

Carrick U3A

12th Annual Barbara Scammell

Writing Competition

Winners 2019



Above: Janet Zoro, awarded 1st prize for non-fiction and poetry.



Right: Paul Rutley, awarded 1st prize for fiction.

THE WINNING ENTRIES

POETRY

1 ST PRIZE	'SAY CHEESE'	Janet Zoro
2 ND PRIZE	'TUMBLE DRIER'	Ian Searle
3 RD PRIZE	'THE ANNIVERSARY'	Jenny Reid

HIGHLY COMMENDED

'AQUA'	Sue Williams
'SILK'	Brenda Burgess

FICTION

1 ST PRIZE	'FALSE TEETH'	Paul Rutley
2 ND PRIZE	'DREAM A LITTLE DREAM'	Jock Turnham
3 RD PRIZE	'CHANGE OF HEART'	Ann Mundler

HIGHLY COMMENDED

'OVER THE BRIDGE'	Janet Zoro
'THE ROCK'	Sue Swinchatt

NON-FICTION

1 ST PRIZE	'FIRST DATES: THE EDGE OF THE DESERT'	Janet Zoro
2 ND PRIZE	'PERFORMANCE'	Sue Williams
3 RD PRIZE	'SURVIVAL'	Linda Cash

HIGHLY COMMENDED

'900 WORDS - A EULOGY'	Rozy Brooks
'HOW THE OTHER HALF LIVES'	Ian Searle

I was delighted that so many talented writers entered the competition this year, and especially that four U3A members who are not in either of the Creative Writing groups all won an award for their entries. The prize-winning subjects varied from a piece about 'False Teeth', eating dates on the edge of a Moroccan desert to a poem about a 'Tumble Drier.' The vast variety of subject matter must have made Kath Morgan and Jane Moss's jobs very difficult and we are very grateful for their professional judgement of the competition and all the work they have done for us.

I regret that there is no printed booklet of entries this year but thanks to the hard work of Sue Swinchatt an online version is available on the Carrick U3A website. All the entries will also be published throughout the year in the Carrick Argus, which is also available to all members via email.

I hope you enjoy reading this collection of prose and poems as much as I have, and that you will continue to be inspired to keep writing.

Brenda Burgess, leader of Truro Creative Writing Group

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Fiction

1ST PRIZE

FALSE TEETH

BY PAUL RUTLEY

She looked at her husband, he knew but he would let her speak, he always did. 'Jack' she mouthed, her lips and tongue were out of touch, the words jumbled. Her eyes looked at his, confused, questioning. He answered with a smile. 'J_a_a_a_ck' she drew out his name. She sat opposite, she always did; she spoke across the kitchen table, beside the window that looked into the garden. He tried to hide his mischief, he listened. 'Jack?' demanding now, her eyes fixed on his. His voice soft, playful 'What is it, tell me?' 'Jack' she mouthed, unable to form the word. 'Yes, speak to me, Jack'

'My dear woman tell me what is it?

'Jack, my mouth, it's not working!'

He knew; more importantly he knew his little game was up, it had to end. She held his hands; her eyes as always, gazed into his, she was unsettled. It had to stop. He gathered her hands firmly in his. He held her gaze. 'Listen, listen, please, please' he squeezed her hands 'Listen' it took a while, her eyes settled, her attention was his 'Shush, listen...' he smiled; the smile reassured, all was well, they were one, they were always one, they had lived as one for sixty years and more. She listened, she always did. 'Now, take out your teeth' she frowned, puzzled at this request. 'Yes, that's right, take out your teeth' carefully enouncing each word. The sentence formed in her mind, she understood, his nod assured her.

'That's right, take out your teeth and give them to me'.

Instinctively fore finger and thumb held out the removed upper denture. 'And the other' smiling taking the first. He wrapped them in his napkin left from breakfast. He put his mug of unfinished tea in front of her. 'Here, drink this, you'll feel better, then I'll get you breakfast'. She looked; he saw and understood the unspoken question. 'It's ok, I'll rinse them and you'll have them back, I promise. Now, stay here, drink your tea'. She smiled, lifted the mug, drank, she was fine. He smiled and took the dentures to the bathroom.

The moment passed, her teeth returned, firmly set in her mouth, she smiled the smile he had always loved. She looked at him, she was okay: the moment had passed. Her smile was good; she was back, her eyes lit up 'I'm fine, thanks to you my friend, I'm fine'. And then he did what he did every morning, he got her breakfast.

The days passed she would have breakfast, speak excitedly of the birds beyond the window that hung off the fat balls and took the seed from the feeders. He'd filled them; he filled them most mornings, always long before she woke. He cleaned and tidied the kitchen knowing what was next. She went to the door. 'Be careful' he'd call knowing she was safe, she'd always been agile. 'I'm going in the garden' he knew, she always did.

She had a ritual, it seemed to reassure her. She'd organise and tidy, run her fingers in the seed trays and straighten the strings of the fat balls. It was necessary, it satisfied her. She'd pick up whatever was left out, the empty watering can; his old shoes; the sweet jar, kept for the bird seed, anything would do even the peg bag. She'd line them up one by one along the wooden bench, the bench their grand daughter had given, on which in happier times they sat, holding hands, then when her mind was well but even then he knew, he knew.

He'd always played games with her, it was a tease, he knew. She'd say 'Oh Jack, you are a one!' and he was, he was the only one for her. She'd been his friend, his loving wife, devoted mother and now she was gone, her mind gone but she, she was still there. He'd enjoyed 'pulling her leg' that's what she'd say 'you've pulled my leg' and smile. He now had the time to do it but she couldn't see the humour, not since the event, that event that confirmed she was going.

This new morning was different, he knew, somehow he knew she wouldn't make this day. There had been 'other events' as they called them, a sad smile passed but there had been another, he knew and he knew it was today. Her look: the tongue tied, lip twisted slur, this time not down to childish games, this time was real. She looked for his comfort, her eyes searching, he held her hands, held her gaze, he knew, he knew.

He'd done well; he was tired, so very tired. He watched over her at that kitchen table as he had done so for so long. It was time, time for them both. How many mornings had it been, looking out into garden before that first time, that 'event'? He smiled to himself, smiled at the times she wondered why she couldn't speak and then to suddenly improve. Too late to share; he'd left it too late.

She would have exclaimed - 'Oh Jack, you always get me!'

What was he to do? He didn't want her to go, didn't want her to leave him. He could get the doctor, there was nothing else. Her voice broke through his thoughts, her voice clear,

positive 'I must take my pills!' Yes and why not he thought and that, that was it 'come on dear, take your pills' he smiled.

The paramedics eased her slight figure gently on the stretcher. The ambulance away, the lights and bells filled the darkening sky. She'd have wanted it quieter, he would follow. It was dark outside. The lone reflection stared back from the garden, in his palm his false teeth, the ones he'd leave in her pot, the ones she'd struggle to wear, the ones she'd never wear again, that last bit of fun he couldn't tell her about, he knew and he wept.

2ND PRIZE

DREAM A LITTLE DREAM

BY JOCK TURNHAM

Foxy? Foxy Shaw? Do I remember her? I mean, why wouldn't I? We had a kinda thing going for a while....you know...before she became famous an' all.

I first saw her....her name was Lillian, by the way....I first saw her back around 1910. Lower Broadway. I was a cub reporter-well a photographer, I should say-working for the 'Times'. I'd been to a shoot when I passed the stop as a bus pulled up.

This young broad steps out carrying a dinky little suitcase. She stands on the sidewalk looking up and down like she's lost.

"Can I help you miss?" says I, bold as brass...and "Welcome to Manhattan". What a jerk!

She turns and gives me a smile....you know, like she did in the movies. Movie, I should say...I think she only made one...right? No, there were a couple of others. But, you know, like the smile she did in those pin-up magazines, during the war.

She was booked into a cheap hotel in The Village.

So I walks her there...carrying her suitcase..and all the while she is talking and talking...all about hopes and dreams. She says "I'm going to be an actress...in a show called 'The Sunshine Girl'.. at The Knickerbocker Theatre...on Broadway. Do you know it? One day I'm going to be a star in Hollywood. Have you ever been there?"

Like this, all the way to the hotel. And me? Yeh...I'm like some dumb schmuk gazing at her with my mouth hanging open. I was entranced.

"Shall I see you again?" burbles me, like a love struck fool...which I was! "I could take you to The Knickerbocker, I know where it is."

“Oh, George!”..... that’s my name....“ would you?” she coos, pecking me on the cheek.....and then she’s gone.

I met her every day after rehearsals. Sometimes we’d have a soda. One evening I kissed her...you know...on the smacker...I mean lips.

She moved in with me. It was a real small apartment.....Lillian called it a burrow...and I was her ‘Bunny’.

I saw her in the show..she was only in the chorus..but ‘Wow’...what a stunner.

We were together for maybe four, five years. She got a job as a hooper in one of Ziegfeld’s shows on Broadway. Her life became hectic and I saw less and less of her. When the show went to Chicago I didn’t see her for months.

Then I got the letter. I’ve still got it...somewhere. She said the show was gonna be made into a movie in Hollywood. She said she wouldn’t be coming back. She had to follow her dream. And, she wished me ‘Good Luck’!

I didn’t hear from her for a long time. I saw the movie of course....I could just make her out in the chorus..... Some kinda dream!

Someone said she was in a Busby Berkeley movie...and later she is supposed to have danced with a young Astair....a foxtrot...that’s how she probably got the name ‘Foxy’. But I don’t know.

I did see pictures of her in ‘Photoplay’ a few times in the thirties. ‘. Miss Foxy Shaw accompanying some young up and coming. Once she was on the arm of Gable...before he was really known.

During the war she was a pin-up girl....but not a famous one.

I guess it was the early fifties, one winter. I was walking on lower 39th when this car pulls up and out the back steps this dame draped in furs.

“Bunny! Is that you?” she cries. And before you know it we is walking arm in arm down Broadway like we is still the kids we were. And she talks and talks...and me...well you know! Still a dope. Still love struck!

The car had been following us and the driver toots the horn.

“Darling, I have to go!” She looks straight at me, tidies my hair, adjusts my tie...like she did when..you know.

“Dear Bunny” she says, “ We only have one shot at life...and I had to follow my dream...I’m sorry if I hurt you.”

Then she pats me on the cheek and is gone.

I never saw her again.

Of course, I read about the divorces...the drugs...and then the suicide.....Some dream..huh?

But I have a dream too...every single night.

A bus draws up. A beautiful young girl steps lightly from the door.

‘Miss Foxy Shaw?’ say I, ‘My name is Bunny, and I’m so very pleased to meet you!’

She looks up and gives me that smile.....I think you know the one.

3RD PRIZE A CHANGE OF HEART

BY ANN MUNDLER

Gorgio and Luca sat engulfed in a miasma of cigarette smoke and insecticide at the end of a gruelling days work in their father’s citron grove. Gorgio blew a smoke ring upwards into the scented, evening air. He spoke, not looking at his brother.

‘Those ultra-orthodox Jews really scare me with their long beards and peculiar side locks hanging down from under their black hats, and who in their right mind would wear a long, thick overcoat in this August heat of Calabria for crying out loud?’

‘Dad says they’re a nice bunch when you get to know them,’ said Luca.

Gorgio gave Luca a dig with his elbow to be sure his younger brother was listening.

‘What’s nice about the way they scrutinise every molecule of our citrons? They chuck most of them away because they have tiny marks on them or a hardly visible difference in skin colour. I don’t understand how that can offend God. We’ve done our very best to produce as good a crop as we can for their special celebration. What’s it called again?’

Luca took a deep breath and spoke slowly, with exaggerated patience.

‘It’s called Sukkoth, a sort of Harvest Festival. The tradition goes back to Moses. It’s true, they do discard about eighty five per cent of the fruit but Dad says they pay really well for the perfect stuff.’

‘That’s not the point Luca. What about us on our backs, inching along the ground, trying to find the perfect fruits, getting those bloody thorns stuck in our arms and legs, not to mention our arses. And those plants are puny because they won’t allow grafting. Have to be held up by bloody wire supports.’

‘Watch your language Gorgio.’

‘Don’t worry, they aren’t listening. They’re too busy cooking all that food they brought with them. God knows how those rabbis and merchants can get through all that lot in a month, and it doesn’t include any bread. Poor old Bimbi has to make their bread-- under strict supervision.’

‘Bimbi’s happy,’ said Luca. ‘They pay him well.’

The brothers lit up again, squinting into the deep fuchsia-pink sunset streaked with purple and gold.

‘There’s a wind springing up,’ said Luca watching his cigarette smoke blow behind him.

‘So what?’

‘It’s from the sea, that’s what.’

‘Is that a big deal Luca?’

‘Not what we expect in August. Need to check the forecast.’

All thought of checking the forecast vanished after a few glasses of the local brew at the tavern.

That night the wind whipped and moaned its way through the citron groves. The tender, un-grafted plants were torn from their wire supports. The beautiful, glistening- yellow, diamond shaped fruits were buffeted against wooden supports and soundly slapped by long, pointed, shiny green leaves. The cruel thorns pierced their delicate skins through to the thick pith beneath. A wonderfully pungent, aromatic perfume was released from the ridged fruits. No humans stalked the gale-torn grove to savour this unique perfume released from the fruits, believed to have been offered as a thanksgiving in the temple, for the release of the Jewish people from captivity in Babylon.

Early next morning a disconsolate group stood surveying the wrecked fruit in the wind ravaged grove. Gorgio and Luca were not among them but their father, Marco was. Merchants were wringing their hands. Rabbis wailed as only rabbis do.

‘We’re done for. The harvest is ruined. God is punishing us.’

The wailing reached a crescendo as the rabbis rocked on their heels. Marco’s heart felt as though it had sunk into the storm-strewn ground. No citrons, no income. Disaster. No citrons, no Sukkoth. Tragedy. A miserable, black-coated procession slowly made its way back to their lodgings, well away from the gaze of the locals. If the locals had been able to observe the rabbis they would have heard much praying and seen the diligent searching of religious writings.

A few days later a compromise had been reached, or some might say a miracle. Rabbi Shmuel requested a meeting with Marco. Marco was very nervous and apprehensive, fearing the worst .

‘We have decided to take the very best fruit from your other grove.’

‘You mean the grafted fruit?’

Marco was incredulous.

'I always understood that your citrons had to be grown from seed because grafting isn't allowed by your law.'

Rabbi Schmuel paused before replying.

'That is so, but we now believe that Moses desired the best fruit we could obtain not absolute perfection. Absolute perfection in this case would spell financial ruin for you.'

Marco had a lump in his throat which prevented him from speaking for a full minute. Eventually he spoke, 'That's wonderful news. The grafted grove didn't escape the gale but the damage was nowhere near as bad as in the seeded grove. I'll get the boys to work right away.'

Rabbi Schmuel nodded his approval.

'May I make a suggestion?' asked Marco. 'Perhaps we could have a party to celebrate. Will you join us?'

'A wonderful idea, we'll bring food and teach you our dances.'

The two men shook hands. Marco thought he saw tears in Schmuel's eyes as he blinked his own away.

Marco hurried to tell his boys about the party.

'Party?' queried Gorgio. 'Do they drink alcohol?'

'Of course they do' retorted Marco, 'it's in the Bible.'

'So who's invited?' asked Luca. 'Can we ask girls?'

'No, of course not,' said Marco. 'It's just men.'

