to remember. His mobile is buzzing again, should I answer? It was my pillow over his face, from my side of the bed, with my stray hairs on it. That's on the floor now; maybe I shouldn't have moved it.

Maybe I didn't. I'm not myself you see. Were they yellow hairs? I don't remember, I don't recall me saying that. The pillow which rests on his face is white. (Do I mean swallows his face?) I close my eyes. (Whitethorn, blackthorn.)

She remembers the corridors dark which smother her, makes her love light. Her world of celluloid stars.

A young woman enters the room, sits at the dressing table, switches on a moon of light, pauses over endless jars or wipe-out. Leichner zinc to erase self, paint on another face.

'Don't you remember the sealing wax Daddy gave you? The crayons? The colouring book?'

'Yes, yes, I remember.'

'You know how much you hurt me. Didn't you hear me cry?'

(Whitethorn, blackthorn.)

The young woman, startled, says, 'There are four of us!' The sea wind rises.

'Silly – it's the moon's reflection, a mirror image, that is all. You must remember. It is important. There were never four.'

'Mamma, don't leave me! My mamma was a red haired woman.'

'Yes.'

(Whitethorn, blackthorn.)

The young woman stands poised, perfect.

The wind dies. Birds wait to sing as Christian waits to wake. He is in one landscape, I in another. His face on the pillow has the expression of a child who has run down the beach to find the sea has all ran out, leaving only hurting distance. Didn't he know I'd wait forever, like a seabird?

There, trade-mark pout, finger-licked fresh as new paint.

'What is your name?'

'N or M?'

Zee, my name is Zee.

Camera –

Action!

2 D J Harrison

It's all good, all goes without a hitch, smooth, seamless, pitch and word perfect. I relax jangling limbs, puckered forehead, allow my eyes to regain their normal aperture.

'For heaven's sake.' The director is a small man in every way. A minor film maker with an atrocious CV, a short, hunched, figure who would make Woody Allen look butch and with private parts that look like only the first instalment got delivered. He is not happy. I can't face him now, not without something. A pill, perhaps, or one of those ice cold lines of powder. That's what I need. I turn away from him but he won't be ignored.

'Zee! Where do you think you're going?'

'Nowhere. For a sit-down and a drink, maybe. What's the matter?'

'I'll tell you what the matter is. I know they're all the rage but this isn't a freakin' zombie film.'

I have no idea what he means, I know this film isn't about zombies, I leave all that crap to Mila. I give him my blankest stare.

'You're supposed to be a lovelorn teenager, not something recently exhumed and barely animate.'

'What would you know?' I hiss.

'I know you're not the least of my problems. It's Christian, he's completely ruining the whole scene.'

'He's dead,' I say, 'how can he ruin the scene? He's lying there, dead. What more can he do?'

'He needs to be more life-like,' the director grimaces as if at his own absurdity.

'I was being dead-like.' Christian is sitting up now and wiping the corner of his mouth with the bed sheet. 'It's harder than you think keeping my eyes open, not blinking, not breathing.'

'You don't look dead on camera. You look like you collapsed drunk after a heavy night on the beer. As for not breathing, the sound man caught faint snoring noises.'

'What the hell is post-production for anyway?' I ask helpfully.

'You're no Johnny Depp, so don't start acting like one.' The director ignores me and continues to talk directly to Christian.

'You're not exactly Tim Burton yourself,' I observe.

'I need more animation!' He is shouting now.

'Try Tom and Jerry,' I mutter.

'Come over here, Zee.' He waves furiously and takes me to the corner of the studio, out of earshot of the cast and crew. 'It's not working,' he whispers. 'The whole film sucks. We have to think of something.'

'Well, if Christian can't do a convincing corpse while he's alive, why not see how he looks when he's dead. I mean really dead, not pretending dead.'

'Are you kidding?'

'No. Are you?'

He thinks for a while, brow furrowed, eyes closed. 'Could work. We put out a rumour. The speculation could go viral. How and when he died could have the social media stoked up to a frenzy. Guarantee a mammoth opening weekend. Let's do it.'

'Places, please everybody. Take two.'

3 Hayley Noble

We run through the scene again. This time it was different, heightened by what we were about to do. It gave it electricity, like everything I touched sparked. When we got to the pillow scene I pressed harder than before. Nothing held me back, he was my director after all, and he gave the orders. It couldn't be murder, not if it was art. And that's what I do, art. The press always go on about how I can't possibly be a serious actress because of my clothes range, perfume, books and singing career but they don't understand. They don't understand how difficult it is to be taken seriously. I work very hard answering calls and dealing with constant questions from my staff, often I can work six or seven hours in one day. But serious is what I want to be and Ben the director may have just given me the perfect scene.

After thirty seconds Christian's struggle acting finally changes to something more convincing. His arms start waving about and thumping the mattress, I pull my head to the right to keep out of his range. I would never have imagined I would have the strength to hold him down but it's amazing what you can achieve with a personal trainer. His muffled shouts are becoming annoying now, the audience like a person who dies with some dignity, not wailing and ugly. I press harder to drown out the sound, it works and it keeps his shoulders down too. There, he's stopped. I remove the pillow and look down; he really does look dead now. The scene carries on to the end perfectly; I don't know why we didn't think of this before.

'Cut.'

I sit on the bed next to Christian, I can't help but smile, that was some of my best work. I can't wait for opening night, I need to think about dresses. Ben is walking over, slowly, he's not smiling.

'Oh please don't tell me there was something wrong with the camera. That was perfect, Ben; I couldn't possibly do it again.'

'What have you done?'

'What? What we agreed. You said he would look better dead, it was what we agreed.'

Ben stared at me, his beady eyes wide and creepy, his open mouth making him look even uglier. His script falls to the floor and he spins round to face the crew, stumbling slightly on the Persian.

'Right everyone, we're taking a few minutes. Everyone out of the studio, I need to speak to my two...leads.'

