

Annie's Box of Bits and Bobs



Ann Carter

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That Last Day

Disgusted, I stared at breakfast of buttered toast and coffee and shook my head. It should have been croissants and Danish pastries, but last night I'd been too eager to get home and whip the flat into some sort of tidy-flat shape and forgotten to buy them. Now it was too late. Surveying my surroundings, I also realised it was too late to pretend I had any sense of style when it came to furnishing my flat.

Crunching toast between sips of coffee, I considered the trappings of a life spent in the murky depths of Boston. The red settee had come with the flat. Faded and worn, it was only fit for dumping on a patch of ground so yobs-without-jobs could have somewhere to sit while watching cars burn. I liked to think I was saving it from such an ignominious fate. The fridge was another reject, snatched from a second-hand shop because of its zany egg boxes and 50s style chrome handle. The kitchen table I had inherited from my mother. Through a half-open doorway, I could see the footboard of the double bed I had shared with my love-rat of a husband, Jeff. I should have thrown that out after the divorce but at the time didn't have

the money to replace it. As years passed, it was just easier to keep the bed than change it. The only new item in the whole flat was my red laptop.

A chime from the ancient mantle clock warned me I had to leave in fifteen minutes, or I'd be late for work.

Bloody Hell, woman! It's your last day on earth and you're worried about being late. Get a grip!

It was the realisation that I was leaving so little behind that was really annoying me, not the decision to spend my last day alive working. All I had to show for thirty-five years walking God's good earth was one ex-husband, a flat filled with second-hand furniture, and Simon my cat.

Don't cry! Damn, damn and bloody damn.

Knuckling away the tears, I pushed the plate aside and glared at the exercise book on the table. Slowly, I drew it close. Every instinct screamed at me to leave it alone. A rebellious forefinger traced the letters written across the cover in purple felt-tip pen.

Emily Marton, 15th July 1978 – My name and date of birth.

I often wondered what my work mates would have said if I told them my mother had been a witch. They'd probably joke about warts and toothless grins, but Mum wasn't like that. She was lovely, funny and kind. She looked like any other middle-aged housewife with long frizzy hair and a hankering for wide gypsy skirts. Beneath the clothes, however, from her skin to her bones, she was a witch. She made potions for those who knew about her powers and gave tarot readings for those who could only guess. If she was disappointed that I refused to follow in her witchety footsteps, she never showed it.

I was helping her with her shopping the day she slipped down the steps outside her house and hit her head on the municipal handrail. Her last words, odd as they seemed at the time, had

been strangely prophetic.

“Forgot to empty the rubbish,” she gasped as she lay in my arms, her eyelids fluttering. “Damn”.

Afterwards...after the hospital, the nurses and the police, I found the exercise book with my name on it in the rubbish bin next to the writing table. That was the only cleaning I needed to do. The rest of the house had been scrubbed from top to bottom. On the kitchen table she left envelopes labelled “Rent” and “Cat’s League”, next to her Will and Post Office savings book. She always said she knew when she was going to die. I’d thought that was just witchety talk aimed at the tight-lipped women with plastic jewellery who came for tarot readings on Thursday afternoons.

She died four years ago and I still missed her. If the exercise book was to be believed, however, I’d be seeing her soon.

On the first page she had written:

July 1980 – A new beginning, a cautious step on a long journey. Care to be taken with small sums of money.

August 1980 - Friends look to you for advice...

There was a two-line entry for each month of my life and a new page for every new year. One of the sharpest memories from my school days was winning the 100 metres dash at sports day, and then going into the toilets to find my underclothes soaked in blood. That morning Mum had warned me about my period starting. She’d even given me pads and a change of underwear to keep in my gym bag. I can’t believe I never noticed her iron-clad foresight. I just took it all for granted.

As I turned the pages, the days of my life fluttered past like autumn leaves. December 2006, the month Jeff took his accountant Marcie to Wales, the entry read:

Dec 2006 – Past - The Moon (Confusion/dishonesty) Present -

Reversed Emperor (Problems with an older man). Future - The Hanged Man (sacrifice and changes?) A cheating husband?

The entries went on well past the day she died. With ice-cold dread I read the final entry.

June 2015 – Past- Nine of Swords (anxiety and pain), Present – The Burning Tower (Trauma/ accidents) Future – Death !!! 25th June

The exclamation marks were pressed deep into the page, as if she'd been angry at the tarot cards she'd drawn. As angry as I felt reading those words today...on the 25th of June 2015, the day my life was supposed to end.

Reading the book again was like picking at a scab. I knew what it said. The words weren't going to change just because they terrified me.

Enough!

I tossed my mug and plate into the bowl and washed them. Three minutes later, I left a pristine kitchen and headed for the bedroom. I dressed while Simon my cat watched me from my pillow. I gave him a gentle ear tickle for being so patient. In the kitchen I found an old plastic shopping bag and walked from room to room, throwing away everything I wouldn't want a stranger to see; last night's pyjamas, old shampoo bottles, left-over food, half-empty sauce bottles. It wasn't until I'd rammed the exercise book on top of all that rubbish and tied the handles together with a tight desperate knot, did I realise how badly my hands were shaking.

A couple a deep breaths and I felt strong enough to pick up a box of cat food and stagger downstairs with it. I knocked on the door to Flat 1A and waited. Curly white hair framed Mrs Whitmore's heavily wrinkled face as she opened the door in answer to my summons.

“Ah Milly...Simon’s food,” she said with a warm smile. “And where is...?”