'They've got a way to go yet,' said Gorgio.

'Be grateful lads. This is a massive change of heart for Rabbi Schmuel. I can never thank him enough. Tonight is the beginning of something wonderful.'

When Marco was out of earshot Gorgio turned to Luca. 'I don't want to be doing this for the rest of my life.'

'Me neither, but don't let Dad hear you say that. It'd break his heart. '

'Look at him Luca, he's taken on a new lease of life.'

'Bloody hell,' they both muttered under their breath.

She'd take the next exit; she hated motorway driving and, flustered by her encounter with Psychic Sid at Sedgemoor Services, she felt jumpy. Dawdling along country lanes would calm her. She slowed and glanced across the flat green Somerset Levels. Below, the shining ribbon of the River Parret - and the waterside pub she had noticed so often, with a whitewashed welcome on its low tiled roof. Her trusted OS map would get her back there.

The threatening piles of cloud were just releasing the first windswept raindrops when she turned into the car park of the Rising Sun. It was empty. The door was open, but no one sat in the dark low-ceilinged bar. She was surprised by the black and white photographs of rock bands - she'd have expected sepia 'old Somerset' on the walls. The man who came through from the back of the bar was tall, gangly, dressed like a cowboy. His grey hair was thick, unruly; his smile was wide, lop-sided, hauntingly familiar. She asked for a large brandy and ginger ale.

'That sort of day, is it?' The warm amusement in his voice tumbled her insides; her hand was trembling as she reached for the glass.

'I think it's getting better ... Tom?' And they looked at each other. He ducked through the bar hatch, folded her in a close embrace. 'Hell's bells! Rosie!' - no question in his voice - 'must be thirty years'. 'More like thirty five'. They stood, holding hands.

'Can we sit down? I feel... overwhelmed.' They sat, and talked. And talked some more, and laughed a lot. They had met in London, as new graduates, in the Civil Service. Their love affair had been on and off for years; then she met a man who suggested marriage and children - the second didn't happen, the first didn't work out. Tom had become harder and harder to keep in touch with - he worked in Brussels on and off. Then he disappeared.

'You disappeared; we lost each other'. She spoke softly.

'Believe me, I regret it. But ... well, love happens, life changes.' He had jumped at early retirement on full pension when the Civil Service did a lot of trimming. Sold up in London and followed a dream - bought the pub, and started promoting bands in the West Country. Married a rock chick, who left him for a bass player. Got depressed, got better, carried on. She checked the time, jumped up.

'Tom, I must go! I'm due at a funeral in Lynton in an hour and a half!' He looked at her.

'You need to change?', and she laughed. Her long dress was a russet and wine swirl of soft, shimmering materials, her jacket chestnut velvet. 'We are all wearing our finest glad rags to celebrate a colourful life; and he loved me in this.' Tom nodded, hugged her, murmured:

'But you haven't told me your story! Come back afterwards; I do a terrific B&B! Please, Rosie'. He meant it. She knew.

'Not tonight; some of us are staying at the house - could be a couple of days; I have to start sorting. I'll phone, and I'll take you up on the B&B, I promise.' And now she was driving across Exmoor. The rain had stopped, and the trees glowed gold and scarlet. She had made the trip from Cardiff to the house which would be hers, now, driven over that bridge, passed that pub so many times in the last six years. Luke's warm, gentle spirit would always be there, on the edge of the moor. She thought of Psychic Sid. He had been collecting for the hedgehog sanctuary and she had dropped a pound in the tin. Then he had told her that a bridge was an important sign for her today, that she should look around with care, think twice, and believe that second chances were sometimes possible.

HIGHLY COMMENDED

THE ROCK

BY SUE SWINCHATT

It was an impressive sight - jagged, twin-peaked, rising 700 feet above the waves. Seven miles off the southwest tip of Ireland, centuries ago monks had made this rock their home. Alongside the tiny monastery were sleeping quarters; domed huts carefully constructed out of stone. They reminded visitors of old-style straw beehives, so had acquired the name. Long abandoned, the rock now attracted few visitors - just the occasional group of puffin watchers. It was a lonely, desolate place fit only for holy hermits.

Four young men swiftly disembarked from the small craft and began clambering up the hundreds of steep narrow steps, pausing only for a moment to wave to the skipper as he pulled away from the landing place and headed back to the mainland.

'Right lads,' said Tom, checking his watch. 'He said he'll fetch us back at six.'

'I'll have to cut down on the fags – I'm out of breath already.' Callum was gasping. The others laughed - Cal was the only one among them who'd never smoked in his life.

'You're so unfit, boy.' Sean teased. They slowed the pace a bit, as their muscle-aching ascent continued.

'God, but this is a weird place. Who'd ever want to live here?' This was Breffni, the leader of their totally illegal metal-detecting jaunt to a protected site. He'd heard rumours of coins being found and even a gold ring. He was eager to reach the top.

'Come on now,' he urged his friends, 'I can almost smell treasure.'

'Rotting seaweed, more like,' Tom quipped. More laughter. Breff had some mad ideas at times, but in truth it never took much to get them to go along with him, just for the craic. Despite their enthusiasm, after a couple of hours their excavations around the beehive huts had only unearthed a couple of rusty nails and a bottle cap. Sean suggested they try their luck lower down, but the slope quickly became too steep. He couldn't keep his balance and swing the detector at the same time. It was then they noticed a change in the air. The wind had strengthened and blue-black storm clouds were rolling in. The sea, hundreds of feet below, was now very choppy. Vicious squalls could come out of nowhere and this rock was no place for the unprepared.

'Breff, you did check the weather, didn't you?' Sean asked.

'Yeah.' This was a lie, but he wasn't to know coming events would weigh heavy on his conscience. Before long a cold rain was lashing down, or rather sideways, quickly drenching the four lads. Suddenly Callum slipped, hitting his head hard as he fell. He landed awkwardly with his left leg twisted under him. It was obviously broken.

'Cal - you ok?' Sean shouted, the wind snatching his words away. There was no reply.

'We must get him out of this rain,' yelled Tom. 'We'll have to go back up to those huts.' Callum was in no shape to stand, let alone walk, unaided. Somehow between them they managed to half carry, half drag the semi-conscious boy to shelter in the only beehive hut that still had a complete roof. They crouched inside, by now so cold they could barely think straight. Callum's breathing had become shallow and irregular. He looked deathly pale. Tom gently shook him but got no response.

'That boat's not coming back for us, is it? Not in this.' Sean was sounding scared.

Tom turned to Breffni. 'Give your man a call.' Breffni held up his phone. 'There's no friggin' reception.' Tom and Sean checked theirs - nothing.

The three fell into silence, each with his own fears. As the darkness crowded in, the wind sounded almost musical; rhythmic, like distant, ancient voices chanting. They all heard it, but not one of them said a word.

The ambulance siren faded into the distance. Cal would be ok now, wouldn't he? The paramedics said it was hypothermia and concussion - a bad combination. Not to mention the break to his leg. The three shaken young men stood on the quayside under the watchful eye of the local Garda Sergeant. It had been a farmer's widow who'd seen the faint flickering light way out on the rock. With her phone line down she'd cycled miles through gale force winds and rain, all the way to the lifeboat station to raise the alarm. Commenting that she deserved a medal, the Sergeant then turned his attention to what four city boys thought they were doing on the rock on such a day. He escorted them into the Garda Station, handed each a mug of sweetened tea and got out his notebook.

'And how did you get out there, for a start?' he asked them, sternly.

'The ferryboat,' Breffni answered, with a boldness he no longer felt. The other two just silently nodded.

'Tell the truth now, lads. The ferry didn't leave port today. Engine trouble.'

Tom looked out of the window and pointed. 'Over there - that's the boat that took us.'

The sergeant followed his gaze, then tutted. 'Huh, I know the old rogue who owns that. It's barely seaworthy. You're lucky it didn't sink under you!'

'Your man did us a favour - alright?' Breffni said, embarrassed now by his recklessness. 'Don't go hard on him.'

The sergeant was wondering what to do with the bedraggled group. How hard was he going to be on *them*? After a few moments' reflection, he decided to soften his approach. 'Well, at least you had the sense to signal for help.'

They stared at each other. Only Tom's phone had been equipped with a flashlight, but they'd soon discovered the damn thing didn't work. Sean opened his mouth but could barely make a sound.

'That wasn't us,' he finally managed to whisper.

The sergeant crossed himself and said quietly 'Well, I'd say those old monks were looking out for you then, weren't they?'

BIRTHDAY PRESENT

BY IAN SEARLE

Mary set the mug of tea down within comfortable reach of the wheelchair, taking care that the handle pointed towards him. She sat in her own chair, picked up the remote control, and turn down the volume on the television. "Charles," she said, "it's your birthday next week."

"Don't remind me," he said. It was said with a smile, but Mary was well aware of his true state of mind. Ever since he had caught that terrible virus five years ago now, Charles, she knew, felt helpless and resentful about his disability. He was paralysed from the waist down, unable to do some of the simplest things, for himself, reliant on her and the carers who came in, morning and evening. They did their best to maintain some semblance of dignity for him, they were professional and respectful, but it was Charles himself who had lost his own self-respect. Furthermore, although she had made him stop describing himself as a burden, he could not rid himself of the feeling. She still loved him deeply. They had been married forty-five years, and she knew perfectly well that he loved her. She looked after him as best she could, taking care that he should do as much for himself as was physically possible, but she felt his pain, his frustration, even his rage at being trapped in this useless body.

"I'm planning a surprise," she said. "Don't you dare refuse it."

"What sort of surprise?"

"A trip to town. It's all booked, passenger assist on the train, hotel and the evening entertainment."

"Oh?"

"A concert."

Charles pulled a face. "I wish you'd asked me first."

"You'd only have said it wasn't worth the fuss."

"Exactly. All that bother getting a ramp to get me into and down from the train, then I've got to get into the theatre. There's probably a special disabled section for wheelchairs. We shan't be able to get to the bar for a drink. It's a nice idea, but is it really worth the trouble and the expense?"

"Yes." The answer was emphatic. "You'll enjoy it and it's my treat." There was no arguing with Mary in this mood.

Charles was placed near the front, Mary next to him. They had a perfect view of the entire orchestra. It was many years since they had attended a concert. Charles shifted uncomfortably in his chair as the players took their places and began tuning their instruments. This close, it struck him how many there were. All these people, individuals, equipped with a wide variety of instruments, making sounds as quiet as a triangle's tinkle to the clash of the large cymbals. The conductor had to blend all these different sounds together to make one enormous instrument of them. Charles suddenly realised what a mammoth task that must be. The audience applauded as the Leader took his seat. They applauded again as the conductor appeared in his formal evening dress. Then there was silence. The conductor raised his baton and the individuals in front of him began to play.

It was a sparkling overture by Mozart, high-spirited, and Charles' eyes switched from one group of players to another as the music was thrown from strings to woodwind and back as in a game of tennis. The overture was followed by a piano concerto – Rachmaninov. Now the focus was on the pianist, and the music was dramatic, powerful, romantic. Charles was moved, as was the rest of the audience, by the sweeping melody, the dominant piano, backed by strings which seem to sob. It was only when the applause was beginning to die a little that Charles turned to Mary and smiled. He had been completely absorbed by the sound until then.

It was the Mahler symphony next. The adagio, long, slow phrases, played by strings, transported him to a different world entirely. It was a world of exquisite sadness. It recognised the suffering that underpinned human experience. It tugged at his emotions and he wept unrestrainedly and unashamedly. The tears coursed down his cheeks. Mary, concerned, watched him, but he was oblivious to her. As the movement came to an end, she passed him a tissue to wipe his eyes, and it was only then that he realised he had been weeping.

They said nothing as he negotiated his electric wheelchair out to the pavement and into the taxi. They exchange wan smiles. At the entrance to the hotel, in the foyer and the lift, neither of them spoke. They were not in the mood for a drink, except for a hot cup of tea, which Mary made in their room before she helped her husband to undress and struggle from his wheelchair into the bed. She slipped in beside him.

“Thank you,” he said.

“Was it a good idea after all?”

“The Mahler,” he said, “reminded me of something I should have remembered. Life is full of sadness and suffering, yet it is still possible to weave all these awful experiences into something so beautiful. Perhaps we need to suffer to understand beauty. It made me realise that life itself can be beautiful.”

Mary looked at him with tears in her eyes. She turned towards him and put her arms around him. The kiss they exchanged was more than a perfunctory, good night kiss, it was a full, warm, lovers’ kiss.

RAIN

BY BRENDA BURGESS

A man in his early forties is trudging slowly home, his head bent against the driving rain. He stops frequently to wipe droplets from the end of his nose. He has lost count of the number of times he has walked along this pavement, but today it is the isolation of this seaside town in the torrential rain that appeals to his painterly senses. He looks keenly at the scene, drinking in every detail. He arrives at his front door and sheds his dripping coat as he walks through the narrow hall.

He calls out to his wife, “There’s no way I’m going to stand, soaked to the skin, battling against this wind with a large canvas. I’m going upstairs to paint.”

Although he prefers to work outside, he prepares a large canvas in his studio, giving it a coat of burnt sienna. He wants the warmth of the reddish brown ochre to glow through the predominant grey tones of the finished painting. Using detailed sketches he has made some days before, he blocks in the outlines of the buildings in the distance. With successive layers of thin washes of muted greys and blues he builds up the lowering cloudy sky that presses down on the town. The broad sweep of the pavement dominates the foreground, bare and desolate but its wet surface radiates with reflected light from the sky. The whole picture vibrates with the energy of the driving rain and the huge wave of white spray that breaks over the harbour wall. Using only a few deft strokes he places a woman walking towards him in the front of the picture. She leans protectively over a small child, trying to use her umbrella

as a shield. Another woman walks in the opposite direction, followed by two bedraggled dogs. The only block of warm colour is the red brick façade of the hotel in the distance.

He stands back and looks with narrowed eyes. "What do you think?" he asks his wife.

"It's so very bleak. D'you think one or two more figures?"

"Maybe you're right." A few more skillful touches of dark paint places a couple of people standing by a horse and cart. A policeman with a billowing cape strolls past them towards the town. There are other figures barely discernible in the hazy background. As he looks at his work the insistent rhythm of a song from Twelfth Night comes to him, the words echoing the beat of the rain. "That's the title," he decides.

Satisfied that the painting is complete he decides to enter it into the Royal Academy summer exhibition. He has to get to Truro to take the train to Paddington and it is a long and difficult journey up to London with a five-foot by three-foot canvas. After lengthy bargaining with a reluctant cab driver he arrives at Piccadilly and struggles up the steps with his painting to the doors of the impressive building.

For days he waits anxiously for the panel's verdict. "Too French," they said and rejected it.

"What did they expect from someone who's studied and worked alongside that wonderful group of painters in Paris? With Manet and all those other painters, masters of light and colour. I consider it an honour to be classed as one of them." He grumbles bitterly to his wife on his return.

Deeply depressed by this rejection he worries he is not earning enough from the sale of his paintings to support his new wife. No one wants this latest painting; it is too large and people have neither the money to buy it nor the space to hang it. Reluctantly he takes teaching jobs to supplement his income. Eventually he comes to a momentous decision. "I'm going to offer it to Town Council for the Museum. They've got room to hang it there."

In the Council Chamber a group of men stand staring at the painting.

"Tis some awful miserable painting. It do make me feel some cold just to look at it."