This is perfect, finally some time to give him some more of my ideas; I've been waiting for him to start listening to me since we began filming.

'He's dead. You killed him.'

'Yes, like you said. He needed to be dead to make the scene believable, you said so yourself. Don't worry, it's what he would have wanted, no-one would think he was faking.'

'This is murder, you know that?'

'No, Ben, this is art and Christian would die for his art. It was the...ow!' He slapped me. This pug-faced gnome actually slapped me, me a famous actress. I think about his face under that pillow, smaller, easier to control.

'Are you stupid, this is murder, this is court and trials and getting locked up for life!'

'A trial, oh, there's never been an actress whose earnings haven't gone up after a trial.'

'What is wrong with you? Oh God, Oh God. Right, listen, we need to move the body.'

'But what about the scene?'

'The scene's finished, wait there, and for God's sake cover him up.'

4 Jeanette Greaves

I walked out. I walked out into the desert heat. Ben had said that the scene was finished, and you know, maybe he was right. Maybe the whole acting scene was finished for me. I had just given my everything to my art, I had put real work into a convincing portrayal of murder. It was my masterpiece, the pinnacle of my career. And yet I'd been met by a hurriedly cleared set and an unappreciative director. It just wasn't good enough.

It took me an hour to walk back to the hotel, through hordes of tourists. I was still dressed in character, in satin pajamas, with my hair mussed from the bed scene, but even so, I was attracting sneaky glances from strangers, who doubtless recognised me. I blanked them, I was in no mood to sign autographs or field questions from fans.

The phones in the suite were beeping frantically, and I wondered why they hadn't been answered. My PA's assistant should have been taking messages and sending them through to my PA. I reached for my bag, and my phone, then realised that I'd left both of them on set. The effort of my art had obviously taken more out of me than I'd thought. The blank condolence card on my desk reminded me...my PA was at a funeral, and her lazy assistant had forgotten to send a card on my behalf.

I took a quick shower, changed into my own pyjamas (much more classy than my character's) and decided to go for a lie down. It had been a hard day.

Darkness had fallen by the time I woke up. It looked like one of my staff had remembered that they actually had a job, because the curtains were drawn shut. I sat up, peering into the dim light, I knew there was someone in the room. I'm very sensitive, you know, I can tell when there's a strange presence. I heard the floorboards creak again. The dark shadow in front of the door moved closer.

It was not my PA, it was not her assistant. The figure was male, and as he bent closer, I sensed a cold aura. 'Zee...Zeeeeeeeeee...You murdered meeeeeeee.'

I reached out and touched icy cold skin. Freezing cold lips brushed against my eyes. A gelid tongue thrust between my lips, and I felt a whisper like snowflakes as fingertips caressed my thigh. I drew in a breath. I rarely scream, it's not good for the throat, but in this instance...

The pillow came down on my face. A dead weight covered me.

5 Victoria Walsh

Muffled sniggering leant over me as my arms flailed upwards towards the dead weight, the pressure enormous, at first I couldn't grasp anything solid but then I felt his hairy arms. Funny because I'd never noticed how hairy they'd been before. I gasped for breath but I couldn't open my mouth, I felt dizzy like I wasn't really here, this wasn't happening. I was with him. We were happy. He idolised me, he said we'd be together forever. Maybe we would be. He was right to idolise me, perhaps I should let go. People who died before their time became legends. I could be as great as Marilyn Monroe in death. I could. Stars zigzagged across my eyes, my head spun, my lungs unable to refill. He called my name...

'I'm sorry, Daddy...I won't do it again!' I smirked as I flushed the lifeless body.

Yellow hairs, I remember. Christian's hair is brown. On the pillow; a trail of shed clothes to the wet room. Christian wasn't usually untidy. He hadn't heard me come in. He'd killed me. The sounds drew me closer, passion muffled slightly by the water coursing down their bodies. A gasp and Christian found his release.

'Christian Travers!'

'Eh...' he turned, 'Zee? Oh shit!'

I saw the whites of his eyes first. Of the man who'd sworn to love me forever; stoic, speechless because the action had said it all.

I need to be someone else. This isn't happening. It didn't happen. Why did everyone leave? Is it my turn now?

'I'm not sorry...you betrayed me.' The whites of his eyes protruded. Christian had died with more dignity than him. Christian's blue eyes stared at me, *'I'm not sorry.'*

'Damn it, just. Let. Go!' A voice from outside the pillow.

I kissed his blood drained lips, *'It's a fling. Love me... I can wait.'* I felt his fingers outline my spine, love whispers to me.

'My God, Mitzi! Just wait until your Father gets home!' Mamma's voice.

Mitzi...my name is Mitzi...I remember!

I am not that other person.

The corridor was darkening, closing in, it can't end like this...love...light; the pressure relented, my mouth opened and air rushed in. Strength exploded into my arms and I pushed, it *doesn't* end like this...I caught nostrils and pushed my fingers up causing a screech.

'Ah...bitch!'

I rose and butted my head against something solid. The pillow gone. I sat groggily, unable to focus for a moment, disorientated.

'Zee! What the hell did you do that for?'

'Y-y-you...were...trying...to...kill me,' I rasped.

Ragged breaths, blood stained hands. 'It's called tying up loose ends, m'dear,' Ben's voice grunted from the floor like the pig he was.

6 Brian Preece

'Loose Ends? They're tied up. Don Stephenson is on the case!'

'What, Donald Duck Stephenson, that quack?'

'Yes. I called him earlier. He's sent his ambulance to the set. Everything will be cleaned up perfectly. I know his secret and he will do anything I ask.'

'So what's he gonna do?'

'One of his patients died of a heart attack this morning. He's in the morgue waiting for an autopsy. He has the same blood group as Christian. Isn't that just dandy? A sleight of hand and Christian died of heart failure during the take! It's all arranged. All you have to do is write a good eulogy. You didn't have to lose your nerve and try to kill me.'

'I wasn't thinking straight. I just wanted you to kick the bucket, lady.'