We both glanced down to where Simon had wrapped himself around my ankles, purring like a train.

“Make a sandwich and he’ll take no notice,” I said, smiling at Simon’s begging. “Get his food out and there he is. I reckon he knows where the cans are every moment of the day.”

“Cats are aware of their owners,” Mrs Whitmore told me, a mischievous grin tugging at the corners of her mouth. “After all, if they could use a can opener, they wouldn’t need us, would they? So let’s make him happy and give him some food.”

Simon trotted after the old lady as she hobbled towards the kitchen with one of the tins clutched in her arthritic hand.

“Traitor,” I whispered, leaving the box just inside the door. This was the same subterfuge we played every year. Mrs Whitmore left Simon to his food and returned to say goodbye.

“You’ll be back on the 10th then?” she asked.

“Yes,” I lied. “I hope he doesn’t eat your salmon dinner this time.”

“He won’t because I won’t leave it where he can get it,” Mrs Whitmore replied. There was a twinkle in her eye as she continued. “Off you go and enjoy yourself. Bring back a good-looking Spaniard for those of us who can’t afford the travel insurance.”

“Mrs Whitmore!”

“I’m old, my dear, not dead,” she said, grinning as she closed the door.

Mrs Whitmore might have buried four husbands, but it seemed she was game for at least one more. When Mum said, “love well and live long,” I think she had Mrs Whitmore in mind.

With only five minutes to spare, I rushed upstairs, grabbed

my coat and handbag and reluctantly said my last farewells. Three minutes later I was standing at the bus shelter. Jenny, a teenager who worked at the bakery in town, joined me.

"No bike today?"

"It's got a flat," I lied, compounding the falsehood by adding, "I'm off on holiday tomorrow."

When the bus came, we sat together. Jackie chatted about her week in Cyprus, but I wasn't really listening. Instead I watched the traffic through the wet, grimy windows. Riding the bike to work was a nightmare. Cars pushed in from side roads without noticing you. Buses swerved between parked trucks. Schoolboys dashed across the road without looking. I dreaded being run over, so today, not wanting to tempt fate, I was taking the bus.

Getting off at Gibb Street, I dashed across the pavement to Berkley House. The shadowy foyer, with its marble floors and cream walls, felt like an oasis of calm after the bustle of the street outside. I scuttled up several flights and took my coat off before pushing open a door labelled Berkley Enterprises. I made it to my workstation without being noticed, or so I thought.

Blue eyes beneath thinning brown hair peered out over the cubicle divider in front of me. It was James, my supervisor. Berkley Enterprises was the largest print works in the Lincolnshire. James and I made up its graphic art department.

"You're fifteen minutes late, Emily sweetie," he pointed out. "Big Dan was on the prowl again. I told him you'd gone downstairs to get the coffee."

Daniel Biggs, aka Big Dan, was the area manager. He ruled the office with a rod of iron, shouting at latecomers and timing coffee breaks. He terrified me, but not James.

"That's coffee-making blackmail," I said, accepting his empty mug.

"Yes, sweetie," he agreed with an overblown sigh, "but I'm the one covering your ass, so jump to it. We've got a lot to get through today."

James was right...as usual. It took me all morning to finish the book covers for Alan Philps' three book sword-and-sorcery series. I was enjoying a well-earned break when the phone rang. It was Dalgleish and Price, my solicitors.

"Miss Marton," a female voice informed me, "we seem to have misplaced the Will you signed last week. Do you think you could come in and sign another one for us?"

"Would 12:30 suit," I asked, checking my watch.

An hour later I found myself sitting at my solicitor's desk, listening to his version of events.

"It's a complete mystery," Brian Dalgleish told me, shrugging his broad shoulders. "We can't find the will anywhere. However, now that you've signed the replacement and we've witnessed it, you're good to go. I believe you're off to Majorca?"

He moved around the desk as he spoke and offered me his hand. Apparently our meeting was over.

"Yes, I leave tomorrow," I said, accepting his warm handshake.

Dalgleish and Price had helped me buy my flat. Brian was their senior partner. He was fortyish, lean, with kind brown eyes and dark, straight hair fading to grey at the temples. He had been the first person I'd thought of when I realised I would need someone to take care of things...afterwards.

"Let me see... You've been trekking in the Himalayas and white-water rafting in the Rockies. So what death-defying sport awaits you in Majorca?"

I liked Brian, always had. His brown eyes were the sort you

could drown in. His lips promised the softest kisses. Angry at such schoolgirl fantasies, I turned to the photograph on his desk. A lively-looking boy leant close to a little girl with huge brown eyes. Brian was married. He had a family. I had no right to think of him like that.

When a second hand pressed against my captive fingers, I looked up to find him frowning at me.

"Are you alright?" he asked.

He seemed concerned. I shook my head. How could I tell him I was going to die, that he'd never see me again, that I was terrified of being torn away from all that was warm and bright? Ignoring the alarm bells going off in my head, I stood on tiptoe, closed my eyes and gave in to the last chance to indulge that schoolgirl fantasy. I reached upward and kissed him. I held my breath as he kissed me back, pulling me closer. There was a golden moment where I imagined bodies entwined beneath satin sheets and sunlight flickering through the trees.

No!

I heard him call my name as I hurried out. For pity's sake, why did I do that? Ye Gods! He must think I went around offering myself to every bored businessman I met.

I was still fuming when I got back to the office. James' raised eyebrows had me diving into my computer; cutting, shading, manipulating images, adding titles and bywords. Anything to keep my mind off my fears. I managed to finish two more book covers before the scraping of chairs warned me that work was over for the day.