"No, t'won't do at all. Make them upcountry think it do rain all the time down 'ere."

"Tourist trade be bad enough without folks havin' to look at that."

"Aye, you'm be right there, Councilor Downey."

"The title itself s'nough to put them off."

"So, gentlemen, we all agree that this gift to the Museum should not be hung," the Chairman said.

“Aye, the basement it is.”

Note. This is a fictional account of historic events. Norman Garstin was one of the founder members of the Newlyn School. This painting stayed in the basement till after his death thirty-seven years later in 1926. It next saw the light of day when it was shown in a retrospective exhibition of his work.

This outstanding work of art entitled ‘The Rain it Raineth Every Day’ hangs in the Penlee House Gallery and is one of the best-loved paintings in Cornwall.

EVERYTHING’S FINE HERE

BY SUE SWINCHATT

‘Hi, guys. How’s it going up there? Oh, by the way, there’s been a launch from somewhere in south-west England. No more info, sorry.’ This was NASA letting the Mars base know that a craft was coming their way. The control of all space missions had shifted to Stockholm a few years ago and the staff there had a very laid-back attitude.

Tom wasn’t surprised at the news. In fact, he’d half expected refugee ships from Earth to have arrived before now, with all that had been happening. Tom was a senior engineer at First Base, a permanent colony on Mars set up by a multi-national pioneer group of eighty men and women. The challenges they’d faced over the five years since their arrival had forged them into a tightknit, harmonious community. Of course, they could never have done it without the robots - twenty-five humanoids that did the really hard work and had become highly valued members of the group.

Everyone was aware that back home populist politics had yet to run its full course. Still, nobody expected what happened on Donald Trump’s 90th birthday. Still clinging to power like a limpet, out of the blue he’d announced to an astonished America that he was imposing Sharia Law.

‘Listen to me, people. Such a great idea. They won’t hate us anymore. Massive crime reduction – ‘uge! And America *will* be great again.’ When he added triumphantly, ‘Tough luck, you women!’ Melania had tried to shoot him, but had been over-powered and dragged away to a secure unit.

Hearty congratulations and caviar arrived from his old pal Putin, and not just for his birthday.

‘Don,’ wrote Putin ‘Why not use US Army to enforce mass conversion? Rebrand soldiers as Warriors of God.’ You could almost hear him sniggering. Many people later came to believe Trump’s ‘Great Idea’ had been remotely implanted by the KGB.

Unsurprisingly, a stampede of Americans immediately headed south to countries beyond the Rio Grande. All welcomed the *gringos* with open arms, took their dollars and put many of them to work on coca plantations. Millions more went up to Canada, which quickly became overwhelmed and had no idea what to do with them all. The Prime Minister, yet another member of the Trudeau clan, finally managed to get through to the President after being passed around from one White House official to another for a good twenty minutes. As she started to speak, Trump cut across her with a real gem: ‘Too bad, Canada. You shoulda given me Greenland when I wanted it.’ Then click, the line went dead. Completely baffled, the Canadians had decided it was wiser to try and cope alone.

Following this, for three years there were no rains across North America, causing widespread crop failures and more panic. Huge dust storms – even worse than those they experienced on Mars, became a regular occurrence. On one exceptionally windy night, millions of tons of soil were carried northwards across the prairie states before being dumped all over the Canadian Arctic tundra. It choked the fragile ecosystem; all the caribou died, as did many of the traumatised Americans who’d settled there.

‘We did try to warn you,’ wailed the few remaining climate-change experts. They were immediately arrested, taken to Guantanamo Bay and allowed to disappear.

‘I guess we are just not Muslim enough,’ Trump whimpered to his aides as they huddled in his underground, well-stocked bunker. In Iran, Ayatollahs with smug smiles on their faces, nodded in agreement.

The British spaceship’s arrival on Mars actually went un-noticed at NASA – it was a public holiday in Sweden so no-one was working. The base members gathered to welcome the crew.

Brushing aside the usual niceties, the Captain immediately asked for directions to the Place of Worship and looked aghast when told there wasn't one. Thinking the rest of the crew might be more approachable, Tom said 'We welcome you all. Feel free to go wherever you like. And you must meet our wonderful robots, too. We couldn't imagine life here without them. They are great companions to have in a new world.'

The crew joined the residents for a celebratory dinner that evening. During the meal it became obvious the newcomers were discomfited having robots seated in their midst. To the residents this was completely normal. Although robots had no need of food, they were always included in any social gathering. Indeed, some single residents shared their homes with them. Hearing this, one of the guests suddenly got to his feet and declared, 'They are an abomination in the eyes of the Lord!'

The Chief Pilgrim, as the Captain liked to be known, told them he would be sending a report back to Earth exposing First Base as a den of heathen vice and un-natural practises. He walked out, followed by the rest of his crew. Tom went after them, but soon realised these pilgrims were not to be swayed from a mindset that found wrong-doing everywhere. The other residents were still sitting in shocked silence when he returned. Some-one eventually voiced what they were all thinking: 'What if these people have enough influence back home to stop NASA sending us any more supplies?' The base was still some way from being completely self-sufficient.

Sometime during the night, the valve supplying air to the visitors' accommodation pod got turned to the *Extract* position. Early next morning a team of volunteers gently strapped the lifeless pilgrims into their seats aboard the craft, while Tom fired up its propulsion system. They watched as the ship headed into the vastness of space in the opposite direction to Earth, bound for the furthest reaches of the Solar System. As it launched, everyone noticed the name on the fuselage – Mayflower II.

A DUSTY EDUCATION

BY ELEANOR HOLLAND

“Goodness Gracious Me” said the old Babu to himself, as he settled himself under the Banyan Tree, trying to shade himself from the relentless blaze of the sun. He was waiting for his motley group of pupils, who came from the village, to squat on the dusty earth round the old man and listen to his words of wisdom, as their fathers had before them.

The Babu, in his youth, had learnt wisdom from the Maharishi, a wise sage, who practised Transcendental Meditation and who had had a profound influence on the young Indian lad. The children who came to listen to him, were fascinated by what he had to tell them, managing to escape from their household chores, to squat and listen whenever they could. There were no books, paper or pencils, so they picked up a twig and scratched their letters and sums in the dry earth. Each child handed him one anna for their tuition.

As he sat waiting, the Babu was reminding himself of a saying left behind by the Sahibs and Memsahibs in the days before India was so tragically divided up and the British returned to Blighty, leaving the Country to govern itself. He had been but a six or seven year old child on that fateful day of Independence, but he remembered clearly, as though it was yesterday, how men, women and children were butchered in their homes and in the streets of the Bazaar. It was madness! Hindus and Moslems, who had lived for centuries in some sort of harmony, were mutilating one another.

The Village, where he grew up, with his parents, brothers and sisters, was in the foothills of the Himalayas, near the border of newly created West Pakistan. They were a Hindhu family, but the beleaguered Moslems, living in the same area, had been desperately trying to reach the border and safety. They were ill prepared for their ‘flight for life’ and had no idea where to go, or what awaited them in a strange new country.

The Babu remembered his parents talking about the Mahatma Gandhi and his plans to oust the Brits - Gandhi had always spoken of peaceful methods and had already defied a regime, which put an unreasonable tax on salt, by walking to a beach, with his usual following, squatting down, collecting sea water, drying it in the sun and obtaining salt, which was free of any man-made tax. Even wise Gandhi had been unable to halt, or have any influence on the mad rush towards Independence, resulting in inevitable chaos.

He grew up, managing to educate himself by watching and listening. As a youngster, he worked for an uncle who owned a few ponies and couple of tongas (a light two wheeled cart). He started by looking after the ponies, grooming and feeding them, gradually, as he got older, he was allowed to drive a Tonga, himself, picking up passengers and listening to some enlightening conversations, over the jingle jangle of the bells on the pony's harness. As he got older, stiffer and less able to climb onto the rickety step and up onto the tonga seat, he earned a meagre living from teaching the children from his village.

'**Goodness Gracious Me**', he said with feeling as the children arrived and another day began.

THE PAINTING

BY VERONICA WHALE

For most of my life, I have lived in a huge Georgian stately home in the North of England, belonging to the Wycroft family for generations. I first came as an under-house-maid, with a room I shared with another girl, at the top of the house but, as the years went by, I rose to become the house-keeper for Sir Geoffrey Wycroft, and had a flat in the house to myself. I felt that after his wife died, Sir Geoffrey came to rely on me a great deal.

But, the war years took a heavy toll on the family fortunes. At first, the staff were greatly reduced, then Sir Geoffrey decided to open the house to the public, which meant extra work for all of us of course. He was such a kind, gentle employer, that we all fell in with his plans and I often found myself with the job of showing people round the house, pointing out the lovely Hepplewhite and Sheriton furniture, the beautiful carpets and valuable paintings. Our pride and joy was the dining room, with its lovely mahogany Georgian table and chairs, the Wedgwood tableware and Waterford glasses. In fact, the family still used the dining room and it was always a rush to clear the plates and put the rope across before the people came in the afternoons.

One day, Sir Geoffrey said to me that things were not going as well as he'd hoped and that he'd have to sell one of the paintings. I said how sorry I was and which one did he have in mind? "I thought the little Monet painting," he said. "Oh! But that's a beautiful one Sir," I said. "It's my favourite, such a pretty scene of the riverbank."

The day came when the painting came up for auction at Sotheby's and it caused a great stir there. Bids were flying between the overseas bidders on the 'net', as well as in the hall. When the figure came to over a million, there was a gasp and Sir Geoffrey was overjoyed. "That will take care of the house and all its needy repairs" he said. As time went by, doubts began to emerge as to its authenticity. A television programme produced experts who cast questions as to its artist and suspected that it was a fake. The more the experts probed, the more the painter was deemed not to be Monet himself, but perhaps one of his pupils.

When Sir Geoffrey had returned from London, I had congratulated him on the success of his sale. "Yes, it's a great relief, I was really worried about the state of the house, it needs so much done to it. Not bad for a painting that's really a fake." "But Sir," I said, "You never had any doubts about it being a Monet, surely?" He gave me a conspiratorial look and put his finger to his nose. "This is between you and me, Mrs White," he said, "There has always been a legend that my great grandfather knew the painter who sold it to him for forty guineas and it was not Monet." He grinned at me.

SILK FOR CHRISTMAS

BY JOCK TURNHAM

"Dad, what time will mum be back?" called Bethany, aged twelve, from the lounge where she sat adjusting the piles of presents under the Christmas tree.

"Soon, love" replied her father, Robert. "Christmas morning is always really busy at the shelter. There are a lot of people to feed."

Bethany's mother, Dawn, was a volunteer for a charity which gave food and a bed to the homeless.

Robert was in the kitchen preparing the Christmas dinner when the front door opened.

"Hi, I'm home" cried Dawn, "and I have a visitor."

Bethany raced into the hall to greet her mother, but her face fell when she saw a tall girl dressed in an old overcoat standing in the doorway. Long greasy hair half covered her face which Bethany could see was tattooed.

"This is Silk" smiled Dawn. "She is going to have dinner with us and stay the night.

Robert, wiping his hands on a tea towel grinned and said "I hope you like turkey."

Silk was shown to the spare room, given some old clothes of Dawn's, and led to the bathroom.

When Silk reappeared she was like a new girl. Over dinner, however, she said very little but ate plenty.

Bethany was helping her father clear away.

"Why does she have to be here and spoil everything? It's not fair! Make her go away."

"It's only for one day, darling" smiled her father.

Sitting around the Christmas tree, the family opened their presents. There was even one for Silk, a scarf that Dawn had never worn had been wrapped especially. Bethany had a silver bracelet.....a gift from her grandmother.

"It's lovely" sighed Silk, "really lovely."

Bethany shared her sweets with Silk and the girls smiled at each other.

"Do you have a granny, Silk?" asked Bethany.

Silk seemed to withdraw into herself, letting her hair fall over her face.

"Hush, Bethany." said Dawn. "Silk's had a very sad life."

During the evening they all played a boardgame, called Dixit. Everyone laughed as the game unfolded, even Silk.

It was a happy time.

Soon it was time for Bethany to go to bed.

"Can Silk come and sit with me for a bit? Please."

"Well, if Silk doesn't mind." smiled Dawn.

Silk sat on Bethany's bed and together they looked at her presents again. The bracelet sparkled in the light.

"It's really lovely" murmured Silk.

The following morning Bethany burst into her parent's room, tears flowing down her cheeks.

"My bracelet, the one from Granny. It's gone!" she wailed.

Her parent's hurried into dressing gowns.

"Don't worry darling...its probably in your drawer."

At that moment the parent's noticed the spare room door was open. It was plain to see that the bed had not been slept in, and that Silk's things were gone.

"That bloody thief! We give her food and warmth and this is how she repays us. By stealing a child's precious bracelet!"

Turning on his wife he shouted, "This is all your fault. All your do-gooding. I knew it would all go wrong the moment I saw her tattooed face. Bethany didn't want her here. She said it spoiled things! Well I'm going to find the bitch, and then we'll see. Oh yes!"

With that, he ran down the steps towards the front door.

"I'm sorry darling" said Dawn softly, "I didn't mean to spoil your Christmas. It's just that..."

"What the hell!" Robert shouted from below.

Robert had opened the front door and there, curled up in the porch, amongst her possessions, lay Silk.

Bethany and her mother hurried downstairs.

"I can't sleep indoors anymore" Silk was saying "it's so claustrophobic. So I slept out here. It was fine."

Robert glared at her, raising his fist.

"Where's my daughter's bracelet, you bloody thief. You're all the same...you vagrants. Living off the state and stealing!"

"Just give it to us, please Silk, then we'll say no more." said Dawn softly.

"But...but...Bethany. You remember. You put it under your pillow for safe keeping. I wouldn't steal it. I love Bethany.....and you, you are like my family. My only family. I couldn't....." spluttered Silk, tears filling her eyes.

Bethany ran upstairs, and yes, the bracelet was under her pillow.

Delight and shame played on the faces of her parents when they saw the bracelet.

Turning, Robert said "Oh Silk, I'm so sorry.....so very...."

But Silk had gone.

Only the scarf....her Christmas present...lay neatly folded on the doorstep.

WAVING NOT DROWNING

BY PAT JOWSEY

Old age and drowning are similar. All your life is supposed to pass before your eyes whilst drowning and I find that now in all the hours.....days I spend in this room, the details I had forgotten in the rush and turmoil of living my life come to mind. I visualise memories in a filing cabinet, on small neatly written cards, from the earliest one you recall, to the latest upset or happy event that has happened. The day of your wedding, first sight of your baby, the death of your mother.

Yesterday birds came to the fountain in the garden. All of them bathing and drinking in the sunshine. A joyful scene that bought me delight. I managed to get a room with an outlook. An opening onto the world, I could not afford a sea view. It is only a small room, but big enough for me, the furnishings have seen better days but then so have I, at least I have my own toilet and washbasin. My window overlooks the garden; however, life in the home passes-through the garden. I see the staff standing, chatting and smoking by the backdoor of the kitchen. Everyone with his or her own joys and difficulties. I get to know them all from a distance, the agreeable and the unpleasant ones.

The Matron sometimes sits in the garden with the relatives when one of the residents has died. She is more worried about the drop in income I think. I have no illusions about the nursing home I have been placed in. The idea of being nice to your children as they choose the home you will be put into hasn't worked in my case. I sit by the window in my single room from morning, until I am helped into bed at the time the staff decides.