'Well you damn near did.'

'You've ruined the film. I still haven't filmed the scene where you catch Christian in the act.'

'That shouldn't be a problem. You can cut in one of his scenes from your porn stock. The one from "The Devil Whores Prada" should do. If any of the critics have seen that one they wouldn't dare admit it. And anyway think of the publicity: "Actor dies for his craft".'

'Yeah, I see what you mean. This film will be a blockbuster!'

'And don't forget my cut. I think sixty per cent should cover it.'

'What do you mean?'

'I mean I want sixty per cent of the takings. It's my head on the block and my thinking that's got you out of this mess.'

'I won't do it. I'll tell the truth.'

'What? That I killed Christian under your direction? You knew what I was doing and never stopped me. How will that look in court? Not to mention that by the time you get the guts to go to the police, Christian will have been cremated. That's what I told Don to arrange. He will have a great funeral and you will be the talk of Tinsel Town. What more do you want?'

'OK, you got me over a barrel, but I won't forget this.'

'Neither will I. It will be our secret and we'll get on just fine. You do your bit and I'll do mine. After all, you could re-release some of your old movies. "Bride of Godriller" would go down well after this. At least Christian wasn't too bad in that one.'

'What about Stephenson? Is he safe?'

'Oh, yeah, I know his secret. He dealt with my late husband.'

'Stan? How did he die?'

'Oh, my home-made mushroom soup. He had a heart attack after eating it, I'd made his favourite dessert and he never tasted it. Funnily enough, he had the same blood group as another of Don's patients.'

'What! You bumped off your husband?'

'Now now, Ben. You shouldn't go making wild allegations, especially in your position. You just go home, put an ice pack on that head and forget about all this nasty business.'

The End

Albion Served

A.J. Noon

I must be one of the worlds' worst wallflowers. Why the worst? In my head I have the moves, I have the banter, and I even have the body. Unfortunately to see myself this way requires large amounts of alcohol, which can be fine if everyone else is drinking, but I also lack one other crucial skill.

Timing.

Not dance timing, or even comic timing. I mean the actual timing of when to have my first drink of the night, then my second, then my third, and so on. I'm either paralytic before the party has started or when I finally have enough Dutch courage to get up and strut everyone else is leaving. And of course already paired off.

So tonight is going to be different. Tonight my timing will be spot on. I've just started my second pint, naturally I lined my stomach first with a large portion of cheese smothered nachos, and although I'm still sitting down I am bopping in my chair and singing out loud without feeling too self-conscious.

There are a handful of people on the dance floor and I am watching on, waiting for the time to strike. This is the third day I've been at this conference and, though I've looked a bit sad and lonely, I've made eye contact a couple of times with a lady who, it must be said, floats my boat.

Of course I haven't actually spoken to her, that will happen shortly. I'm watching and waiting for her to arrive at this wrap-up party.

There are quite a few of good looking women here already and I may be missing a trick, placing all my eggs in one basket. But that is me all over. Once I set my mind on a path it is difficult to change it.

So, blinkered vision, lack of confidence, unrequited stirrings, and a generous smattering of alcohol. At best all I could really hope for was stilted conversation, half-shouted in the lull between songs, maybe even a couple of drunken snogs that would at least lead to a phone number or email. At worst, well, even I wasn't expecting what followed.

I'm going to skip ahead to pint number three and I've seen her at last, sitting just outside the dance area, looking in and chatting with friends. My plan at this point is simple, get up on the dance floor, get my smile out – one of my best features – and dance into her line of sight. Luckily the music is quite cheesy with synchronised moves so even I can't muck this up. Some Madonna, but no Voguing, some B-52s, even a bit of Falco. So I'm up, shoes sticking to an already wet floor and beads of sweat starting to appear after just two numbers. It's not from the dancing though, despite the pints I can feel the pressure I am putting on myself.

I reach her line of sight and throw occasional looks in her direction. She's still chatting, I need to try harder. The music picks up but I'm going to have to freestyle. Definitely time to bring out some of the moves I have seen on T.V.

I think everyone is at a similar level of inebriation and I soon relax into simple patterns that let me show off a bit, standing out just enough for her to hopefully notice how cute my butt is.

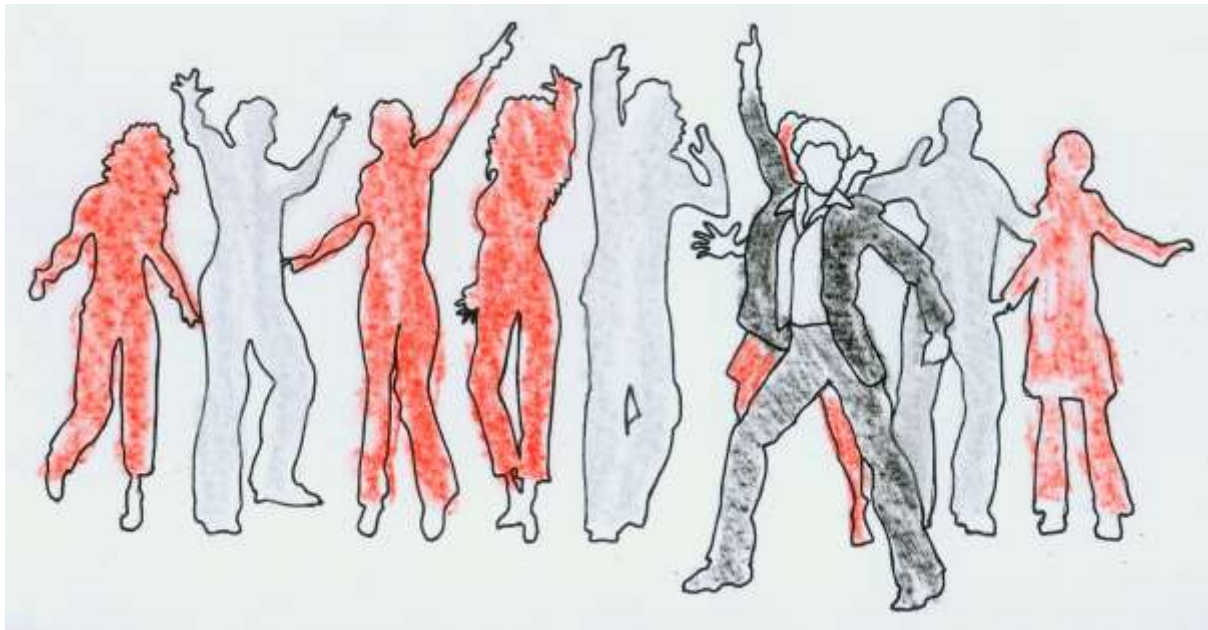
Smile and butt, my weapons of war.