"So, we'll see you back on the 10th?" James asked, threading his arms into the narrow sleeves of his denim jacket. "The drafts for the Baker illustrations should be back by then. Enjoy!"

The office emptied quickly. I saved my work, sent James

copies of everything; then switched off my computer. From the office window, I watched the rush-hour traffic far below. People scuttled along dark, busy streets. These were my last few hours. I wondered how I would die. Would it hurt? I couldn't resent Mrs Whitmore her three scores years and ten. After all, babies and children died every day. I'd had thirty-five good years, travelling, meeting life head on. There had been affairs along the way, but no one alive who'd miss me when I died.

"Err...hello."

Brian Dalgleish stood just inside the main office door, nervously offering up a large envelope.

"You left without your copy," he explained, dropping the envelope like a hot potato onto the nearest desk.

"You seemed upset..." he continued, examining the room. "I wondered if you'd like to get a coffee and, err... talk."

Is every married man I know a cheat?

"Yes, we could go for coffee," I snapped, "but wouldn't your wife have something to say about that?"

Brian's head jerked up, a wan smile filled his face.

"She might, but after running off with my ex-partner, I don't think her opinion really matters. Do you?"

An awkward silence filled the room.

"And the children?"

"With her in Cambridge," he replied. "I don't get to see them as often as I'd like."

The clock on the wall ticked. Machinery hummed. Somewhere a lift door opened with a clunk.

"Coffee?" he repeated.

In reply, I crossed the room and looked up into those gentle brown eyes. This time when we kissed, it was a slow pressing of lips, of bodies moving closer, of tongues leisurely exploring.

"Coffee sounds great," I said, coming up for air.

Much, much later, I woke to flickering sunlight. Plaid curtains flapped at the open window. A red velvet cover lay crushed at the foot of a huge mahogany bed. Naked beneath the sheets, I stretched like a cat, luxuriating in the opulent surroundings. If this was heaven, I should have died long ago.

Brian appeared in the doorway, holding up two captive paper bags.

"Breakfast!" he announced.

It was morning; I was alive, and I had spent the night in the arms of a wonderful man. Finding the clothes I'd discarded the night before, took several minutes. Music was playing in the kitchen as I walked down the stairs, examining the artwork on the walls. Brian had impeccable taste. I couldn't believe how perfect we were for each other. The picture at the very bottom, however, stopped me dead in my tracks. I stared at three tarot cards placed in a line and surrounded by a red border. The first two were the Nine of Swords and the Burning Tower, the cards from my book, the ones announcing my death. A cold shiver slithered down my neck.

"Do you like it?" Brian asked, standing at my elbow, holding a half bitten doughnut. "I got it from a local charity shop. It's supposed to represent *Love Conquers All*."

With trembling hands, I turned the picture over, hoping to see a "Made in Taiwan" sticker. Instead, I found my mother's distinctive scrawl.

"To my darling Milly: Love well, live long."

Frantically I turned it back. The third card should have been the dancing skeleton of Death, but it wasn't. Instead, it showed a man and woman holding hands. It was the Lovers. That's when I remembered shooting stars spinning across the sky, a

rosebud opening at a word, lips that kissed away pain. I thought she'd abandoned me to my fate, but what mother would let her child die when the witch within her could prevent it? I almost sobbed with relief.

"When's your flight?" Brian asked, dusting sugar from his face. "The girls in the bakery said a truck crashed into the bus stop outside your building last night, just as they were closing. Luckily no one was hurt, but they've shut the road for repairs. We'll need another ten minutes to get you to the airport in time."

I took a deep breath and closed my eyes. Suddenly I knew exactly how I wanted to spend the next few weeks.

"Don't worry about my flight," I told him, slowly removing my blouse and draping it teasingly across the mahogany banister. I swanked up the stairs in just my bra, turning at the top to find him staring at me with his mouth open wide.

"What about breakfast?" he mumbled.

I pushed open the bedroom door, looked back and gave him a low, come-hither whistle. Footsteps pounded up the stairs behind me. I grinned. I had stared death in the face and learned that life without love was no life at all. After all my mother's help, I'd be stupid not to use every opportunity to make up for lost time.

Sweet Treats

Now Halloween is coming,
it's time to play my part,
I'll dress up like a vampire,
move slowly, it's an art.
When children come acalling,
I'll gather up the treats.
I'll push the door wide open,
and offer them the sweets.
Their greed will make them careless,
fat fingers stretch to grasp.
If one child stands alone there,
my chance will come at last.
Bright shines the life within them
A child so young and new.
I will harness all that fear,
to show what's really true.
They think we dwell in fiction,
us keepers of the night.
But how could the darkness shield
such horrors from man's sight?

Adults should all remember,
where children soon perceive,
that evil flies abroad now
on this all-hallow's eve.
But when they come to ask me
what frightened Sally so,
I'll smile and cruelly ask them,
"Why send her off alone?"
It's long since last I fed well,
but they are safe you see,
cos candy makes them taste bad,
so sickly-ickly sweet.
Later my lovelies.
Mhuuaaahhhh

Songs of Stone and Fire

I couldn't help a certain swelling of pride as the three members of my team leaned in to the computer screen and studied the image.

"Oh my God!" Jeff whispered, his mouth open, his eyes wide.

"It's sure an ugly brute," Michael contributed with a shudder.