At first, I was assisted downstairs for lunch and supper, but after a week of sharing hours with sleeping old people in front of a television, I chose to stay up my room. I would rather live with my memories. I no longer know who I am; my mind and body don't match, with a brain feeling forty years younger than my old age. The person in the mirror is my mother. Where have all the years gone?

Friends have been enjoyed and then passed on, taking memories with them. Time has disappeared. How can we remember clearly a Christmas forty years ago? When the last twenty years have merged into nothing.

All the life we have taken for granted, the simple joys that youth allows us. Running for a bus, dancing the night away then going to work the next morning. Wasting years with the wrong partner thinking things will improve if you wait long enough. Small differences that seemed so important at the time, quarrels over trivial problems. Time is so valuable and beyond price as the years go by. All these thoughts fill an idle mind when staring out into the world that has contracted tremendously.

A movement distracts me, the woman from the kitchen comes out of the back door, she is on her own. I watch as she cuts mint from the herb bed; it is an old trick she uses to make cheap meat taste like lamb, flavour the gravy. As she turns to go inside, she notices me watching her, no sign of recognition.

The girl who cleans my room told me the cook gambles, I see her on her phone pressing the buttons. Concentrating on chance, hoping her luck will change, oblivious of time.

Losing money is a lot easier than it was in my day. Gamblers destroyed families in the small village we lived in. My man only had one vice and that was drink. I recollect how he spent more of his wages on beer than his family, not many happy memories of that time.

I reflect of how we are known throughout our lifetimes. Child, girl, sweetheart, Mum, Gran. Now I am dearie or lovey, to people whom I have never met before.

The carers here talk about other residents in the home whilst they are in my room. Mr H, has a bad attitude, Mrs D. is awkward. Miss C is a bitch. I envy those who have the nerve to stand up for themselves. I just keep quiet, maybe I am invisible.

Well today, things have changed; I have to stay in bed, so asked for it to be moved over to the window. I now have a different view; leaves are off the trees and I can see the main road. Buses pass by and visitors come and go through the main gate. The Doctor has been very honest with me; I am told they have to be now. I know that I am dying but did the man have to take away any hope I clung too. Nurses come every day now, lovely girls. I am looked after now more than at any time in my life. Even the carers are respectful, they whisper when they clean the room. I want to shout out. I AM STILL HERE.

Looking out at the blue sky and a glimpse of sunshine fills me with joy. This is my idea of paradise. A garden in heaven, walking through a field of wild flowers, feeling the warm sun on my face, my body active and fit again.

A priest arrives; I was labelled a Catholic when I came here. He wants me to confess my sins. God, I should be so lucky! I want to make up some outrageous hair-raising sins to shock the man into silence, but find I have no strength left. I close my eyes and fall asleep, drifting away on soft white clouds.

TED'S TANTALISING TIFFIN

BY BOBBI MACKRILL

Ted and his wife Angel saw Angel's sister Sky waving enthusiastically to them as they were clearing customs at the airport. It had been an uneventful flight but they were grateful to be in Ireland the start of their holidays. Their sons Toby and Rowen had flown out a couple of weeks previously. They so loved their summer hols staying on the farm with Auntie Sky and Uncle Mack with their cousins Jonty and George. The boys ranged from 10 years to 12 years and all got on well together.

Sky persuaded the old Land Rover to start on the third attempt. Ted and Angel clung on anxiously onto the hard seats enjoying watching the colourful cottages hugging the sides of the roads. Sky chatted about what adventures the boys were having. Angel fell asleep, she and Ted enjoyed their careers as civil servants but it was good to get away from London, it would be so good to catch up with the boys. Through County Cork, then off the main roads, the cottages now painted white and dotted randomly around the small fields nearby there then Sky and Mack had happily settled for farming in Ireland, a small village called Kileigh where Sky and Angel's granny had once farmed, such a tranquil friendly place.

The boys all four of them ran out to greet the land rover and its occupants, Mack strolling out after them. There was so much chatter no one actually hearing what anyone else had to say! The old sheep dog Nell struggled over to say hello, her job as a sheep dog now redundant. No sheep to herd anymore. However, Nell loved life with the boys, although her arthritis

made it a bit difficult to keep up with them at times. The boys usually made sure to wait for her and include her in their adventures.

Toby and Rowen were anxious to tell Mum and Dad about the rescue donkeys that had come to live at the farm. 'They are called Dusty, Jessica, and Zebedee they are quite unpredictable and can't live with the horses. The donkeys bite the horse bums' all this came out in a rush after a sort pause for breath,' Toby continued. 'The donkeys live in the small paddock near the farmhouse on the far side of the lake, they like carrots, but we aren't able to ride them, we did try riding Dusty he just wouldn't move not even for a carrot.'

Sky explained that the donkeys previous owner, a reclusive very elderly lady had died and George had persuaded his parents to give the donkeys a home. Sky was sure the donkeys would settle down in due course. Meanwhile the boys had been enjoying riding the horses which were of course were far better behaved.

It was such a warm wonderful summer 'Please Mum and Dad' urged Rowen the youngest of the quartet 'please can we camp tonight Sky says we can and Mack says there's enough tents, so we could all camp, please , please '

Mack interjected 'I won't be camping out boys, I need a good night's sleep, cows to milk in the morning but if you and Ted agree Angel, we'll get the tents out of the barn, there are some sleeping bags in the airing cupboard'.

Ted and Angel had been looking forward to the comfort of sleeping in the farmhouse in between cool linen sheets, on a mattress filled with sheep's wool, but how could they refuse the boys enthusiasm. Yes, of course they would camp. There followed much activity retrieving the tents, sleeping bags, torches and all the usual paraphernalia ,that the boys needed for their camping adventure. No, their parents wouldn't agree to then pitching the tents on the island in the middle of the lake, recovering from the disappointment, the boys proceeded to pitch their tents on the grass that surrounded the lake. A larger one for the boys and a smaller one for Sky. Strict instructions were issued about torches out by 10pm and no rowing on the lake in the dark, it would be dangerous. After much protestations as to the restrictions put upon them, the boys prepared to make the most of what they were allowed to do. They 'borrowed' pans, plates, cutlery and food from the farmhouse kitchen, and cooked a meal of beans, bacon and eggs on the small contained fire far away from the tents. The adults had to

admit that it was a tasty meal and they didn't have to worry about the curfew, for the boys as they were fast asleep in their tents by 9pm. The runner ducks that lived on the Island seemed relieved and retreated to their house situated on the south side, where they enjoyed a good night's rest.

Ted somewhat older than Angel felt the need to adhere to his usual routine, he showered in the farmhouse and donned his pinstriped pyjamas and struggled into the tent and then into his sleeping bag.

He and Angel were awoken the next morning by the sound of runner ducks quacking and exuberant boys variously stranding each other on the island. [I should mention here there had once been a wooded bridge across to the island but Jonty and George had long since removed 'with parental permission of course' the boys felt that to have a boat to the island was much more fun.]

It was a glorious day so Sky promised a picnic on the Island. The boys helped ferry the food and a table over in the small boat. Sky laid out the picnic table with cold meats and salad. Just then a yell from Ted had them laughing. Dusty the donkey, had escape from his field and had run away with Ted's Striped Pyjamas. Ted in pursuit, when the boys managed to retrieve them there was a large hole in the trousers. This was remembered as the highlight of that wonderful holiday. An adventure in paradise.

LITTLE MISS MOFFAT'S BIG DILEMMA

BY GEOFF BURGESS

Millicent Moffat had a secret plan. Secret because its boldness so terrified her that she could not bring herself to share it even with Tabitha, her sole and devoted companion. The problem was that she had so little experience with men that the prospect of any form of intimate communication with them filled her with horror.

As an only child brought up in a vicarage and educated by a governess her contact with boys had been minimal. In character she resembled her shy, reclusive father, and the few young men she was introduced to found her diminutive stature and gaucheness off-putting. With one notable exception. Guy too was a diffident young man but their shared enthusiasm for botany and ornithology broke down their natural reserve. She missed him so much when he joined the navy during the War. At first he wrote regularly but the life together that she had so fondly envisaged was not to be. After the telegram she reconciled herself to a life of spinsterhood.

In her retirement she bought a cottage in a peaceful Oxfordshire village and was content to devote herself to her well tended garden and her books. Until, that is, she embarked on a creative writing correspondence course. She showed a talent for writing sentimental romantic stories of a sort that her tutor dismissed as suitable only for Mills and Boon readers. This was particularly frustrating when he told her that she had the ability to develop into a serious author, if only her depictions of romantic relationships were not uniformly platonic and unrealistic. She did not see how it could be otherwise as she plainly lacked the relevant experience.

It was advice on a favourite radio programme that gave her the idea for her plan. She shuddered as she surveyed her garden and contemplated the dreadful mess that confronted her. First she had to find a suitable man, then she had to be bold enough to ask him. Other women seemed to have little difficulty persuading men to carry out their wishes, but the art of flirting had never been in her armoury. Unhappily, she could think of no other way to restore her peace of mind. Her plan was her only option.

That evening, bolstered by a generous glass of sherry, she washed and brushed her hair, applied a little make-up and slipped into an old black dress that flattered her trim figure. She found that she could still walk in her only shoes with higher heels. Glancing in a mirror she was pleasantly surprised by the transformation. With her self-confidence enhanced, off she trotted to the Pig and Duck down the road.

As she approached the pub her nerve began to fail her. At that moment a group of young revellers were emerging from a vehicle and hurrying towards the entrance. She was able to slip in behind them. At the bar she ordered a glass of milk stout, a drink that had fortified her during the War. The pub was crowded and noisy. She found a small table in a dark corner and observed the scene.

Then she spotted them. A group of local farmhands seated at the far end of the bar, near the Gents. As the evening wore on she lost count of the number of pints they were consuming and noticed that their trips outside were becoming more frequent.

It was time to make her move. She stood up and made her way, a little unsteadily, towards the farmhands. As she approached them she smiled at their looks of interest. She had singled out Caleb who had done some odd jobs in her garden. When she reached him she leaned forward to whisper her carefully prepared message in his ear. "Ooh... arrr..." was the repeated response of the wide-eyed Caleb as he nodded his assent. "Good. See you tomorrow then," she said, and left the pub.

The following day she stocked up with several bottles of ale and stout. At the allotted time she poured herself a glass of stout and waited. After half an hour she was becoming edgy. Had he got cold feet? Had he misunderstood her? She told him it would be worth his while. Perhaps she should have mentioned how much she would pay him.

Just as she was reconciling herself to failure she heard footsteps. A man was approaching the cottage. Her heart beat faster. She fumbled with the latch. But the man standing in the open doorway was not Caleb. It was Garth. He was younger, so might be more suitable, yet she felt uneasy about his reputation with women.

He greeted her cheerfully. "G'evenin' ma'am. Caleb sends 'is apologies as 'e can't come, so to speak, and asked me to do y'r bidden instead... if that be a'right with ee." "Yes...er... fine," she stammered. "Would you sit down." She pointed to the stool next to her and the bottles of beer on the kitchen table. "Please help yourself."

Then everything went out of control. To her horror Garth suddenly lunged at her and started to run his hands over her body. It felt as if she was being mauled by a giant spider. "Stop!" she screamed, and managing to wriggle free grabbed a saucepan and brought it down on his head. "OK, OK," he spluttered, rushing out of the house muttering, "Bloody women, they never know what they want..."

Taking long deep breaths she clutched Tabitha tightly to her bosom. "Oh dear... men!" she sobbed, "they only have one thought in their little minds."

She stroked her soft, warm cat. It was that Bob Flowerdew on Gardeners' Question Time. "The only humane and effective way to stop Badgers ruining your lawn and spoiling your lovely garden is to get a man to urinate along the boundary." It sounded so simple...

In time, the badgers went away and Caleb helped to clear up the mess. They became warm friends.

GRANNY OLIVE

BY JENNY REID

My best friends at school are Rose and Marigold. They are so lucky to have such delightful names. Daisy, in year 5, is called after a weed, but at least it's a dainty weed, and useful for making daisy chains. I wish I had a flower name; it would be so much prettier than mine, which is Olive. The boys call me Olive Oil and I have to try really hard not to cry. Mummy tells me to stick up for myself, and I do... sometimes. I put my hands on my hips and shout back, '*Sticks and stones may break my bones,*' but they just laugh and tease me even more.

I'm called after my great-grandmother who is very wrinkly and almost smaller than me! She lives in Sunny Days Lodge, with lots of other old grannies and grandads. Carers in blue uniforms look after everyone; they're always rushing to answer a loud bell which goes off ALL the time. It sounds like our 'going home' bell at school but at Sunny Days Lodge no-one ever goes home. It just means somebody needs help because they've fallen or even been sick, like me when I've been to a party and eaten too much cake. I've seen the grannies and grandads

eat cake, but they don't play games and run round afterwards. They sit in chairs and fall asleep and snore!

Granny Olive has a cosy room and nearly always sits in her chair by the window, looking to see if mummy and me are coming, which isn't very often because we live a long way away. She likes to tell me stories about the olden days when great-grandpa Bertie was alive. They used to save up all year to go to Blackpool for a holiday and stay for a week in a boarding house. I don't know what a boarding house is...

I wish I'd been born then. I would love to have gone to the Tower Circus to see real lions, and tigers performing tricks. Mummy says they aren't allowed wild animals any more because it was cruel to keep them in a cage and anyway they might have got cross and bitten off the lion-tamer's head!

Blackpool sounds an amazing place. Old trams take people along the promenade to see the illuminations and children ride donkeys on the sands. Daddy insists we go to boring old France every year, where GrannyO says they make donkeys into sausages! I would love to have gone with her to The Pleasure Beach to see 'The Bearded Lady,' then had a fish and chips supper, before going back to our... boarding house.

Today is Tuesday and we're off to Sunny Days Lodge. We don't usually go unless it's a weekend, but I overheard mummy on the phone last night, talking to one of the carers. Granny O isn't very well. I do hope she's better by the time we get there. She fell asleep last time before she finished telling me about The Ghost Train. I rush upstairs to granny O's room while mummy's talking to matron. I want to tell her

how happy I am, because Josh Williams, the worst name caller ever, tripped over his laces playing football and has a broken leg. She isn't sitting in her chair. I dash to the lounge where I hear the bingo caller shout 'all the fours, forty-four.' Someone yells 'house!'.... but it's not granny. I ask a carer if she's seen her. She holds my hand and says, 'come with me poppet.' Then I see mummy, coming out of the 'quiet room.' I can tell she's been crying.

I really loved my great-grandmother and wish we could of had more time together. I wanted to hear more of her funny stories, or even the same ones again. I'll miss her loads and somehow, I don't mind being called Olive any more.

MY FATHER WHO ART IN HEAVEN

BY JENNY REID

*HIGGINSON Charles Augustus - died peacefully aged 82 years on 1st November 1934.
Loving husband of the late Celia and father to Daphne*

I crumpled the newspaper announcement and tossed it into the wastepaper basket. I was mentally and physically exhausted having spent the two weeks since father's death, going from room to room in my parents' neglected Edwardian residence, sorting through all that remained of their life together. The once treasured collections of delFTWARE, antiques and books, were now assembled into groups, each one being allocated a corner of the drawing room. The 'charity', 'auction' and 'throw away,' piles were overflowing. The fourth, 'keep' was sadly bereft.