Then we have the first complication of the night. I've attracted an interloper. To be fair she is very pretty. Good moves, good body and she has danced straight to me. At this stage you're thinking give up on the plan, take what's available. However my stubbornness pulls out a blinder.

Jealousy.

That'll do the trick. It works every time, so I'm told, and I start to dance with my new friend. We seem to click. A bit of James Brown comes on and we slide a little closer. I'm still checking on my fixation, she's not up dancing yet but it won't be long, of that I'm sure, so I carry on. I'm relaxing now, a bit more confident that my mojo has returned and I can turn it on anyone I want to, if I have the chance.

Pint number five arrives, courtesy of the lady I'm dancing with, I'll call her Rachael rather than the somewhat incongruous Number Two. My inner voice is strong enough to tell me to slow the drinks down, maybe have some water next. What's the point of mojo if you're too pissed to do anything with it? Rachael watches me as I dance, smiling encouragingly.



Then I see my target, who I'll call Leanne, and she is up and dancing and only eight feet away from me. Now I have a dilemma. Stay with Rachael or progress to Leanne? Although Leanne is close I haven't yet made eye contact with her this evening. It's not a tough decision for me, my heart reaches out and pulls the strings. My feet start shuffling me over towards Leanne. Rachael follows. There's only three feet to Leanne now. She is in a group who are dancing in a circle. I just need to insert myself into their midst and the rest will fall into place. There are six others with her, all women, but to be honest I couldn't even attempt to describe them I was so focused on her.

Red jeans, a flowery top showing off an athletic frame and as I'm looking at her the second problem hits me. Long black hair, cream lace dress, tights (maybe even stockings!) and she's grabbed me. I didn't even see her coming. As her hands grasp my hips I step back and we stumble into the middle of Leanne's group. Rachael follows, still dancing and watching me closely.

Now I am starting to worry. Have I overdone my dancing? Is my mojo really that strong?

And then the next problem, another layer bubbling away in my confused head. Leanne and Number Three, who I'll call Jessica, are friends. As we are all dancing they start chattering away. This is a worrying development. Am I missing something? Surely this can't be down to just me? My plan had been so simple. Get up, dance, pull. Three steps to heaven. Now I'm sobering up pretty quickly. I'm missing something obvious here and I start to look at the people in the disco.

All the women are talking, not obviously and not a constant chatter but there are glances and gestures. Each man now has several women dancing with them. I watch, trying to appear entranced by the music. I'm not sure why but I am nervous again. A pattern

emerges. Each man has exactly three women round him, all encouraging, touching, herding him into position. Each man is a distinct cluster on the dance floor. There are still some women left around the edges, but they are not dancing. They watch. Every man is on the dance floor.

A drink is held up in front of my face, grabbing my attention. It's a bright green concoction of ice cubes, thick liquid and what look to be vanilla seeds trapped in the meniscus.

I try to push it away but Leanne's face looms large. She is smiling and laughing, eyes twinkling in the cheap spotlights that illuminate her cropped hair. She pushes the glass to my lips and helps me to drink it, forcing the drink down my throat. A burn followed by euphoria, an instant hit. I barely notice the same green shots being passed around the room, I wipe my mouth and my lips tingle.

It's too much for me. The effect of the women, their closeness, their constant touching, and I grab Leanne and whirl her round. Tact and subtlety means nothing. I have one hand on her shoulder and the other firmly grabs her bottom. Such joy at that contact, I could leave it there for a life time, squeezing toned flesh.

She reciprocates, nestling herself hard against my hips.

Rachael and Jessica back off, I forget about them as my moment has arrived. Mojo rising and I can't remember the rest of the music and the moves I pull out. It was just the two of us, pressing hard against each other.

I go for a nuzzle to the neck and she leans back, exposing smooth skin. I was kiss and lick, pushing my mouth against her. Trying to work up and over to her mouth.

She pushes her head back further and my tongue is left hanging in the air, squirming like an earthworm in the rain. She laughs.

Another green drink is helped down, the vanilla feels as if it is burning my throat but I don't care. I need her now and she senses it. She takes my hand and we dance our way off. We are the last ones dancing, though there are plenty of women standing around the edges and watching us leave. I can't understand their expressions. They look angry I think.

Upstairs to a room that's not mine. It's plusher than my cheap rate room, one floor above the disco. Leanne pushes me onto the bed and I can't get up off the soft mattress. She opens my shirt, ripping some of my buttons. All I can do is lie back and watch. The ceiling is mirrored, a vast weight of antique glass and silver distorted by time. In it I see Leanne lean over me, distorted and elongated.

My belt is undone next then my trousers opened, she pulls me out for the world to see. Every touch on my skin burns with lust. I want to grab her but I can't seem to move, the soft mattress swallowing me up.

She steps back, appraising me, then walks to the door and opens it. Rachael and Jessica are standing there. They enter with hungry looks on their faces and approach the bed. A maid follows after them, head bowed, pushing a service trolley with a single stainless steel dome on it. She stops the trolley by the side of the bed and Leanne removes the cover.

There are three neatly folded napkins, a carving knife, and a small blowtorch on the tray.