Michael had surprised us all by refusing to take that last step. I hadn't expected our extreme-sports-jungle-trekker to be so afraid of a challenge.

"How big do you think it is?" he now asked, his eyes narrowing.

"The rift was 1.4 metres wide," Jeff pointed out before anyone else could speak. As the mathematician of our four-man team, he could always be relied upon to have answers to the hard questions. "If the opening is the same width on the other side," he continued, tapping numbers into the flexible calculator on his wrist, "the creature should be 2.6 metres tall."

"Eight and a half feet with four rows of teeth," Michael added, his lip curling in disgust as he stared at the screen. "One bite from that would drop an elephant."

After measuring the screen with a ruler and tapping a few

more buttons, Jeff announced, "A mouth eighteen inches wide could certainly take a large bite out of an elephant's leg." Jeff always took everything so literally. As project leader, I made a point of giving him itemised instructions for every task, no matter how simple.

"Hell, why go for a leg when you could take off the whole head," Michael spat.

Before Jeff could begin measuring the screen again, my second-in-command stood up and angrily stormed out of the room. Worried he might have seen something I'd missed, I followed and found him pacing the musty corridor outside, nervously fidgeting with the car keys in his pocket.

"What the bloody hell were you thinking of Matthew?" he demanded. "You're meddling with things you don't understand."

For the sake of our long friendship, I let the accusation pass.

"I know what started out as an investigation into this place's magnetic anomaly," I explained, "has led us down strange paths, but we've been down these sorts of paths before. This is what we do. What is really worrying you?"

It was true. We had worked together on numerous projects for Cambridge University's Physics Department during the last fifteen years. In all that time, I had never seen him so spooked.

"Fifty years ago, the threat of a nuclear holocaust forced the government to build this place. If the day ever came when the world went totally mad and people blew themselves up, at least they'd have this little hole-in-the-ground to call home." He spared a brief glance for the massive stone blocks which made up the ceiling. "Why anyone would want to buy this mouldy 250 acre city, 120 feet underground, filled with rusty, out-of-date technology, so they could pack it with wall to wall data storage, I will never know. If you ask me, this whole place is a death

trap. And that was before we dragged ourselves down here and ripped a hole in the universe."

"You know the magnetic anomaly was causing insurmountable problems with Capital Data's equipment. That's why they sent for us," I reminded him. "We had to find where it was coming from, and if possible, neutralise it. All we've done is measure its strength and frequency and induce a similar field with an opposing polarity to try and cancel it out."

"And how did that go exactly?" He sneered as he spoke, shaking his head.

"It is quite possible we created some sort of opening inside the annulus, one we immediately shut down."

"But then, against my strongest advice, you re-opened it, didn't you?" Michael snapped at him, his eyes blazing.

"Just for half a second so the high-speed camera could record what was happening. It wasn't until we slowed the video down that we could see what was going on, could see this creature on the other side. I don't know why you're so upset because I'm really excited. This is a cutting edge discovery!"

"This isn't cutting edge," Michael insisted, breathing hard and jabbing an accusing finger at the room we'd just left. "This is...tampering with the bloody unknown! We could have opened up a doorway to Hell for all we know. You can't tear a hole in reality and not expect consequences. This isn't one of those bloody online fantasy games you lot are always playing."

"But the rift is closed," I reminded him, "and it won't be opened again until we know more. Much more."

"And it should stay bloody closed!" he growled.

"We're scientists, Michael. Pushing back the boundaries is what we do."

"This is different!" Michael was not just trying to make a point;

he was seriously frightened. He was breathing hard, his face had turned red, the veins on his forehead bulged and throbbed. "You know I hate this god-forsaken hole. I've had a bad feeling about this place from the moment we stepped inside."

"Michael..." I tried.

"That thing is...alien," he hissed. "You mess with that stuff at your peril. What if half a second was enough time for some foreign germ or a small insect to cross over? That half a second could be enough to damn the whole goddamn human race!"

With a shock, I realised he was right. We hadn't taken enough precautions, not against the sort of things he was talking about. We'd opened a hole and peeked through, but what if some unknown danger had crawled through?

"You're right," I told him, battling down an icy certainty that I had just made the worst mistake of my life.

"We've got to shut everything down," he repeated.

I nodded. "We might already be infected," I whispered, staring at my hands as if they could show the contagion running through our veins.

"Or we might not," Michael snapped, stepping back to the door and opening it with a bang, startling the other two.

"Dismantle the annulus," he told them, pointing to the huge split ring covered in windings, sitting on a metal frame in the centre of the room.

They looked at me for confirmation. After all, I was the Professor of Advanced Physics, not Michael. Numbly, I nodded. Without a word, they began breaking the equipment down into its component parts. Michael helped with an urgency that was contagious.

"Does anyone feel...different?" I asked.

"Actually, I feel bloody marvellous," Jeff, remarked. "It's not

every day you get to peer into another dimension. Wheel out the Nobel prize and carve our names on it!"

Michael groaned, but Jeff, with his carrot-coloured hair and devil-may-care grin, ignored him. He was our joker, the light-footed jester to Adam's lumbering knight.

"I am confused," Adam confessed as he coiled a thick cable around his hand and elbow. "What's going on?"

Adam was our electrical technician, a man who made light, magnetism and electricity dance. He was also a hulking six-foot rugby player. In real life, he was a gentle giant, but in our World of Warcraft games, he was Sir Gilmore, the battle-hungry black knight.

"Considering what we've seen on the other side of the opening," I forced myself to admit, "I am worried about the possibility of alien bacteria crossing into our world."