I didn't want keepsakes of a unhappy childhood - sorrowful reminders that I never succeeded in fulfilling father's expectations. I was a girl, he longed for a son. He was stuck with me....an only child...a daughter.

Our relationship was, at best strained, but dear mummy, always the conciliator, became quite adept at smoothing things over. When she died, father and I were equally inconsolable and I'd thought... hoped, that our united grief might make us closer. After her funeral I hugged him; it wasn't reciprocated. His arms stayed rigidly by his side and I withdrew, feeling hurt and embarrassed at my failed attempts at filial affection.

I left home shortly afterwards with a guilty sense of relief and can still picture him standing on the doorstep as I left. I gave him a quick kiss on the cheek. 'Goodbye Daphne,' was all he said. That was the last time I saw him.

Such painful memories. I needed fresh air, so set off walking along the familiar country lanes, eventually arriving at the old stone bridge. My favourite place, where as a child, I used to throw twigs into the deep swirling water below and wonder what it would feel like to be uncontrollably swept along by the strong current.

The light was fading and with my last task still outstanding, I reluctantly returned to the house. I found the key to father's study still in its original 'hiding place.' The dust and grit became embedded under my nails as I stretched up and ran my fingers along the top of the

door frame, pushing the key over the edge. It fell and landed at my feet, as if an invitation to enter.

Feeling like an intruder, I quickly worked my way through the old mahogany desk, ruthlessly discarding the contents. The overly full bottom drawer was difficult to open, jammed with old cheque books, invoices and bank statements. Lying underneath the mountain of paperwork was a file marked, 'Daphne.'

I hesitated, anxiously wondering if it should be thrown away unopened, until curiosity eventually overcame my sense of foreboding. I found it contained dozens of photographs, all neatly catalogued in father's flourishing hand. 'Daphne's first few steps', 'first day at school', 'birthday party aged seven,' and so they continued. The last one was of my graduation; on the back he'd written, 'Immensely proud of my darling daughter. If only we could start again.'

I ran from the house, tears obscuring my view, but it didn't matter, I could always find the way to the bridge even on a dark night like this. I became that child again, agonising why my daddy didn't like me and how I could make him do so. Now I discovered that he had indeed loved me, but instead of consolation, I felt unimaginable despair. The reality had come too late.

HIGGINSON, Daphne - Passed away 14th November 1934. Devoted daughter of the late Celia and Charles. Tragically drowned...

A SHAGGY DOG STORY: DEDICATED TO ALL GARDENERS EVERYWHERE BY JUDY PRICE

There once was a young gardener who tended his land with love and dedication. No weeds were to be found in his borders, no brambles infested the hedges, no clover invaded the lawns. The colourful and scented flowers all bloomed on time and fruit and vegetables grew in abundance. Pests and diseases were eliminated with the aid of the latest potions that alchemists could provide. Everything was under his complete control save for two pests - cats and dogs. Against them nothing worked. Not sprays, not bells, not dusts, not obnoxious planting. Even incantations from the local druid proved utterly useless.

Then one day whilst on a plant gathering tour of Lower Saxony, he happened upon a market stall selling old gardening implements. Tucked away under a pile of rusty trowels and forks, he found a long and narrow wooden box, covered in grime and dust. At either end of the box a circular hole had been cut through the top. There were also some pegs and metal fittings from which dangled a rats-nest of strings. Intrigued, he asked what it was, but the stall owner said he had no idea, adding only that he was selling it for a friend who had fallen on hard times. His curiosity peaked, the gardener haggled for a while and in the end paid more than he'd intended but reasoned that at least he would be helping someone in difficulty.

On his return home he took the box to an old friend (who happened to be an antiquarian and restorer of some note) to see if he could identify its function and refurbish it if possible. After about a month the gardener received a parcel from his friend. It was wrapped in several layers of thick, creamy-soft felt and bound with calfskin bands. On removing the bands and carefully peeling back the felt he gave a gasp of delight. There stood the mystery box, its true beauty now revealed. It was made up of many fine strips of wood running lengthways, in alternating colours of carmine, pale lemon, and black, and was highly polished. The ebony pegs had been replaced into the intricate brass escutcheons and the oiled strings were back in their rightful place, running from one end to the other. A note from the antiquarian was tucked in the folds of felt. It read:-

'What you have here my friend is an Aeolian Harp, and a very old one at that. The sound box has been covered with Dogwood Bark and the strings are of the finest Catgut I have ever seen. Of the tuning I can make neither head nor tale but have done my best. It must have taken a very great craftsman to cut such fine veneers and cast such intricate fittings. Its origin

I have yet to learn, but I am investigating some very faded old papers and and a label I found inside. I will call on you when I have any further news. Meanwhile, on any fine day when there is a breeze blowing, place the harp on your window sill and you should be rewarded.'

The gardener, heeding the instructions he'd been given duly placed the harp on his window sill and waited to be rewarded. Nothing happened. He tried again on a windier day - nothing happened. He tried a different windowsill but still nothing happened. And so it continued until one day about three weeks later his friend came knocking on his door. When settled with a glass of vintage Blackberry Wine the antiquarian began to explain that although the old papers had begun to disintegrate and were of no use the label had proved more interesting. Here the gardener interrupted his friend saying that although not a peep had he heard from the harp he was not that bothered because something else had happened to make his heart sing. For the last three weeks not one dog or cat had entered his garden!

"What none!" exclaimed the old friend.

"Not one. Not even that mangy Ginger Tom from next door or the psychotic Rottweiler from number 12."

"Ah, well, you may be interested to know that, as I was trying to tell you earlier, I have managed to translate the label that was inside your harp and it may explain this phenomenon." The friend then put down his glass of wine, took a sheet of paper from his pocket and handed it to the gardener. "Here is a copy of what it said."

This Harp was made by and is the property of
Herr P. Piper.
Pest controller and children's entertainer extraordinaire,
late of the town of Hamelin, Lower Saxony.

PLUA ÇA CHANGE

BY MIKE ROBSON

Zinedine the Zog's accounts of his visits to Planet Earth were always eagerly awaited on his return to Zogland. The saga had started about 1500 Zog years ago, about 500 Earth years, when Zinedine, as a young man, had set off on an inter-galactic jaunt that had no particular purpose other than having a good time. As it transpired he had such a good time he decided to make a career of it.

He had come across Earth by accident. It was not on the list of the million most developed planets in the Universe and no one, certainly on Zog, had ever heard of it until Zinedine returned with his amazing stories. He had spent a few years on Tam Ceti 4, which was the 619th most developed planet, but had got rather bored with how primitive it was compared to home, which was 97th on the definitive list, so he had decided to move on to Gliese 1, which was 8th; a seriously developed place where thought transfer protocols were the norm, thus rendering speech unnecessary. Zinedine had learned the rudiments of one of the various thought transfer systems that were available but had no idea how far this would get him on a place like Gliese 1. It was part of the challenge, and the fun, of roaming the Universe.

Unfortunately, or maybe fortunately, he had inadvertently tapped the wrong key into his space ship's IPSNS (Inter-Planetary Satellite Navigation System) and had soon found himself orbiting a blue/green planet which he assumed was his intended destination. It wasn't.

He had been travelling for long enough to know the importance of blending in when visiting a new environment. Zoglanders, for example, have three eyes facing forward and one facing back, a throwback to the time when Zogland was a primitive and dangerous place. Being different was enough to cause serious difficulties in some places he had visited, places where eight, five or even two eyes were the norm, and also four, eight or, bizarrely, two legs. To counter any possible difficulty of this nature he had developed the 3T (Temporary Transformational Template) whereby he could become a virtual inhabitant of wherever he was next to visit, indistinguishable from those around him. All he had to do was to step into his VRG (Virtual Reality Generator) and in the blink of an eye the transformation would be complete and he would emerge changed, full of vitality, and ready for whatever the challenge ahead.

He was now in orbit round that blue/green planet known as Earth for the twentieth time, and he reflected on his previous visits.

The first time he had been there he had been amazed at how primitive the people had been. They were in the middle of what they called *The English Civil War*, which involved them fighting and killing

each other depending on their viewpoint as to who should govern them, a king or a parliament. It was seriously weird. War on Zog was but a distant historical memory many thousands of years old, so Zinedine was fascinated and appalled in equal measure, and so were his fellow Zoglanders when they heard his accounts of these strange people in this strange place.

In subsequent visits Zinedine noted many changes and developments, but there was always one common feature. They, Earth people, were always at war, killing each other, and usually over what they called Religion. When he interacted with the inhabitants most of them seemed to be genial enough, yet at the drop of a hat they would be at it again.

He hadn't been back for about 100 Earth years. On his last visit they had been in the middle of what they called *The Great War*, where millions were killed. It was very bemusing. He saw all common sense, rationality and logic vanishing into thin air. He heard endless rationalisations.

He turned on the invisibility cloak as his space ship began its final approach and he wondered what awaited him on this visit; whether these strange, primitive people would have learned anything.

As he landed, his Earth time calculator told him that the time was 08.00 and the date was September 11th 2001.

THE LIFE AND DEATH OF A QUEEN

BY ANN MUNDLER

One does so hate being jiggled and joggled about on a journey. Thank goodness I have my own first class accommodation. What else would Queen Apisidra expect? Some might think it a cage, but I know differently. In my bee world it is a luxury coach. One's thousands of offspring, oh yes, I mean thousands, travel cheek by jowl, crammed into the wooden box. The poor darlings feel suffocated. Truth to tell, some do die of asphyxiation, a terrible waste. We are destined for a new home known as a beehive.

On arrival my cage is pulled from the bottom of the box by a large, calloused, hairy hand. Quite understandably Queen Apisidra is admired and revered for her beautiful body and magnificent markings. The cage is hung up so that One is in the bee recovery position, while One's progeny are transferred, unceremoniously, to their new quarters; simply tipped in like a packet of black-eyed beans, all fifty thousand of them. This shock jettisoning sadly kills off more of my beloved family.

The new hive seems good enough, not luxurious but adequate. One hopes Mr Hairy Hands knows what he has taken on and read a good manual on bee keeping. We are all very precious, but Queen Apisidra is worth more than all her drones and workers put together. The hive is clean and airy with frames of a good design and a very large feeder at the top. This should contain honey to feed my family. I do so hope that Mr Hairy Hands has not economised by using a sugar solution. After all, who produces the honey?

There is never need to issue instructions to my precious darlings. They all know exactly what they have to do to keep me alive for my productive years. The female workers feed me with nectar and pollen, working their little wings to death in search of food. They survive for less than six weeks but what a worthwhile six weeks. The male drones get ready for their mating flights, building up their strength and practising orienteering. So like humans, work for the girls and sex for the boys.

One is so blessed to be selected as the queen. I can remember very well my mating flights at the beginning of my reign. One simply could not get enough sex. My sperm stocks had to be built up to last me through my lifetime of egg production. Eggs are laid as fast as they can be produced. This is a very -specialised process because the eggs have to be laid in the correct cells in the honeycomb. The smaller cells are for the fertilised worker eggs and the larger for the unfertilised drone eggs. My bees are wonderfully clever at calculating the correct proportion of drones and workers to keep the hive going. Each egg that One lays has to be in the upright position. That can take some doing I can tell you.

Mr Hairy Hands is certainly no expert. I had my doubts from the beginning of our residency in his fairly basic hive. He allows us to become overcrowded, a terrible mistake. This results in underfeeding and the danger of disease. One is appalled. A decision has to be made by Queen Apisidra, who else? Mr Hairy Hands may think he is the boss but One will show him how wrong he is. Half of us leave to seek a new home. This is the only way for all of us to have a chance of survival.

The fresh, scented air is a tonic after being confined to the hive for three long years. A tall Acacia tree makes an ideal penthouse apartment for my family. No sooner have we settled ourselves when a gaggle of spacemen crowd together at the base of the tree. They wave nets and smoke machines, terrifying us half to death. A large three tiered contraption sits on the grass close by. Within an hour we are prisoners inside this contraption. It is to be our new quarters, which can honestly be described as luxurious, practically a palace. But of course, that is as it should be. After all, One is a queen.

One did spare a thought for the remnant, left to their fate with Mr Hairy Hands, but not for long. It is up to them to select a worker to groom as their new queen. She will need feeding with Royal Jelly to get her going, and plenty of honey but they will know all that. It is out of the question to imagine that she can possibly match her mother's beauty and desirability.

Our new guardian is a smooth, cultured, softly spoken gentleman named Nigel. He is so very kind and thoughtful. This is very much appreciated now that One is feeling a little off-colour. One's every need is anticipated. I heard him whisper this morning the words 'old age', dreadful words to a queen in my position. One would have expected a little more time on this earth. I feel death to be very near. One knows it instinctively, without a shadow of doubt my time has come.

Life has indeed been very sweet. Farewell.

Non-Fiction

1ST PRIZE FIRST DATES: THE EDGE OF THE DESERT**BY JANET ZORO**

At nightfall, the bus left the desert road, heading into Douz through the town's famous date groves. The graceful trees were hung with very strange fruit; at first I took them for rubbish, caught on the branches, but then I realised every tree was draped with neatly tied polythene bags. Even the date palms around the hotel drooped with pale blobs, glimmering in the lamplight like ghostly jellyfish. I asked about it at Reception.

'Oh madam, this is protection for the fruit; soon is the harvest, and now we must save it from birds and insects. It is precious for us, our bank'.

After dinner, we sat by the long window in our room. Beyond the circle of light round the building, the darkness was so intense we could see nothing. We pondered on dates, which used to appear at Christmas in long, narrow boxes, brown and shiny and shockingly sweet, to be picked up on little pointy sticks. Now they arrived just before Ramadan in our Gloucester corner shop, the perfect energy food in cardboard boxes stacked into towering walls.

In the morning the view was astonishing: beyond a stand of palms where a couple of camels stood in the shade, chewing, stretched the Sahara. The sands, blushing in the early light, unrolled in ever higher dunes towards the edge of the world. The braver members of the group later rode off on camels and the rest of us potttered happily. The powdery desert sand holds imprints surprisingly clearly, and we tried to identify the tracks of birds, animals and reptiles. But I was content just gazing at the vast ocean of pale gold dunes, rolling away in waves of perfectly uniform shape, till the explorers reappeared, laughing and exhilarated, and we all went into town. It was market day.

Rejecting worries about ill-treated bony livestock, pick-pockets and hard-selling con-men, Bob and I hit the main street. It was bursting with busy stalls - shiny cooking pots, huge hanks of brightly dyed wool, bags of spice and grains, murderous-looking knives, rainbow heaps of fruit, kaftans, kelims, big knickers. The traders grinned and waved but made no attempt to sell us anything. In the enormous animal market, a huge, palm-shaded sandy area, hundreds of plump, placid, healthy animals were tethered. Camels were the stars, and their section was like Harrods sales. Around all the animals swirled and eddied the buyers, stately men in long robes, turbans, kerchiefs, conducting business. Serious discussion was conducted in mild, measured tones. Fat woolly sheep and bleating lambs, skittish goats, dark-eyed donkeys, chickens, quail and a few shining, dancing ponies, were scrutinised, stroked, squeezed,

patted. Wads of notes were exchanged with hand shakes and embraces. The purchases were piloted - or in the case of one particularly recalcitrant donkey pushed, pulled, cajoled and finally carried - to waiting trucks, or herded slowly away down the sandy lanes.