Leanne picks up the knife and Rachael clicks the blowtorch into life. The flame flickers and flares orange then settles to a hissing point. Jessica pulls down my trousers and boxer shorts, leaving me exposed. I can't help the state I'm in and Jessica grasps the tip, pinching hard. She holds me vertical, displaying my excitation to the others. Leanne and Rachael approach. I see the carving knife reflected a hundred times in the ceiling, fragments of knife shining with the cold blue flame of the blowtorch.

The door closes silently as the maid leaves.

First Things

Elle Marie Hubbard

Sshh, I won't have to tell you now, tell you, tell you, tell... The stars are needle pricks in black velvet and the ones she has gathered lie muddled at her side.

This is a night of first things. She has never seen the snow before. The lights of the town sparkle in the frosty night and the shop windows spread a golden pathway across the pavements. She has never been out so late before either. She is alone with her father. This too is unusual. He pulls her along by her red-mitted hand. He walks fast and does not look down. She tries hard to keep up. One day she will try less. A pale, damp curl escapes from her woollen hat. She takes after her mother, not him. His hair is black in the night.

Her mother's absence worries her. She has a lot of questions. 'Later', he says without looking and does not smile. Perhaps then it is her fault. Her neck hurts with craning to look up at him. He is so high above the ground and she is very small. Her red wellingtons crunch in the soft, white snow and there is a strange uneasy anticipation in the pit of her stomach. This is a night of first things and the air is electric and unfamiliar.

'What would you like me to bring for you?'

The Father Christmas in the big store is jolly and his red cloak is soft and warm.

'Wings,' she whispers, without hesitation.

'To fly with', she adds.

'Ah', he says.

The shop is brightly lit like a Christmas tree itself and the ceilings are hung with paper stars. The counters shine, golden, waiting, to be unwrapped.

'Stay there,' her father says.

She knows he means it, but it is not a hard thing to do. The sparkled grandeur is new to her and her eyes are full of diamonds.

Her father has gone to speak to a lady behind one of the counters. A lady with short, smooth auburn hair, like a squirrel. Her face is so like Mummy's – but Mummy has golden hair, like the angel on the tree, like her, and Mummy is not here. Her heart aches with the knife-bright quickness of first pain. If Father Christmas grants her wish then everything will be all right. She glances through the mirror on one of the pillars supporting the starry sky, and sees herself, a smaller version of her mother, and there is a strange ache at her ribcage, but perhaps it is her wish working already she wonders, with the wonderment of a child.

Her father takes her hand in his and together they are alone in the snow. Since he has spoken to the squirrel lady he looks smaller and his eyes are narrowed against the light as if something is making him listen to a noise that hurts his ears, or someone. When she tries to ask him if he's all right, he says, 'Come on let's go home now,' as if he's answering someone else's question, not the one she's asked. He takes his hand from hers and looks into the dark distance, and she is silenced. Sometimes, when she talks too much, her father looks tired, and presses his hand to his head as if to wipe away a tear, and once, one dreadful time, she thought she saw one falling from his eye and she knew it was no-one's fault then, but her own. She is so like her mother and so afraid, because she knows, now, that she hurts him too.

And then she sees it. She is breathless with the beauty of it: a roadside nativity. The star of lighted glass dissolves the dark, floods the pavement into a silver mirror and there are people kneeling in the straw, a father smiling and a mother whose face is radiant with joy, and above them beckons luminescent, golden-haired, her angel, wings sweeping the sky, and she knows that she must go, the whole road is dancing with the delight of it and she shouts, 'Daddy, Daddy, come on!'

The pain, when it comes, spits white like the after image of an explosion, and the scream, when it tears through her, is like fire. She is lying in the snow and her father is kneeling beside her, holding a mirror to her mouth.

The squirrel lady who looks so like her mother is clasping her hand and her smooth, shiny hair is streaked with gold, and recognition crackles across her forehead like sheet lightning in a black sky. There is a strange, new feeling in her ribcage and she smiles, certain now of her gift. This is a night of first things and all her life long, the chains of memory will bring her back to this night: this year, the one after – and the one after that.

A Day in the Life of Tess

Patricia Preece

'Hello there Ma'am, try one of these apples,'
'I don't mind if I do,'
'These are Royal Galas fresh and sweet and
Only the best for you.'

'Could we find a pie stall, Tess?
Prince Philip longs for meat pie and chips!
And don't forget his mushy peas
Such a shame I can't eat this food, it goes straight to my hips.'

'Shall we stop at the Deli stall?'
'Excuse me, young lady, would you make me a spam sandwich please?'
'Certainly Ma'am and as it's your jubilee year I will grace
It with ham and cheese.'

'Let us look upstairs, Tess, at the jewellery stall.
Excuse me, have you any cut price tiaras and earrings please?'
'Yes Ma'am; give your lady your bag, and gloves,
And finish your cup of parched peas.'

'I need a new dress, this one is well worn and looks cheap,'
Tess laughs, lumps bags and checks time,
'Look Ma'am a material stall, shall we take a peek
There's calico, cotton, or silk would look fine.'

'I won't be too long Tess but I need some new stockings,
these have laddered, as I got off the train.'
'A friend of mine goes to Martha's right there, Ma'am
Just tell her you want a cheap pair and plain.'

'There's a hardware stall over on the other side, Tess
'They need a new mop head to clean my kitchen floor,
Prince Philip used the mop to get some gun oil off
He always makes out the job is such a big chore.'

'Ma'am there is such a commotion outside
and your chauffeur is seeing red';
'I thought royalty was exempt on double yellow lines
Oh Tess! Preston market's so hectic and I never got bread.'



Matthew Hopkins' Fate

(The Witchfinder General)

Brian Preece

How else did he know?
How else could he tell?
If it wasn't for his awe
and the book from old Nell!

How did he find so many?
And bade them all confess,
if he wasn't in league with any
of the demons from the furnace.