Adam blinked, his brown eyes glazing as what I said sank in.

"Oh shit," he whispered, winding the cable more quickly, as if that could somehow undo the damage.

"Jeff," I asked our mathematical wizard, my mind working overtime, "have you finished downloading the video file to the department server?"

"We're piggy-backing fifty-year old telephone cables," he reminded me. "It'll take another ten minutes."

"Lock the file. I don't want anyone else seeing it. Then contact the Health Protection Agency and tell them we've found something alien down here. Ask them to send a team over. They will probably want to quarantine the whole place, with us in it."

They groaned but no one offered any further comment, probably hoping confinement would be the worst we'd have to endure.

"Adam, how much diesel do we have left?"

“About 100 gallons,” he answered. “Enough to keep the lights on for months.”

“Take the bike,” I said, referring to our only means of underground transport. If we left a screwdriver in the van with our ground support driver Jim, the half mile hike through the tunnels to the antiquated lift shaft went a lot quicker using the bike. “Phone Jim from the lift and tell him we won’t be coming up tonight. Tell him to expect a visit from the Agency. Ask him to send some food down with the agency guys but stay topside till we have been given the all clear.”

Adam nodded and headed for the steel door.

“And walk through the props,” Michael insisted with a growl. “We don’t want you hitting one and bringing the whole bloody roof down.”

Adam grunted good-naturedly as he shambled out. I smothered a smile. Everyone knew Michael hated that particular area of the former mine. The rock was unstable and was being held by hundreds of steel props wedged between floor and ceiling. A moment later we heard the bike’s characteristic squeak as Adam cycled off.

“Is the download finished?” I asked Jeff.

Before he could answer there was a deep, rumbling growl. Like everyone else, I froze and listened intently, wondering if today was the day the roof did collapse. An instant later, the clatter of metal hitting stone reached our ears. Michael was the first one out the door. Around the first bend we found the bicycle lying on the stone floor, the back wheel spinning. Next to it sat a single white trainer. It was Adam’s.

“Where did he go?” Jeff asked, doing a complete rotation.

The corridor, with lights strung out on temporary cables every twenty feet or so, stretched off into the distance. I walked

forward, testing the doors on either side, but they were all locked.

"What is that?" Jeff said, pointing upwards.

With the others, I stared at a line of dripping, dark spots splattered across the ceiling.

"They weren't there before," he insisted.

"It's just water," Michael snorted. "This place is riddled with cracks."

Jeff bent down and rubbed a finger over a dark spot on the floor, before lifting it up to the light.

"It's blood," he insisted.

Michael peered upwards. "It can't be. How could you get blood up there?"

"Not how could you," Jeff whispered in horror. "Whose?"

There was a long silence, so I put into words what everyone was thinking. "This doesn't make sense," I told them. "If Adam was hurt, where did he go?"

"That's not the only strange thing happening at the moment," Jeff whispered. "I think you should take a look at something I just noticed a moment ago."

We followed him back to the operations room, eager to put some distance between us and the droplets of blood in the corridor.

"Watch," he insisted, standing next to his computer.

The screen showed a still image of the creature we had seen earlier. It stood on four huge legs in a rock-littered glade surrounded by spindly trees. The thick legs supported a bloated, spider-like torso. A wide, fang-lined mouth opened up beneath round, hunger-driven eyes.

"If you play the video frame by frame," Jeff was saying, "you can see it spit."

On the screen a pale blur formed in the monster's mouth before moving at incredible speeds towards the opening they'd created.

"Adjusting the resolution," he said, fingers flickering over the keyboard, "you can see..."

"A tongue," Michael declared as the blur took shape, "like a lizard's."

"But the really interesting stuff," Jeff added with a sigh, "is this."

We stared at the screen as he described what we were seeing.

"Here the tongue strikes the opening in the annulus. It looks like it disappears. In the next frame, the tongue had retracted. The problem is..."

"It never came through on this side," Michael added, scratching his head.

Michael and Jeff continued discussing theories of partial phasing while I agonised over Adam's disappearance. I was just about to join the invisible alien debate when the growling returned. Everyone stared at the door, then jumped back when something heavy and solid crashed into it, shaking the frame. The steel door shuddered repeatedly, eventually buckling inwards under the raucous hammering. Michael picked up his chair and held it up to defend himself. Jeff grabbed a cable wrench. As suddenly as it started, the banging stopped. I waited a few seconds before cautiously dragging the crumpled door open. Plaster littered the floor outside. The corridor was empty.

"Invisible aliens," Jeff insisted, his face ashen.

I shook my head. It just didn't make sense.

"It could be phasing in and out of our reality," Michael proposed.

"Attacking us when its resonance matches ours," I agreed.

Jeff shook his head. "Are you saying that thing killed Adam?"

I nodded. No one spoke but I knew what they were thinking. Adam had been killed because of me, because of the risks we'd taken.

"How long?" I asked Michael.

"Between it being here or there?" he replied. "From what we've heard, I would guess it is here for ten seconds, then ten minutes over there."

"Do you think it is tied to a variable rift?"

"No. It appeared down the hallway, then here. I'd say *it* is fluctuating in and out of our reality, and when it's not here, it's walking around its home world wondering where the hell dinner went."

"So, it could reappear anywhere here in ten minute's time?" He nodded. "We have to move, now!"

For the next hour, we evaded the creature by moving from room to room, locking ourselves behind the strongest doors we could find. The creature was intelligent, however, finding our hiding places in mere minutes. Barricaded inside the old laundry room, listening to it pounding the door, I came to an unpalatable decision.