We wandered, only occasionally spotting any of our compatriots. We stopped for a cool drink in a cafe where the young man, who spoke excellent French, had to go next door to the barber's to get change for quite a small note. There were streets selling motorbikes and tractors, streets of shoemakers and potters, but no bars, no souvenir shops. As well as this weekly market, attended by villagers and desert people, Douz hosts, every winter, The Festival of the Desert, a meeting of the semi-nomadic peoples from across the Sahara for a week of cultural and sporting events - including camel racing, poetry and traditional weddings. We decided we'd love to return to Douz as independent travellers. Ten years later, after unrest in Tunisia and the onset of old age's aches and pains, we probably won't. But the dream is there.

That night, after a marvellous Tunisian meal, we decided to take a walk. The man at reception called us over; he had picked a few new-season dates for us to try. Out on the road there was no traffic, no sound but the whisper of palm leaves. My keyring torch threw a feeble pool of brightness, but we were surrounded by pitchy nothingness. We lay on our backs on surprisingly cold sand and unwrapped the dates; they were oddly dry and fibrous, but we would sing their praises. Tired and happy, hand in hand on the edge of the Sahara, we looked up at the immense, impenetrable night.

A shaft of pale late afternoon sunlight caught and sparkled the silver on the well-polished keys as the instrument lay in its suede case, itself dully dappled with rain. The dash to shelter from the Spring shower had been unnecessary. A few minutes more under a porch canopy and the walk up the stone steps would instead have been pleasurable. Now there were others treading the same grooves, feet fitting into the patterns worn on centuries old limestone, bearing bodies aloft to the bare, high-ceilinged devotional room above.

And now, in an open chamber beyond that room, the musician prepared. The mind divided, the outer self separating from the present yet remaining fully conscious of it, for people were gathering in the hall to greet friends and performers alike. The inner self was playing the music as if cocooned in a sound shell, rehearsing the awkward bits, tracking fingering, and firmly denying ghosts.

Most of those assembled would not know of the jointed instrument as once part of the incredibly hard African Mpingo tree, each complete one moulded from a single piece of the blackwood so that the pieces now reunited seemed returned to elemental life, and the air vibrating in its core felt no strange imperfections of grain; so that the tone moulded and teased from the embouchure on mouthpiece and reed would be unique to instrument and player together. As the instrument came to hand, each finger took its allotted place as if fashioned precisely to it. Soon, they would all move to create the music that in a perfect acoustic would utter sonorities that might never have been heard before. Thus the evolution of a piece gave each performance vitality and enchantment, and from the first moment that air excited the reed, the sound would take flight.

Aware that the singers had sung, and that the small jazz group was taking an encore, the musician stood ready to walk to the platform. As the applause died away the air seemed to resonate with expectancy; stillness held the moment as silence held breath.

When the first rising arpeggio floated into the silence, the player knew the magic show could begin. As each note was formed the sound grew wings and flew to dance in the rafters; it gently rebounded off the stone walls and came back to be instantaneously moulded. Blown into a perfect acoustic the composer's concepts of the seasons were transformed into a kaleidoscope of musical colours, shaped and painted by the reactions within wind and wood, and unique creativity of mind and embouchure. As an artist deploys the brush to best

advantage, so the musician takes the breath to blow and tease the notes into shape, crafting melodic lines to please and excite, to surprise and affect. Each movement freshly challenged the imagination, presented its landscape with inventive twists and turns, here dived into odd corners or there sped off unexpectedly. The moments of calm beguiled, in which every exquisite nuance of expression and dynamic could be offered to enchant and exhilarate. The final high C soared to the arched ceiling and hung there, taking its leave only as the audience breathed again.

To perform that evening was to embrace heaven, and still feeling the invigorating familiar warm glow of the reception, the musician, with magic wand, trod carefully down those ancient steps and walked into the warm night.

3RD PRIZE

SURVIVAL – A TRUE STORY

BY LINDA CASH

"It'll be OK" she'd said. But it wasn't. She stood in the doorway in her emerald green hat and grey coat. She just stood there. I was crying and so was she. My sister pulled her into the hallway and shut the front door. Shut the world out. Shut the grief in. We made a silent pact that day never to wear green again.

I didn't even get to the funeral as I had to go to friends with my 3 year old brother to protect him from the pain we were all going through.

I am the middle child. Neither one thing nor another. "You should know better" when I teased my baby brother, "You're not old enough" when I wanted to be treated like my older sister. But we were all on a level playing field when it came to dealing out the grief and pain. He was 45 years old. Younger than my son is now.

Life went on. Not the same, never the same, but somehow hours turned into days and days into weeks and months and suddenly a year had passed. Not a happy year but we had survived our grief and although not out 'the other side', the thick fog had become thinner and on rare days there were glimpses of hope. And then, from nowhere, a scent in the air and back to the hell of those first days of loss; deep and irreconcilable grief.

Overwhelming realization that nothing would ever be the same again. A family trying to be strong for each other but not being very successful.

And yet bit by bit the memories faded and we all took on our own lives. Our mother never showed us her grief which made it all the harder for her. Being strong when you're falling apart inside is one of the bravest things to do. Who she shared her pain with I never knew. Certainly not her uncaring sister in law who lived close by and who I never liked, but that's another story for another day.

Perhaps her good friends, but never in front of us.

The years slipped by. We as children and teenagers became self centred and forgot to grieve. Life seemed good and I fell in love.

And then Mum was ill. I rang our doctor to say I was worried about her and he said over the 'phone "With acute cancer you can expect nothing less". Within a week she was dead in her bed at home. I sat with her all night before she died. I don't remember whether I prayed or berated God or was just too numb to feel anything.

That was the end of our family as such. My poor little brother went to Ireland to live with my sister and family, At 8 years old he had lost everything. My Great Uncle who had lived with us went back to Scotland to friends, and at the age of 21, it was my job to sell our home full of memories.

Love has a way of easing pain and memory fades the bad times to place them in a space in your heart that you try not to dip into.

I married and got on with my life. A good husband, a baby boy, a new house and a new life. Prospects were good and the future rosy. Sadness encroached on me now and again in the form of depression and it took strength and my husband's care to pull me

through but life was so busy and there were few times to get maudlin over the past 50 years on and life still adds burdens to deal with. A devastating divorce for our son, and the loss of not seeing our grandchildren, ill health and the loss of so many dear dear friends.

But we as human beings somehow keep coming back for more and for me the wonderful joy of life would break through all the traumas and allow me to see the light instead of the shadow.

I still cry sometimes - when I'm low, when I catch a glimpse of someone that reminds me of Mum or Dad, on an anniversary. The loss never really goes away. Bury it deep and it will only rise to the surface now and then.

But oh how many occasions have we missed sharing - a wedding, a birth and all those Christmases [Dad LOVED Christmas and spent weeks preparing for it,] and so many birthdays that

I couldn't buy gifts for them both, share our happiness with them or just be able to show how much I loved them. Since they died I've never wanted to get too close to friends. They all seem to move away or die. Safer to stay at arms' length. No more broken hearts.

50 years on and life is pleasant. Not too many highs, not too many lows. But I often wonder who I would have been if my beloved Mum & Dad had been around to guide my early days of womanhood. Perhaps I would never have met my good husband or had our dear son. Perhaps I would have had a best friend that I shared all my secrets with.

But I am me and must accept the path life has chosen for me. It would be nice to be able to pull into a 'passing place' when things ahead look bleak, but on the whole I am made of sterner stuff.

Looking back I have had a good life - far better than many, but I sometimes wonder what I would have sacrificed to keep my Mum & Dad with me for a few more years.

Perhaps it's as well we don't have the ability to make that choice.

Life is good, life is bad. Make up your mind which one you choose to work on! I'm getting there! Sometimes!

HIGHLY COMMENDED 900 WORDS – A EULOGY BY ROSALIND BROOKS

Anne was my mother who died this year. This was my tribute at her cremation.

Anne was the Matriarch. Anne was a journalist. At all times, right up to the end of her life, she followed the progress of three generations of her brood. She had completed ninety-one years, but I remember her as my beautiful, young and energetic mother, the compassionate, intelligent and sometimes scary maternal spider at the centre of her world wide web. True to form, she had visited and chosen this beautiful spot for her cremation, long before she arrived here for this celebration.

Today is not only the Ides of March, auspicious in itself, but it is Cheltenham Gold Cup Day. Mum loved to watch the horse racing and had read every Dick Francis novel. In 1976 Mum came to Bath, where I was studying, insisting I bunk off from my studies and whisking me away to Cheltenham Gold Cup Races. That was exactly forty-three years ago to the day. What a time we had, unintentionally entering the expensive gate so watching the thunderous spectacle from the

inside rail only two fences from the finish line and right next to Mum's literary hero, the author Dick Francis. Of course, being the total lady, she did not disturb him on his day at the races, even though she was a huge fan and had read every one of his books.

I remember the eternally hot summer days at the idyllic Cornish creek of St Just in Roseland. Mum sits on the pebbly beach dishing out the picnic then lying back to soak up the sun, while, tied to her ankle, is a rope tethering a small dinghy. It is how we learned to row; manoeuvring, spinning, rowing crabwise across the tide, all the while safe, secure, watched over, tethered to Mum's leg, knowing we could be pulled back to shore and into the warmth and softness of her pillow-like hugs. This is how she brought us up, the love which said, go your own way, but pop back whenever you like. I am always here for you.

The day before Mum died, I picked three of the first celandines I'd seen this year and popped them into the vase of flowers by her hospital bed. She didn't know they were there, but I did. As a child, each year I would look for the first yellow flash of the glossy celandines and picking a small bunch, run home to give this great prize to Mum. She watches through the kitchen window as I run up the garden path clutching this thing which she has made so special between us. I feel her rough-skinned hands on my soft child's fingers, as she accepts this gift, exclaiming her great pleasure, no matter how many Spring seasons I "surprise" her.

Celandines still evoke my intense and sweet pleasure from seeing Mum's smile and even when she was living in Wales, I would report the first celandines, her voice still young and lucid on the telephone. At my visits, I sit on her bed and we chat and laugh, stroking a cat or three. I hear tales of her life and enjoy our shared and exclusive memories. Just this Christmas Mum tells me when she looks in her mirror, she sees her Granny Hamilton. "That's OK Mum" I reply, "when I look in the mirror, I see you and that's fine by me." We smile and reflect on the changes life takes us through.

One of Mum's favourite tales, which we all loved to hear, was the school play, in about 1944. Penzance Girls' Grammar School was performing at the Humphry Davy Boys' Grammar School. Picture Anne, 17 years old, in brief leopard skin shorts fitting in all the right places, glossy brown hair and legs up to her armpits. She's on stage and a boy's voice shouts out:

"That's Anne Hamilton, I'd know those legs anywhere!"

She is stunning, she has the legs, the hair, the intellect and the attitude.

So, on behalf of her daughters, granddaughters and great-granddaughter, thank you Mum for the legs and that certain something when you walk into a room and you subtly but definitely own it.

Mum knew where she is going next and is happy to be there, her journalist's curiosity driving her on, excited to know where her story goes from here.

I know this because once, during a particularly vicious bout of flu, she saw the white light. She moved towards it in joy and happiness. When she woke, back in her own bed, she was crying because, glimpsing such a wonderful and peaceful state, she did not want to return to the terrestrial plane.

She was only old for a few years. The rest of her life Anne was vibrant, dynamic, intelligent, beautiful to the very end, an outstanding Mum, role model and a hard act to follow.

I think of Terry Pratchett's description of the witch Goody Hamstring, passing into death.

Her body returns to its proper self, youthful and unfettered by her journey, illness and old age.

At the moment in which her soul realises it is no longer bound by the body's morphic field, her body straightens up.

Death whispers, **"IS THAT WHO YOU WERE?"**

The witch replies: **'It's who I've always been.'**

Safe journey Mum and wear those leopard skin shorts again, because you OWN IT.

HIGHLY COMMENDED

HOW THE OTHER HALF LIVES

BY IAN SEARLE

"Hello," I said, "it's Peter, isn't it?"

It was a spurious question: attached to the lapel of his over-large coat, there was a label with his name on it. It also gave his destination, Windlesham House School. A taxi driver had ushered Peter into the splendid hallway of the Queen Anne mansion which housed the school. Peter was a ten-year-old. It is bizarre to think that today he will be in his 40s, probably a very wealthy businessman, possibly a diplomat, a general, a surgeon, a QC or even an MP. At this time, however, he was a forlorn-looking ten-year-old.

"Term doesn't begin until tomorrow," I pointed out. "Why so early?"

"Something to do with available flights," he said.

"I see. Where have you flown in from?"

“Milan.”

This was not especially unusual. Peter’s mother had driven him to the airport with his suitcase, both appropriately labelled, and handed them over to the care of the stewardess. The flight attendants tended to lavish special attention on these children, who were travelling alone. At Heathrow, Peter was shepherded to a pre-booked taxi, and driven some forty miles to the school. Now he was standing in the hallway, waiting for a matron or a house mistress. I could not stop myself thinking of wartime evacuees. There was a significant difference: Peter had been a pupil at the school for two years; the lovely building, set in rolling Downland, faced south. The smooth, green playing fields filled the small valley bottom which sloped very gently down to the main road. The driveway curved around the edge of the rugby pitches, separating them from the woods in which the boys and girls were allowed to play. There was one rule only, they were not to climb any tree they could put their arms round.

I had long been an opponent of private schools. I saw them as bastions of privilege, places which preserved the class distinctions I wished to see disappear. To have taken the job at all was, in many ways, counter to my socialist principles. On the other hand, in contrast with the boys’ comprehensive school in which I had worked before this, I was able to teach rather than spend most of my time keeping order. Classes here were small – the average class size was sixteen – the parents, who paid a lot of money, expected their children to succeed. Having 320 boys and girls, aged from 8 to 13, imprisoned in this way 24-hours a day, meant that they were completely under our benevolent control. The teachers were of a high standard and expected to do much more than deliver lessons. Weekend duties came round every third weekend. Lessons took up 5 ½ days a week. Instead of “homework”, all the children were called back into the classroom after tea for supervised Prep. Even the eight-year-olds did half-an-hour of Prep, the thirteen-year-olds, 1½ hours every evening. There was also a large number of organised activities as well as sports. They included , for example, stamp collecting, modelmaking and riding at a nearby stables.

I undertook to run a photographic activity. I had few takers, and one afternoon, for various reasons, I was left with just one boy. I’ll call him Justin. His father was Lord Chancellor at the time, a fact I was unaware of until Justin mentioned it in passing. He did not think of it as extraordinary. His father was a Scot, that much I did know. Since we were on our own that afternoon, I suggested taking my old car and looking for suitable buildings to photograph.

Justin was happy to do this, though, as he settled into the passenger seat, he commented, "This is quite an old car, isn't it?" I had to agree. "What does your father drive?" I asked.

"Well we have a Daimler, which he uses most of the time, and we have a couple of Jaguars, but he doesn't like driving in London. At home we also have a Roller."

There was not very much I could say. I pulled into a layby. I pointed over the hedge to a grand old house, visible in the landscaped, Sussex countryside. It would, I thought, make a good subject for a photograph.

"It's quite impressive," I observed.

"Not as big as ours in Argyll."

"Oh?"

"My father's Head of the Clan, you see. At one point the family owned the whole of Argyllshire, but we had to sell most of it off. Now we've only got a couple of hundred acres." It was not said out of boastfulness, just a matter of fact.