He earned a living from the discovered.
And we know how he did this well.
From drowning, he easily recovered,
so we'll send him back to Hell!

Shall we burn him at the stake,
or flail off his hide?
No record exists of his fate,
so we'll leave it for you to decide.

The Road to Hell

Brian Preece

Blackened door
And blackened sky.
Empty heart
And empty eye.

Here they laughed
And here they cried.
Here they slept
And here they died.

Swore I'd keep
Them safe from harm.
Meant to fit
A smoke alarm.

Too late now
For me to mention.
I paved my road
With good intention.

Eve and Sorgys

AJ Noon

Eve circled the clearing, cautiously looking for any signs of danger. She could detect no one hiding in the trees and there were no warning scents on the air. Satisfied they were alone she settled down onto the damp pine needles only to be almost overpowered by the rich resinous smell that rose up. It took her a few moments to control her breathing, then she straightened her cloak to make herself look as presentable as possible, and approached the fallen log on which *he* sat. She glanced around at the treeline as she made her way over to him, treading gently on the leaf litter and trying to recall the speech she had been practising for the last week.

He was sitting hunched over, his broad shoulders pushed forward, his head bowed and covered by the hood of his mud splattered cloak. He heard her footsteps as she neared and he stood slowly, raising his head. As he did so the hood slipped backwards, exposing his face.

Eve almost faltered when she saw the patchwork of angry tissue that was revealed, but she pushed the shame into a deep hole inside her and walked up to him, steeling herself and placing a hand on his shoulder. She looked into his mismatched eyes and could see only sadness and pain. Her shame tried to crawl back out and it took all her efforts to muffle it.

The speech she had been practising was gone, ripped away from her mind by the sight of him. She took her hand away then stepped backwards, the pain in his eyes too much. She could see that the last two months had taken their toll on him and she brushed her fingers against his cheek, loosening some of the dirt and blood that had accumulated between the scars.

"I'm sorry. I tried to reach you. I couldn't get there in time." She wanted to explain her failure, explain how she hadn't been able to find the courage to leave with him when he had asked her, but couldn't find the words.

He did not answer; he just stood there looking into her eyes.

Eve looked away, needing time to compose herself. His terrible scars were a vivid red against his grey skin, despite the moonlight giving everything a pallid look. All she could see was the pain he had suffered.

"Did you have any trouble getting here?" Eve asked, trying to stop her voice from cracking, mentally kicking herself for avoiding what needed to be said.

His head shook slowly, stiffly, as if each movement was a great effort.

"Were you followed?"

This time he nodded and raised an arm towards the western edge of the clearing. His arm stayed straight out, motionless, and even in the weak moonlight Eve could make out the mountains in the distance. Near one of the many peaks was Castle Murano, the place where they had first met four years ago.

As she turned back to face him she heard the sounds of dogs in the distance. She peered into the darkness, looking between the trees, listening, trying to gauge how far away their pursuers were.

"They were waiting for me outside when I left, but I lost them. It won't take long for them to find us... They know this is where we used to meet."

It was not long ago she would not have heard them, when life was simpler and she was just a chamber maid. Since she had been turned all her senses were improved. Her eyesight saw deep into the forest, but there was no trace of any torchlight yet. The barking faded out, carried away by the wind and she relaxed a little.

Eve saw his tunic was ruffled and stepped forward, placing one hand onto his chest and smoothing the rough cloth down, "I'm sorry, we don't have much time. They will find us shortly and there's nothing...nothing I can do for you."

He still did not speak. His green eye sparkled in the moonlight whilst his brown eye was dull and lifeless. All he did was watch her.

Eve tried again to explain, "I tried to reach you. I tried to get to you before they did, but I left too late. I couldn't decide at first, you were asking so much of me." Eve stepped away from him and circled the log slowly, listening as her feet crunched on discarded pine cones. Even though she was wracked with guilt her senses were still and constantly scanning the forest around them.

Once more the sound of dogs broke the silence between them. Eve looked up and she could see orange light from torches flickering through gaps between the trees. The mob was slowly drawing in on them. She crouched down and ran a hand through the damp detritus of the clearing floor. The movement released fresh aromas and she inhaled deeply. She smelt pine, damp earth, and the faint trace of a deer that had recently passed through.

He slowly shuffled over to her and lowered his hand, which she took hold of. His skin was cold and clammy. He effortlessly pulled her up to her feet, his other arm encircled her and he lifted her clear of the floor.

Eve laughed, "This is what I liked most about you, Sorgys. You never needed to say anything to make me smile. You always knew what to do."

She placed her hands on his shoulders and pushed herself higher. He held her up, offering her to the moon, and memories of happier times together brought tears to Eve's face.

She squeezed his shoulders and lowered herself. He took her cue and placed her down gently. Eve put both hands back onto his chest, pulling his dirty shirt together and ineffectually brushing off more dirt, trying to smarten him up for his final act.

"Can you imagine how strong, how clever, our children would have been? You would've been a great husband." She looked up and saw he was crying, three large tears trying to find a way past the scars.

"Oh Sorgys, you are still in there then!"

Eve wiped her own tears away then stood on tiptoes and cupped his face in her hands. Using her thumbs she carefully wiped his tears then put her hands back on his chest. She could feel the slow deep thud of his heart. It was a constant rhythm. One pace. Never varying.

Some of the stitching on his neck had come loose and she nimbly tucked the thread out of sight using her long nails. She had to fight the urge to do more repair work on him.

"You shouldn't have come. They'll catch you. If I... If I..." She could not finish the statement.

"I do miss you. That's not fair is it? I bring you out here, to this fight, and all I can say is I miss you." Eve took a step back and surveyed him in the moonlight.

She tucked in another piece of stitching, this time on his wrist, "He did a good job with you. I'm surprised, I wasn't expecting this. You still look like you, though maybe a little ragged around the edges." She forced a laugh.

The sound of yapping dogs came again and even Sorgys heard them this time, turning slightly in the direction of the barking.