"It stays out of phase for the full ten minutes but stays in-phase for longer each time. I reckon it won't be long before it's here permanently. We need to destroy it before it makes earth its new home. God forbid it should find a way to the surface."

Michael nodded, more eager for the final confrontation than I was. Jeff just looked nervous.

"The telephone exchange would make a good trap, the corridor narrows down there," Michael suggested.

I agreed. The growling outside stopped. Silence brought a

temporary reprieve.

"That was five minutes and twenty seconds," I said, checking my watch. "Michael, you and Jeff take the cables and see what you can do. I've got another idea. I'll meet you at the exchange in eight minutes."

I kept an eye on the time as I raced to the old diesel tank and filled the four empty cans we had left there the day before. I hurried and carried them two at a time to the propped section of the main corridor and hid them in a dark corner. I checked my watch then raced south to see what Michael and Jeff had come up with. They were huddled over a wooden cable spool next to the enormous 1960s rusting telephone exchange.

"We've rigged high voltage wires either side of this corridor," Michael said, pointing to the bare cables lying against the walls, cables that were connected to a sturdy high voltage switch stapled to the wall.

"When I throw that switch, anything walking through that gap gets a three-hundred volt whammy."

A low rumbling in the distance warned us our time was almost up. We all stared in the direction of the noise, watching, waiting. Several anxious minutes passed before the creature lumbered into view from the far side of the trap. We had never seen it this close before. Michael took half a step forward.

"Move back," he warned, his hand hovering over the switch. Jeff and I shuffled away from the cables.

"Let's see if this bastard can dance," Michael said with a grin, throwing the lever and scuttling to safety.

We watched, transfixed as the creature crawled slowly toward us, its glance testing the walls, its teeth bared, its long tongue swaying from side to side like a pendulum. It shrieked when it reached the cables, and white lightning flared upwards, striking

it in the chest. It was still wailing when it toppled backwards, its feet beating the air.

I could see it was hurt but not dead. I stepped forward with a wrench, intending to club the thing to death, but I'd hardly gone two steps before it shimmered, then disappeared.

"Damn! We need something bigger if we are going to kill it. You two go," I yelled at them. "Wait for me at the lift."

"I'll catch up," Michael told Jeff, pushing him down the corridor toward the exit.

"Be careful. This isn't one of your bloody computer games," Michael insisted, squeezing my shoulder. "You'll only get one chance at this. Don't do anything stupid."

"I won't," I assured him.

I left him there with a frown on his face and ran towards the weakest part of the mine to make my final preparations. I did not have Adam's genius for all things electrical, but I had been a competent research engineer before being appointed Head of Department. A few moments later I had wires strung from light to light. I was ready, but waited until I heard the now familiar rumbling. Grabbing one of the half-empty fuel cans, I banged it as hard as I could against a metal prop. The noise echoed through miles of tunnels. I banged again, then stepped back into a darkened hallway and waited with my fingers resting lightly on the corridor's light switch. I knew I wouldn't have to wait long.

The creature's head almost touched the ceiling as it lumbered towards me. Its mouth hung open, saliva dripped like venom from rows of sharpened teeth. The black mark on its chest where the high-energy arc had struck it earlier, hadn't frightened it.

"Come and get me," I whispered, drawing it in.

When it reached the forest of props, it hunched down, cautiously examining the strange terrain laid out before it. The multi-faceted eyes glittered when it saw me there, waiting. It shuffled forward slowly, carefully avoiding the metal posts, a hungry gleam in its eyes. I watched until it was right in the middle of the props before turning on the lights.

The wiring had been arranged so the switch diverted power to the four cans tied to the various props. Inside each can I had pushed a broken light bulb. As I stood there waiting, I imagined the glowing coils heating the diesel inside the can until the fuel was hot enough to ignite, hopefully, causing an explosion. I wanted to bring the roof down right on top of this ugly creature's head.

It watched me as I edged backwards down the corridor, intending to get a good distance away from the props before the explosion went off. It saw me retreating and hesitated, looking at me, then looking at the hundreds of steel columns all around it. The creature knew something was wrong.

In my mind I was no longer the staid, unmarried University Physics Professor. I had already settled into my World of Warcraft persona. I was Philos, the Arch Mage, hero of many a mission which saved the world from evil incarnate. He knew all about throwing himself against impossible odds to save his comrades from monsters.

I watched as the thing stood still, before making a decision. It lowered its head, and foot by foot, carefully wound its way through the forest of steel columns. I stood watching, fascinated by its determination, until it emerged from the props and stood upright.

I saw its eyes focussed on its prey, the human it had come to kill. There was a moment of panic when I realised how badly I

had miscalculated. The cans hadn't exploded. The monster was now so close I could smell its burnt flesh and see the spines on its tongue before it rolled it up into a tight ball, ready to strike.

With a blink of an eye, I saw my options laid out before me. I could run and save myself, and try again, but I was responsible for this nightmare. I had to kill this creature before it found a way out of the mine. If it got topside, the carnage would be unimaginable. My only choice was to trust my abilities. For my plan to work, I had to keep the creature in that section of the corridor. If I ran and it chased me, I might survive, but so might it. I had to stay and act as bait. I stood my ground and flinched as the monster took another cautious step. It was only ten feet away now. I shivered, remembering the blood splattered across the ceiling.