This kind of insight into the world of wealth and privilege was an everyday experience for me. I remember speaking to another small boy, a twelve-year-old called David, at the end of one summer term. I asked him where he was going to spend the holidays. He said he was not yet sure whether he would be going to his father in the USA or to his mother. He thought he would probably be seeing his mother.

"Where does she live?"

"Well, she has a flat in Paris, another on Lake Lucerne, a house in Algiers, and she owns a small island in the Seychelles."

"What about your father?"

"He's a film director. He has apartments in New York and Los Angeles."

"Which do you prefer, then?"

"I think I prefer Switzerland."

"Which one would you describe as home?"

David had to think very hard. Finally, he said, "I suppose this is my home."

He meant the boarding school. I found the reply both revealing and sad.

SHADOWS OF WAR

BY BRENDA BURGESS

“I used to be quite an attractive woman in my day, you know.” I looked at my elderly friend with affection. It was still possible to see traces of beauty in the delicate bone structure of her aged face and she had remarkably shapely calves for a woman of nearly ninety. Although her hands were discoloured with brown pigmentation and her fingers were misshapen with arthritis, they still moved with an habitual elegance. Her hazel eyes sparkled with vivacity as she spoke.

“I was never short of young men calling for me. Because my mother had died when I was twelve my father was a very strict Victorian parent and he vetted each one carefully. Of course, everything changed when he decided to let out a spare room to a lodger. My first sight of this very tall, awkward young man who looked at me nervously through steel rimmed glasses did not fill me with enthusiasm, but there was one thing in his favour – he had a car. It was a ramshackle affair, given to breaking down in the most inconvenient places. I think I fell in love with the car a long time before I realised I had also fallen in love with this gentle man with his lop-sided grin. Although he was a man of few words, he had a wry sense of humour and transmitted a strong impression of calm and capability. I don’t want to shock you, dear...” She paused as if uncertain as to whether she should continue.

“Oh, go on. I’m not easily shocked, you know,” I laughed.

“There were frightening rumours about things in Germany – talk about the possibility of war, and I think a lot of young people were unsettled about the future and more inclined to ‘make hay while the sun shone.’ We rented a cottage in Cornwall for a weekend and by the time we got back to my home in Exeter, we were passionately in love, and ... not a hint of a sun tan.” She gave a knowing wink.

I nodded and smiled. “Yes, I understand. You were a very modern young woman.”

“We got married before war was declared. Of course, Ronnie had to enlist, much to my dismay. He went through the necessary paraphernalia of officer training and came out with flying colours. I was so proud of him in his smart new uniform. The regime of exercise and good food had filled his skinny frame out and he now held his tall figure with an assurance he had not had before.”

She closed her eyes and sighed. I could see she still had this picture of him engraved on her memory. "He was posted abroad. We weren't supposed to know where. Letters came, quite a few at first, but then with longer gaps. I rushed out to meet the postman everyday but I suppose I got used to the disappointment when he shook his head. 'Not today, young lady. Maybe tomorrow will be your lucky day.' I've often wondered how many times a day he said that phrase.

Then the awful day came when a telegraph boy parked his cycle by our front gate. I can't begin to describe how I felt when I was informed that the love of my life was 'missing in action, presumed dead,' but so many people were in the same boat and I just had to carry on with my job and survive like everyone else. I had no idea whether he was alive for at least two long years."

She paused for a moment. "Did I ever tell you that when my mother was alive she had an uncanny knack for predicting the future? D'you know, I don't think she wouldn't have been too surprised when a second telegram came as the war was drawing to an end. It brought us news of the release of prisoners of war held in Crete and that Ronnie's name was amongst the thousands of men being returned.

I'll never forget the day my father came with me to Victoria Station to meet this one man out of so many that meant the world to me. My eyes ached with searching the faces of the mass of men and my heart was pounding with a mixture of excitement and fear. A tall, bowed figure with tattered uniform hanging loosely was approaching me. When I looked at the gaunt face and into his hollow eyes, I suddenly recognised that familiar lopsided smile. I was filled with a mixture of joy and horror and I turned to my father who was weeping openly." All he could say was "He's just a shadow of his former self." She broke off to control her tears. I leant forward and took her hands.

"He'd gone down to six stone and was very weak," she sighed and took a deep breath.

"All that was a long time ago. I nursed him back to health but I never knew what happened in those years we were apart. He never, ever said a word about it. I was so thankful that he had returned home each and every day we had together afterwards."

I put my arms round my aged friend and held her while I surreptitiously wiped away my own tears. I was so grateful that I had known this wonderful woman who had stayed in love for the rest of her life.

THE BRIDGE

BY ELEANOR HOLLAND

The first Bridge I remember was the bridge over the railway line near the house I was borne in - I used to toddle down the road, escorted by the family Alsatian, Bruce (who's mission in life was to protect me), to watch the trains rush through under my feet.

Travelling by train to and from Cornwall, across the Brunnell Bridge, during the years I served in the WRNS at RNAS Culdrose, I was always interested to see the progress of the new road bridge being built across the River Tamar. When I was drafted to Scotland, to RNAS Lossiemouth, on the Moray Firth, the train journey involved crossing the Forth Bridge and it was very important to throw a coin through the iron structure into the river beneath for luck - it was hard to tell if any of the coins I threw ever made it, but I think I have been fairly lucky in life, so maybe at least one did.

The Bridge that had the greatest impact on my life, was the one that crossed the Sittang River in Burma - or Myanmar, as Burma is now known. In the Spring of 1942, my Father, who was serving in the Dogra Regiment (Indian Army), was sent into Burma, with a detachment of sepoy and a team of mules to carry the baggage, in order to stop the Japanese army in their tracks. They were total out of their comfort zone in a jungle, having spent the previous months training for desert warfare, presumably expecting to join the allies in North Africa, fighting the Germans. The Japanese, bombing of the American Fleet at Pearl Harbour changed their plans and thus it was that my Father's life took an unexpected turn.

A lot of confusion and changing plans meant they found themselves on the bank of the Sittang River, expecting to cross over the bridge to the other side, which, much to their horror, had recently been blown up by the Royal Engineers, in order to prevent the Japs, advance into Burma. Many of the sepoy were unable to swim, so this very unfortunate occurrence culminated in the Dogra platoon being an easy target, when a Jap squad came upon them, having no trouble in mopping them up and taking them prisoners of war.

As the Geneva Convention meant nothing to the Japanese Army, they didn't think it necessary to inform anyone of the names of the soldiers they had captured, so, thus it was that we were just told that 'Colonel Power was Missing, presumed killed'. Obviously this had a profound effect on our

Mother and us three children, who were living in India, miles away from the family in England. Apart from the dire news, the Army Pay Office deemed that, as it was not certain whether we were 'Widows and orphans', or the 'Wife and Children of a serving Officer', our pay would cease forthwith.

This was a huge blow to our poor Mother, who bravely never allowed her worries to affect us. Luckily, a very kind relative, who was the British Resident - representing the King - in Jaipur State, invited us all to spend the Winter of 1942 with him in his enormous Residency. This was a truly amazing experience for us, living in a virtual palace, mixing with the Maharajah's children, enjoying Christmas camps, which included tiger shoots and watching Polo, played by the best in the world. This treat was repeated the following Winter and was quite different to the way most British people lived and worked in India.

Our Father returned to us at the end of the war, very emaciated, but alive. We all returned to England and happily lived in his inherited family home for sixteen years, when he sadly died of a heart attack, aged sixty-five – probably as a result of the treatment he had suffered at the hands of the Japanese

So this is the reason I say that the Bridge over the Sittang River had the biggest impact on my life.

A TABLET**BY VERONICA WHALE**

Last September Veronica's daughter Rosalind and her husband, Trevor, living in the States, offered to buy her a laptop for her Birthday. This conversation occurred recently on the telephone:

Ros: Hello Mum, how are you getting on with your tablet?

Veronica: Oh darling! I've only started recently but I really think they're working

Ros: You were able to get to Currys alright then, to get it?

Veronica: Oh No! (a bit puzzled, but then Ros is in America) I was able to get it in Boots

Ros: That was easy then. So it's working alright?

Veronica: Well, it's early days yet, but I think so

Ros: You'll be able to send us e-mails soon then

Veronica: (really puzzled) Well I'm not sure about that, but it's very helpful

Ros: Well, it's a free way of communication

Veronica: Yes, it's on the National Health

Ros: Really? I suppose it has benefits related to Age Concern?

Veronica: I suppose so

Ros: Trevor will be really pleased to hear it's been of use

Veronica: It's really kind of him to be so concerned

Ros: It's going to be much cheaper for you to connect with us rather than the telephone

Veronica: I did phone them to have them delivered, but it caused such confusion, as I was always out when they called here with them

Ros: (really concerned) Mum! You've only got one haven't you?

Veronica: I get a packet of them every month

Ros: (after a brief silence) Mum! What are you talking about?

Veronica: My new medicine, what else?

Ros: You mean tablet of medicine?

Veronica: Yes, of course. Oh! You mean that computer thing? No, that hasn't arrived yet!

ALEXANDER THE GREAT

BY PAT JOWSEY

In the Autumn of 1985 we embarked on an adventure, my husband and I were going away for a month. Leaving our two teenage sons at home, hoping the house would still be standing when we returned. We dreamt of exploring the islands of Greece. Not having much money meant Island hopping on a very limited budget; we didn't mind roughing it a bit. Having spent the last couple of years renovating a row of old cottages into a comfortable home. We needed time away.

Arriving at a small Greek Island at midnight by local ferry, then discovering our accommodation to be a hut on the beach. We usually found the best way to find somewhere to stay was to ask at a local taverna, everyone had a relative with a room or apartment to rent for a few days. That night we slept like babies, waking with the sun shining through the holes in the roof, then finding there was a Taverna up the beach serving freshly made bread rolls with local olive oil and the strongest coffee we had ever tasted.

We were in paradise, the idea of going to hotel resort could not be considered, well out of our price range. We were doing what we had never had the opportunity to do when we were teenagers. The days went by so quickly, walking miles through the olive groves and along the beach, amazed at the smell of the sea and banks of wild flowers that grew everywhere. The pace of life was wonderful; everyone we met was kind and had the time to chat, as far as we could, my husband was convinced he could speak Greek if he tried hard enough. The locals were very patient with the British middle age couple staying on the beach. We found ancient ruins, remainders of the Islands' long history, pieces of broken pottery scattered around. The sky so blue, echoed in the domes of the white churches on the cliffs around the Island. Sunshine filling the days. Eating in the taverna and getting to like Ouzo and Retsina the local alcohol.

Then a couple of days before we had to leave, we met Alexander, He had the look of an Emperor or a pirate, depending if he was trying to sell you something or talking to his neighbours. Tall, strong, with black curls covering his head and chin, his eyes dark and full of life, smiling, talking nonstop. He owned a fishing boat; for a small fee, he would take us on an adventure, a voyage to a desert Island only he knew about. We were to meet him at 6 o'clock the next morning, by 7.30 we had nearly given him up; then in the distance the sound of an

engine. Alexander roared up in an ancient truck, clinging on the back were four nervous looking tourists. We were loaded onto narrow seats and off we went. Sitting in the front seat with his master was a great dog, from the back they both looked the same, covered in black curls.

We smiled at our companions, but had to concentrate on hanging onto the truck as it rattled and bumped over the rocky road to the harbour where Alexander's boat was moored.

When we saw it, we did wonder if our insurance would cover the risk of embarking in the tatty fishing boat awaiting us. We found out two of our companions were German lady schoolteachers, very prim and proper, the others, a French couple staying in a hotel up the coast. Conversation was polite and strained as we were younger than they were and ready for a good time. They were wishing that they perhaps should have stayed at home.

After an hour of sailing across the bay with a strong, smell of diesel coming from the engine. We reached the desert island, no vegetation, only sand, rocks, and seashells.

We had to wade ashore; Alexander picked up the older women, carrying them to dry land. They were shocked but he was a Greek man doing just as he wanted.

Two more boats turned up, other tourists joined us on the island. We lazed on the beach while lunch was being prepared for us. The menu was Sardines and Sangria. The drink came from a plastic dustbin, poured out for us by a watering can into plastic mugs we had been given, Sardines were cooked on a makeshift barbeque consisting of an old bed spring over an open wood fire, balanced onto a natural circle of rocks on the beach. Sardines just caught from the boats moored off shore, eaten with crusty fresh bread were fantastic. We had a theory of the origin of the sangria. Alexander on his tours of the local taverna and hotels, knowing everyone, related to most, collected any leftover alcohol from the bars. Everything went into the dustbin with sliced oranges and lemons. After a couple of drinks, it tasted great and the dustbin was gradually emptied.

Everybody made friends with everyone else, we swore to keep in touch forever and this had been the best day out we had ever had in our lives. The schoolteachers dancing with everyone, giggling and swinging around the mast of the boat, as we headed back to the harbour. We even had a competition on who could sing the rudest songs.

I cannot remember getting back to our accommodation, I recall having to concentrate very hard on getting off the boat and not falling into the sea. My husband was a great help, thank goodness, he had a stronger head for alcohol than I did. I spent the next day in bed, but you have to pay for days like that. We never forgot Alexander the Great. That is what he called himself, on the cards he handed out to anyone who looked like a likely customer. I do hope he is still taking people to his desert Island.

THE OAK TREE

BY BOBBI MACKRILL

I call her my magnificent Oak tree; she grows on our farm on the edge of a field. The field is called the horses field the reason for this, is this is where our horses, Charlotte, my daughter and my horses used to spend a majority of their time. The oak tree was at one time shade from the hot sun or shelter from the rain, they loved it. I loved the Oak tree from the moment I first saw it, I've known it for nearly thirty years. I have become the Oaks caretaker. A role I have understood and undertaken happily and seriously over the years.

Initially, we used to graze our Aberdeen Angus cows in the horses' field, they took comfort from the spread of the oak tree, also using it as a sunshade and an umbrella

Unfortunately, the lower oak tree branches would sag towards the ground and the cows would reach up to use them for extra fodder, quite understandable I suspect the forage and nutrients were of great use to them.

I think the oak tree could tell many stories prior to my 30 years as caretaker. It is interesting to note that when the oak tree and I first met, the oak tree sported an old rather tattered thick blue rope, hanging in the centre of a particular thick branch. It looked as if the rope could have been used as a swing maybe with a plank of wood attached or an old car tyre. To the south east side of the noble old trunk were a series of metal bars, similar to those you see on telegraph poles so that engineers can aid their climb to the top of the poles. The metal bars

were secured and despite my efforts were impossible to remove. I imagine the previous generations of children who had lived here, climbing the oak aided by the metal bars, probably not giving much thought to the welfare of the oak. Me, I love trees, I have spent my life planting them, nurturing them, even talking to them, you get such a response, they grow and flourish. They make such a contribution to the wildlife, that they in turn encourage and nurture, they change the face of a derelict landscape. They provide such joy by their very being, they outlive us, and they are there for future generations to enjoy. This is what my magnificent oak tree has been doing for perhaps a hundred years. It is difficult to assess her age with absolute accuracy. It does not matter. Her age she knows and she is keeping it to herself.

Last year my grandson William who shows such a real interest in the trees in general, discovered the beautiful blue speedwells that grew each summer under the shade of the magnificent oak. We, he, and I would carefully avoid walking on them when we took our walk up to see the oak. William then two and half years old, one day discovered an acorn under the oak; he was so fascinated by this. I went on to explain in detail about how the magnificent oak had grown from just such an acorn as this. William studied my face with considerable disbelief as I tried to explain to him that he was once a baby like his baby brother Jake and he could see how Jake was growing couldn't he.