They had no more than a minute left, their last minute together. She looked back into the forest, trying to think of something to say, something perfect for this moment. Something that would atone for her failure. If she had turned up as they had arranged four months ago he wouldn't have been waiting for her, wouldn't have been caught.

Nothing came, but she had to make an attempt, "If you go now you may have a chance. You may be able to get away." Eve looked at him, but she knew what his answer was, even if he did not say it.

"Is it that bad? Is it worse than being dead? At least you're alive now."

"I'm still struggling with my changes. The power I have ... the power is fantastic. But when I dream I see their faces, every one of them. It's only been two months yet I've had to feed eight times... It's not pleasant."

Eve sat in the log, brushing off some of the mud that had collected on her cloak. "I have such a strong need for life though. I...I can't imagine stopping. I know they'll track me down, find my roost, and they will kill me. You can't blame them though, it's their loved ones I'm taking away from them."

Eve looked into his eyes, trying to find a flicker of understanding from him.

"I'm sorry, I really hate what I do now, but I have to live...I have to feed."

He took a step forwards, his arms outstretched to embrace her. The urge to throw herself into him and hide in his arms was strong, but she stayed back from him.

"I'm sorry, Sorgys. I've put you in so much danger. This is all my fault. I...I don't know what I can do to make it right."

Sorgys just stood there, his arms open and his eyes pleading in the cold moonlight.

"I can't, Sorgys. I'm going to have to go now, they are here."

As she finished speaking the first of the dogs broke through the treeline and into the clearing. It paused, snarling and drooling, unsure as to which beast to attack first. Another dog came through the undergrowth, and then another, and finally the whole pack was assembled. A scrawny man followed them out of the undergrowth, a pitchfork in one hand and a flaming torch in the other, "They're here," he cried as he sighted the pair.

More men came through into the clearing, spreading out around the couple and encircling them. They kept their distance initially, they were still afraid despite their overwhelming numbers.

Eve laid her hand on Sorgys's arm, "Goodbye Sorgys. I'm sorry it has to end like this. We both have to go our separate ways now. I'll always remember you. I hope...I hope...I hope it won't hurt."

The villagers advanced, driving their dogs forward. They were reluctant at first but their masters' urging broke their fear and they charged towards the pair, scrabbling for purchase on the forest floor.

"Goodbye Sorgys." Eve stepped back and pulled her cloak around her. The air around her blurred and folded in on itself, leaving a large black bat fluttering in her place. Even in her vampire form she could not take on so many, she had to leave, and she could only do so in her other form. The bat started to climb into the sky.

The first dog reached Sorgys and sunk its teeth into his calf, but Sorgys did not flinch, there was no feeling any more in his body. More and more dogs latched onto him, causing him to stagger back under their weight.

Eve circled around the clearing, gaining height and drawing away from the villagers. She looked on vainly as Sorgys was lost to sight under a mass of dogs and angry men. She wheeled away and headed east towards the mountains, but in the cool night she thought she heard a hoarse voice carrying on the wind,

"Goodbye Eve."

Truth of the Matter

Dea Parkin

She stood on the doorstep. Twenty-five years on, and I knew who she was. Something about the plane of her cheek, the direct gaze and the beautiful olive skin. So like her father. I'd not seen him for twenty-five years and I'd never seen this woman before, but I knew where she came from, knew who her parents were, knew her name.

'Are you Gina?' she asked, in a tone that said I was doomed if I was, doomed if I wasn't.

'It's Marie, isn't it?' I asked. 'I had a feeling you'd turn up one day. Come in.'

She glanced round at my lounge. It would have been easier if she'd accepted my offer of a drink, something to occupy our hands, to keep the situation rooted in grown-up politeness. She didn't want that.

'Why did you ruin my mum's life?' she demanded. The question I'd dreaded for a quarter of a century.

'I didn't know I had.'

'You did. You must have. Dad –'

'Your dad did what he thought was the best thing to do. The best for you. Staying with your mum, it was the honourable thing.'

'You seduced him!'

I hung my head a bit at that. He had been ten years older than me, my boss at work. Married. It hadn't stopped me, and to be honest, I knew I would bed him the day I met him, at my interview. It had taken nearly a year but he wasn't going anywhere. Just to the office we shared, doing work we both hated, day after unremitting day.

He was going to leave his wife, but then came her shock news. I didn't care that he'd slept with her too, he was trying to keep everyone happy, he was that sort of man. A decent man, so he stayed with her.

I did my part. I left the ghastly job, left the area, left no forwarding address. A pity he couldn't have been as circumspect. The evening before my escape, he told his pregnant wife about me in a clean-breast confession. Honour, honesty...sometimes people take them too far. I wondered if this fury of a young woman whose eyes and tongue denounced me in my own home would ever understand that. Was it me who ruined her mum's life? I truly don't believe so.