A split second later and the world exploded. Tongues of flame rushed outwards, dashing me against the wall. I fell, feeling rubble beneath my hands, hearing stone and bone, creak and slip. Unable to breathe, I watched, mesmerised as huge slabs of stones began falling from the ceiling. There was a deep agonising groan, followed by more rock and so much dust I couldn't see. There was a growling rumble all around me, followed by a sense of being pushed downwards, followed by agonising pain and crushing...blackness.

In the dark centre of the earth the Arch Mage battled a ravaging Daemon with spells of Fire and Stone, till both were utterly destroyed.

His companions mourned their loss.

*They sealed the mountain out of respect for his sacrifice,
but also to ensure that Daemons
would never again walk the world of men.*

The Thorn and the Rose

The rose did bloom,
the thorn allowed
its beauty to eclipse.
But autumn came,
cool winds did blow,
its petals dry and crisp.
With rain and frost,
winter flies by
the thorn stood there alone.
Through snow and ice,
and hail and wet,
and winds that softly moaned.
As days grew long.
and leaves unfurled,
the warm sun kissed its skin.
It stood erect,
as buds appeared,
and hid beneath its kin.
By thorn allowed
as days grow long,

the rose takes centre stage.
At end of year,
it hides its tears,
when views its empty cage.

A Sea Change

Two sets of rusted, twisted hinges were all that were left of the doors to the old lecture room. The first thing that struck her as she stood on the threshold of that dark, cavernous space, struggling to see inside, was the smell. The place reeked of mould and decay, of rotten timbers and crumbling plaster. In one corner, she could see sunlight arrowing down through holes in the ceiling. Dark algae covered the walls and floor. Despite its dilapidated condition, the lecture room reminded her of happier times.

Back in 2032, more than thirty years ago, she had been one of the bright young things scattered around this very room, waiting for the new Climate Engineering course to begin. Silent among the crowd of excited youngsters, she had scanned the room, soaking up the atmosphere, sharing that sense of wonder while inspecting the back of a young man's head who sat near the front. The thick, dark hair bounced as he punctuated his conversation with generous hand gestures. She wondered if he was Italian, given his olive skin and Roman nose. As soon as the lecturer entered the room, the noise died down. The boy in front then straightened up, turned around, and horror of

horrors, winked at her. She had been a child then, teetering on the cusp of life. Like so many others in that class, she'd been terrified of taking those first adult steps, but equally terrified of missing what life could offer.

"I thought I'd find you here," Malcolm mumbled from behind her shoulder.

The once youthful face looked deeply etched in the light of the electric lantern held at arm's length. Gone was the youthful mop of unruly black locks, replaced by a receding line of closely cropped grey. Despite the disappearing hair, the last thirty years had been kind to her husband. Regular squash maintained his boyish waistline, while the straight nose and olive skin lent him a distinguished, aristocratic air.

"You shouldn't wander around," he warned her in the waspish, supercilious tone he used these days. "Most of the floorboards are rotten. James would have my guts for garters if anything happened to you."

"Really," she responded with the faintest hint of venom. "Our son is too occupied with his own life to worry about his parents. For the last six months every time I've spoken to him, I've gotten a grunt in reply, and that's only because I have asked him to move his feet so the robot could clean around the cables and flashing lights he calls a work station. I suspect the only time he'd notice I wasn't there was when the laundry pile got so big, it spilled onto his keyboard and got in his way of his work. Even then, I suspect he'd just sweep it aside and continue typing."

Malcolm knew how true her description fitted their only child. His lips twitched. He almost smiled.

"I hear it takes fifteen hundred man-hours to get one of those three dimensional, interactive games ready for the marketplace," he replied with a sniff. "I suppose we should be grateful

computer games are still popular with the masses.”

Ellen nodded. Despite their personal problems, they both wanted to see James make his own way in the world. They had spent their whole adult lives fighting the consequences of rising sea levels and climate change, in the hope of giving their child, and everyone else’s, a world worth living in.

“Do you remember this room?” Malcolm asked as he strode towards the dirt-encrusted window at the far side.

“Lecture room 323,” Ellen replied, stepping in his slime-squashed footprints, remembering his remark about rotten floorboards. “We had talks here on Climate Modelling and Biodiversity.”

“So we did,” her husband snorted, rubbing at the grime on the window with his thumb, making a small opening through which she could see the sky. “And compared to what we know today, it was all such puerile crap! The climate models ignored the Humboldt effect, the sensors they used to measure sea temperature didn’t work. I look back at how they tried to prepare us for the future, and it was like being given stone tools to work with, when we now have robots and sentient computers.”

“Does Poly-Claddit subscribe to the BSMC?” she asked, referring to the military government’s artillery of Superfast Mega Computers housed in a secret mine in Oxfordshire.

“Of course we do,” he snapped. “The rest of the world might be knee deep in power shortages, but good old Britain manages to find just enough elbow grease to keep the computers running. As long as the storms don’t tear down the transmission antennae and the flood barriers keep back the rising water, life goes on. Who knew reclaiming crumbling old buildings could be so profitable? Within government guidelines of course,” he

added, nervously looking around at who might be listening. "Just how much land have we've lost since 2050?" he asked, clumsily changing the subject.

"They put the surface losses at fifteen percent, mostly in low-lying areas near the coast and along the rivers. We could lose another four percent this year. It has been seventy years since the climate change warnings at the World Summit in Rio and the effects are still building."

"We didn't act soon enough," her husband muttered, staring through the small spy hole he'd made. "I bet when you left here in '33 you never thought you'd be back to find it under water?"