William is a bright boy. So I came up with the idea that he and I would collect some more acorns from under the magnificent oak, and we would plant them in soil in seed trays. We would be able to watch them grow.

A few days after this conversation William had enthusiastically collected half a bucket of acorns, and was very anxious to begin the planting process, William and I put suitable soil from the garden into seed trays. In addition, I tried to explain to him that after we had made a hole in the soil, we just had to plant one acorn in each hole. This William found difficult to grasp, his thoughts being if the hole was big enough then we could fill each hole with acorns. Subsequently my seed holes held one acorn each and Williams held anything between from one to three acorns. Well, months came and went, spring blossomed, and we looked again at the acorns we had planted. William was, and I must admit, so was I, excited to find that about 50% of our plantings had produced two leaves, even the well-stuffed ones that William had planted. They actually proved to be even more interesting because they were vying for room.

They had expanded outside the seed trays and we could see how they swelled and had cracked and pushed the stems out {I suspect that if William was a little older he may have said, I told you it would work granny}

Recently, we carefully placed soil in small individual pots, pressed a hole in the middle, and planted the small oaks. We have plenty now but William insists that the other 50% will grow so we are keeping them in the seed trays, and he's right there are more acorns breaking through. William and I water the pots of Oak trees regularly and he understands that they need more water, now it is hot summer weather.

I think that William now realises that the small oak trees, which we will have to pot on again in due course. One day will be big magnificent oaks such as the one that gave us the acorns. They will be planted carefully on the farm perhaps for another small boy to collect the acorns and grow more oaks that are magnificent.

A REMARKABLE JOURNEY

BY MIKE ROBSON

In the 1980's, if you were a freelance consultant, you dreamed of selling a job to IBM, then unquestionably the world's best company. My dream came true when they asked me to run a pilot training programme in the USA. If it went well it would lead to all sorts of other opportunities. The programme they required was to last three and a half days, from Tuesday afternoon to Friday, in an hotel a couple of hours drive north of New York.

I had never been to America and so I decided to go on the Friday before the course so that I could have a look around. I arrived at Heathrow airport in good time for the flight and handed the check in lady my ticket. 'Where is your visa?' she asked, at which point my world imploded. 'Visa?' I spluttered, 'but we're on the same side, surely I don't need a visa to visit our closest ally. There must be a way.'

'Sorry,' she replied, 'but the only thing I know for sure is that you are not going to America today. You need to go to the American Embassy in Grosvenor Square to get a visa'.

My head in a complete spin, I walked away from the check in desk and made my way to a coffee bar. I needed to think. 'What can I do? What can I do?' I screamed to myself. 'Have I messed up my chance of a lifetime before it even started?' I got myself a coffee when what I really wanted was a very large scotch. Things got even worse when I found that because the following Monday was a bank holiday, the US embassy was closed. The only good news, if it could be called that, was that I established that there was a Concorde flight from London to New York, at 10.30 am on Tuesday morning and that there were seats available. I made a provisional booking and went home feeling pretty miserable.

I spent much of the weekend in a daze, but at least found out that the Embassy opened at 07.30am on the Tuesday and that there was a train which left our local station at 06.00am and arrived in London Paddington at 06.45am. My IBM contact in the USA was sympathetic to my plight, and agreed to have me met at JFK airport by a driver. I confirmed the Concorde ticket, and there was nothing more that I could do.

Tuesday morning arrived and I was up and ready after a sleepless night.

I got to Didcot station in plenty of time, and was very relieved to see that the train was running on time. It arrived in Paddington on schedule and I ran to the taxi rank, asking the driver to take me to the American embassy as fast as possible. We arrived there at 07.15 and I found myself third in the queue. Evidently I wasn't the only one with an urgent need. Waiting in line was one of the more frustrating things that I can remember. Every minute seemed like an hour, but eventually, at 07.48, my name was called. Fifteen minutes later I had a USA visa stamp in my passport. I ran out of the building and looked around desperately for a taxi. Within a couple of minutes a black cab appeared with its For Hire sign lit. I climbed in and said that I needed to get to Heathrow Terminal 1 as quickly as possible. It was a good fare for him and so he said he would get me there as fast as he could. I looked out of the taxi and saw a clock. It was 08.12. There was nothing more that I could do, so I sat back and watched the world go by as the driver drove quickly but safely through rush hour London. We arrived at the airport at just after 09.00. Time was tight but at least, I thought to myself, there won't be a long queue to check in for the Concorde flight. Thankfully I was right on that count and it wasn't long before we were called to board the beautiful and iconic plane. We took off at 10.30.

Being a bit of a fatalist I was still worried about the pick up in New York and the drive to the venue, but for now I tried to enjoy the experience, travelling at twice the speed of sound, 1500 mph; looking out and being so high, 50,000 feet, that we could see the curvature of the earth. It was pretty special.

We touched down at JFK airport at 09.30 local time. We had arrived before we had taken off!

Fortunately there were special arrangements for Concorde passengers as far as customs and immigration were concerned so we were spared the very long, ominous, lines of queuing passengers who had travelled on other airlines.

I walked into the arrivals hall at 10.08 and soon spotted a man holding a placard with my name written on it in big, bold letters. He had already got a luggage trolley and he put my bag on it and asked me to follow him.

The car was a 'stretch limo'. I had seen pictures of them but never seen one for real, let alone travel in one. It was huge and very comfortable. The journey to the hotel went without incident and at 12.18 I checked in and asked to be shown the room where the training course would be held. The room was fine so I went back to the receptionist and asked where the course participants were. She shuffled her papers and looked at different computer screens. Then she looked up, smiled sweetly, and said, 'You are the first of the group to arrive.'

Poetry

1ST PRIZE

SAY 'CHEESE'

BY JANET ZORO

I shuffle snapshots like a pack of cards.

Memories are tiny paper squares, curled and grey, some potent as a madeleine.

Two toddlers in a goat-cart: Uncle Jack, his fierce fox terrier, the little steam train we rode round and round, legs dangling, feet so full of joy. Some illustrate the family story books - pre-War, pre-me, the speeding cars and sailing boats, mother rowing, father in a kilt.

I was the first and feature in some stiff posed groups – unknown adults, me and mum, and, lisle legs and lace-up feet,

my tiny grandma. You'll note we women

do not smile for photographs; three generations face the camera

as if it were a firing squad.

These are the remnants of the sheets for sending out with Christmas cards. Solemn, solitary, I gaze at the lens, smile to order for the Polyphoto man, respond to waving toys with looks of feigned delight.

Here I clasp my sister in ventriloquist embrace. No, I didn't pinch her - you'd see it in her face, which practises a flirty charm in every shot.

I never learnt that look; my range is worry and concern, mild amusement and long suffering.

I grow grimmer as my plaits are tightened through the years; my little sister, winsome, shows off her new teeth.

I wish they'd made me smile.

2ND PRIZE**TUMBLE DRYER****BY IAN SEARLE**

When I walk in, the programme is on Pause,
She is asleep.
I press the button, "Hello Gran," I say.
The drum revolves
She looks at me. "And who are you?" she asks.
"I'm Gwen, remember me?"
The drum revolves again.
"Where is Harold? Why is he not here?"
"Granddad died five years ago," I say.
"And who are you?"
I try another button, "Lovely flowers, Gran!"
It doesn't work: the high-pitched whine
that keeps the contents tumbling doesn't stop.
"Harold hasn't been to see me. Where is he?"
"I've come instead today," I say.
The rolling stops a moment;
sheets and socks and towels
and vests fall softly in a heap – a pause.
Then it starts again, the other way.
"And who are you?" she asks.
"I'm Gwen, your granddaughter," I say.
"When can I go home? I don't like it here."
I can't answer that. This Home is where she lives.
Nor can I find the button that says Stop.

3RD PRIZE**THE ANNIVERSARY****BY JENNY REID**

Not much to be said, after 50 years wed,
But worth a meal out as a treat.

“I’ll book us table,” said Bertie to Mabel,
“We’ll have a day out in Portreath.”

There’s a nice cafe there, we can let down our hair,
Have fun and a fair bit of laughter.

I fancy some hake, or maybe rump steak,
And a bowl of rice pudding for after.”

He donned his best suit and splashed on the Brut,
While Mabel, feeling somewhat foolhardy,
Went rather risqué, with a new French beret,
And a blue crimplene dress and pink cardy.

On route the bus spluttered, the driver he uttered,
“I think there’s a fault wi’ big end.”
In a timely manner, he whipped out his spanner,
As they ground to a halt at Cawsand.

The ride was unstable, “I’m frightened,” said Mabel,
“My nerves are in shreds, I feel sick.”
The driver conceded that help might be needed
So called the AA pretty quick.

Hours late they alighted, fed up but excited,
Then realised with utter dismay,
That the cafe ‘La Mer’ was no longer there,
Replaced by ‘The Happy Gourmet.’
“It just ain’t the same, as when we last came,”

moaned Bert, with increasing annoyance.

“It’s gone all upmarket, they’ve got a new carpet,
I’m not gone on all this flamboyance.

There’s sun dried tomatoes and olives for starters,
And what’s all this nouvelle cuisine?”

“I’m really not sure, but I’d like some more,”
said Mabel, “it’s all rather lean.”

They found little solace, in the solitary mollusc,
and six petit pois in a jus.

Dessert, equally brief, was a nasturtium leaf,
on a spoonful of tiramisu.

At the sight of the bill, Bert began to feel ill,
His face all contorted and red.

“Well we’re not coming ‘ere, this time next year,
We’ll go down the chippy instead!”

HIGHLY COMMENDED**AQUA****BY SUE WILLIAMS**

Froth of sea,
bubbles,
like spawn-skeins
draw out to the deeper pools.
A splash of white stone
cups the surface beyond the
froth,
throws globules in a crown of
drops;
skimmers trail a wake of
cotton-tailed threads.
The rocks disturb the flow,
immoveable forces
that eddy the water
around,
round and round,
and seaweed ballerina-dancing
joins white-water spume-splash of
moon-pulled tide.
Pebbles at the water-edge
crowd,
jumbling for position,
unable to find their
destiny
as each one grinds,
a scaling, scalping down in
size and shape
over aeons of time, 'til
ground to the dust of sand,
warm,
sun-warmed sand.

HIGHLY COMMENDED SILK**BY BRENDA BURGESS**

Soft and smooth as a young girls' skin,
Skeins spun from the silkworm's sac,
Stretch across the loom to spin
A priceless robe for a royal back.
Too costly for the young and free,
This lustrous cloth that the weaver weaves,
Started with one humble mulberry tree,
The silkworm thriving on its luscious leaves.

Cocoons of silk wound into a tomb,
The worm sleeps in this gossamer bed,
But it dies a death in this satin womb,
To give up its gift of precious thread.

Man yearns for all that is rare,
That no one else can compare.

Used for Chinese paintings long ago
Satin, shangtung and crepe de chine,
Tussah, Fuji and Peau de Soie;
Lavish lingerie with sumptuous sheen;
Parachutes get pilots safely down;
Sutures for surgeons to sew and mend;
Flowing fabric for a woman's gown,
On which these glowing shades merge and blend.

Turquoise, framboise and vivid green,
Bright red, gitane and cyan blues
The deepest colours ever seen.
Lemon, silver grey are gentler hues.

Painting on silk, a complex art,
Brings delight to an artist's heart.

VANITY FAIR**BY BRENDA BURGESS**

There was once a foxy lady,
Her name was Becky Sharp,
She played with men
Like an angel on a harp.

With her sandy red hair
And gleaming, scheming eyes,
She made men desire to
Die between her thighs.

She bewitched Jos Sedley and
Three of the Crawleys ,
All of whom regretted it sorely.
Betrayed Emmy with George Osborne too,
Before he met his Waterloo.

Her life with Rawdon was one long plot
To ease his friends of the money they got
By gambling, both by day and by night,
Till Rawdon comes home and has the sight
of Becky gambolling with Lord Steyne.
He then knows that all is not fine.

She continued with her deceit
And men still grovel at her feet,
Does she, by a good deed get to heaven?
It all comes out in episode seven.

Amelia is told that George was false,
Again Becky with Jos begins to waltz.
In the end, her old lover,
Has a dubious demise.
She collects all his life cover,
The profit of her life of lies.

UNBIDDEN**BY JOCK TURNHAM**

Ardeche lethargy
And the faint plucking of a guitar.
Some Romanies, a puppet show.
Here in St. Eulalie.

Under your broad brimmed hat
You read Dawn French.
Everyone's a writer now.

Hanging from this tree
A pair of blue canvas shoes.
Their owner, a distant memory.

Almost fitting my feet
I shall later paddle in the stream
Searching for crayfish.

It comes unbidden...my muse.

My childhood is my inspiration.
It comes unbidden.
It is a tale yet to be told.

INTO THE BLUEBELL WOOD**BY JANET ZORO**

Trees draw thick charcoal lines across the
light.

The wood is flooded: rippling watery
bluebells,

moving with a whisper, splash my feet

as I wander through the shallows of a
daydream sea.

I paddle down the path towards a deeper
blue;

thicker shadows crowd like flocks of rooks.

Oak and ash link arms above me, shutting out the day.

Light filters, falters down to inky thickets. My heart races.

There, among the brambles, are those watching eyes? Far
off

the echo of a woodpecker - or the sound of someone

knocking on a door, forever closed. The air is cooler here,

filled with rustles, squeaks, mosquito whine and hornet
buzz.

I push through rubbery rhodedendron leaves towards the afternoon.

Spiderwebs plant ghostly kisses on my face, weave themselves into my hair.

Then I am free: sapphire bluebells flow around me, meander
through

a treeless meadow. Far below, the murmuring sea rolls in,

white lace and peacock, gentle on smooth golden sands.

Oh the comfort of the splashing children's chirps and squeals,

the catty calls of herring gulls,

the wide warm dome of sunlit sky.

A VIRTUAL CELEBRATION

BY ANN MUNDLER

One sparkling Spring morning, a perfect May Day

Through my open kitchen window I spy

A maypole across the way.

Red and white stripes like peppermint candy

Pointing through leaves bright as young lettuce

To a freshly washed sky, blue as best lapis.

The fiddler strikes up 'Come lasses and lads'

They appear like magic, taking leave of their dads.

Chattering, dancing and clapping they come

To the song of the strings and the beat of the drum.

Coloured ribbons weave, the music crescendos

To the whooping of laughter and pointing of toes.

The noise is ear-splitting, gaiety reckless

Dancers, fiddler and onlookers breathless.

The reel rolls on I tap my feet

Caught up infectiously in the musical beat.

With no warning at all the fiddle is silenced

By a raucous siren destroying the ambience.

Startling, bewildering, uninvited and sudden

The ceasing of dancing and revelry unwelcome.

I force my wayward mind back to reality

Chasing away my heart-warming fantasy

A vibrating clunk, the rumble of a train

The maypole is the level crossing gate again.

JUST WONDERING

BY ANN MUNDLER

Most days I see
the slow, dignified processions
from my window.

I often wonder
how it would feel to lie
in a polished wooden box
surrounded by flowers.

Whenever they ask
'Where do you live?'
I always reply
'On the way to the crematorium.'