Follow the Sun

Brian Preece

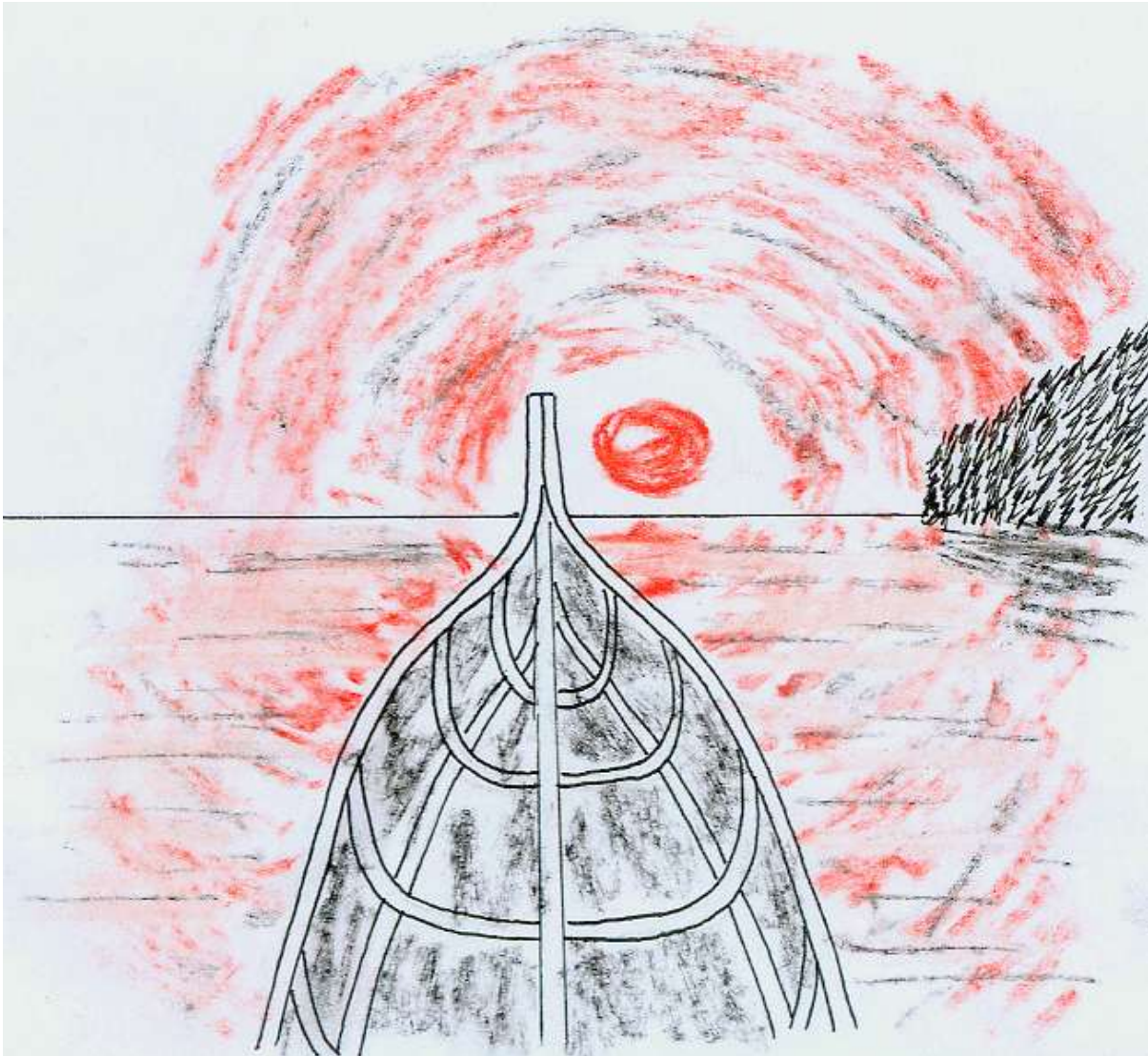
How can I go back? How can I? How can I go back to the black night? How can I go back to the black, cold night, after I've bathed in your sun, your warm sun? How can I go back to the black, cold, moonless, starless night? Now that your sun, your warm sun, has set, set, never to rise again. How can I go back to the cold, black, moonless, starless night?

For nine years, I've bathed in your warm sun. For nearly a decade, I've followed the same cycle, the same weekly cycle. Three nights at work. Two nights bathing in your warmth, two nights I should have been at work. Two nights, I held that warm key in my warm hand, I put that warm key into that warm lock. I turned that warm key and pushed on that warm door. Two nights, your sunlight flooded that apartment. I bathed in your sun, your warm sun, your warm, inviting eyes, your warm, moist, welcoming lips, your warm, caressing, arms, your soft, warm body. For two nights I bathed in your warm bed. And for two nights I returned to the cold, black, moonless, starless night. I put that cold key in that cold lock. I entered that cold, black house. Greeted by those cold, accusing eyes, those cold, damp, hard lips, those cold stiff arms, that cold, lifeless body. I slept in a cold, black, lonely bed.

How can I live without warmth, now that your sun has set and will never rise again? You never said that you were leaving. You knew that you were leaving, but you never said. Your friend knew, she knew, but she never said. Three nights a week, she sat there and never said. She knew you were leaving, but she never said. She knew that your sun was setting, never to rise again. She knew, but she never said. How was I to know? How was I to know, when you never said, when she never said? I did not see your visitor. I could not see him. I could not feel him in your warm, soft body. You never told me that he would take you away. You never told me that your sun would set and never rise again. I did not see your sun set. I wasn't there, when your sun set. She told me. She told me that you had left. Your sun had set, never to rise again.

How can I go back? How can I? How can I go back to the black night? How can I go back to the black, cold, moonless, starless night, after I've bathed in your sun, your warm sun? How can I go back, now that your sun has set, never to rise again? I know what I must do. I will go the lodge. The warm, cosy, wooden lodge. I will go to the lodge in the forest. The lodge by the lake. I will go to the lodge, where paradise dwelt for a week. A week each year, when I should have been at the conference. I will go to the lodge, where I bathed in your sun for a whole week. The lodge in the forest, the vast, silent forest. Silent except for our footsteps in the litter. The crunch of our feet on the litter, the snap of the twigs, beneath our feet and the rustle, as we kicked the leaves. Silent, except for our footsteps on the litter and the sound of the birds. The eagle we watched, as we lay in the litter, on the forest floor. The eagle that soared like my soul in the canopy of the trees. I will go to the lodge, where I bathed in your sun. I will take the canoe onto the lake, the smooth, silver, warm lake. I will take the canoe we paddled onto the lake. I will sit in the back and see your sun in front of me, as I have done so many times. I will feel your warm sun on my face. I will take the canoe out onto the lake. The rimless, smooth, warm lake. I will watch your sun set. I will watch your warm, red sun set in the warm, welcoming, golden lake. I know what I must do. I will watch your sun set into the lake.

And I will follow the sun.



Illustrations throughout by Brian Preece.