"No," she admitted, "I had hoped to come back and finish my degree."

Malcolm gave a mirthless chuckle. "Oh come now," he softly mocked, "if you hadn't got pregnant, you'd have been thrown out. Let's face it, Ellen, academic study was never your strong point. You've been a wonderful wife and mother, so why all this hankering after something you're not?"

Ellen gritted her teeth and refused to rise to the bait. Malcolm was a successful businessman, using his material engineering skills to bring flooded old buildings back to life, but he still felt the need to denigrate her at every turn. There wasn't a day went by that he didn't push in the knife and give it a twist.

Back in 2033 when she found herself pregnant, she saw his willingness to look after her as love. Now, looking back, she could see what he really loved was having her under his control. He cosseted her like a princess when their son was small. It was only when James started school and she began working with the local flood-relief teams did the waspish sarcasm start creeping into everyday conversation. As she climbed the local authority ladder, Malcolm's annoyance grew. He often accused

her of abandoning their son to chase worn-out causes. It was only when the mayor asked her to co-ordinate the regional flood relief efforts, did she feel the full power of his displeasure. For years they hardly exchanged a civil word.

James, aware of the chasm opening up between his parents, withdrew into his virtual world. After years of sniping at each other, they came to an uneasy truce. Ellen never talked about her work and Malcolm kept his remarks to himself.

Whenever they were with friends, however, or at local meetings, he would dive right in, slashing right and left, whittling her self-esteem down to whatever size he thought appropriate. She wondered why she stayed with him. The warmth she once felt had been destroyed long ago, killed by the death of a thousand cuts.

"Sir," someone muttered from the doorway. They turned to find Jackson, Malcolm's second-in-command standing there in coveralls, wiping his hands on an oily rag. "We've installed the pumping unit on the first floor, but we've had to fix the solar panels to the south-facing wall. The roof beams here are rotten, and could collapse at any time. A good sou'wester and we'd all be looking up at the sky. That aside, we're on schedule to start injecting the outer walls in the morning."

The increased rainfall during the 2030s had been devastating. Storms and high winds battered the west coast of Britain for six unrelenting months. Every major river flooded, burying most of the adjacent cities under six feet of water. Shops and factories closed, prompting insurance companies to refuse to insure buildings on flood-plains. Before the 30s were over, more than half a million river-side properties were abandoned, bringing the economy of major cities like London crashing to its knees.

Britain was not the only country to suffer. America endured drought, floods and heavy snowfalls. Storm-surges flooded the Baltic ports, heavy rains swelled European rivers, rain and high winds ruined crops. There were times when she felt the planet was trying to kill them all.

It had always been a numbers game. Humanity was more than just a fast spreading bacteria, it was a co-operative fast-spreading bacteria. Humans shared whatever they had with others of their kind, be it food, medicine or water. It was humanity's strength, but in the end, it was also to be their downfall. With famine relief and international aid, by 2040 the world's population peaked at 10 billion. It was too much for the planet to handle. The floods of 2050 and the wholesale crop failures brought widespread starvation and an almost immediate collapse of the international banking system.

Overnight every insurance company with a British address declared itself bankrupt. Where sterling, the dollar and gold had once underpinned the global economy, soon the only commodity anyone was prepared to trade with was grain. In those early days Britain couldn't produce enough food for their own needs, never mind having enough surplus to barter for luxuries like oil and gas.

If the years from 2050 to 2060 were hard in Europe, for some it was the end of a long dark tunnel. Governments in countries like Iran, India and China disintegrated, followed by fighting and photos of cities in flames. Thousands of refugees fled across seas and mountains. There were stories of bullets keeping waves of starving refugees from their more fortunate neighbour's borders.

Afterwards, an ominous silence would fall and one more corner of the world would go dark. North America survived

more or less intact as did Europe and the oil-producing countries of the Middle East. For the rest of the world, for the countries no longer connected to the internet, no one knew what had happened to them.

Britain survived by doing what it did best, pulling up the drawbridge, repelling invaders and struggling on. Its singular saving grace had to be making all the hard choices early on. Martial law, hostels for the elderly, local feeding stations, forced farm labour and statutory population control were all instituted to keep civil disobedience and mass starvation at bay. Twenty years of military-enforced hardship had been a bitter pill for the freedom-loving Brits to swallow, but it kept the country from falling into the abyss.

With the development of wheat strains capable of growing in the wetter, windier conditions, times were easier and attitudes were changing. It was just a shame Britain's ruling junta didn't see it that way.

"Ma'am." It was Jackson again, but this time he was looking at her. "Your driver's here."

"Is it that ex-commando fellow of yours?" Malcolm asked with a sneer. "Does that mean I'll be eating alone tonight? I know how close you two are these days."

Ellen looked at her husband and was almost tempted to wipe the smirk off his face by telling him the truth. Instead she lied.

"I have a meeting at the Thames network control station in an hour," she told him, showing him the booking on her government-issue wrist computer. "I expect to be home by six."

He nodded but Ellen could see he wasn't happy.

"Is the old infirmary still in one piece?" she asked Jackson as she followed him along the scaffolding surrounding the old, Victorian, red-brick building.

"It's just around the corner ma'am," Jackson replied, pointing ahead. "Do you want to see it?"

Ellen nodded. "I know my way. I wonder if you'd ask my driver to join me."

As she peered through the broken window pane, the paint peeling from the frame, she spotted the old-fashioned beds lining the walls and was reminded of the choices she made as a young woman. Lying on the bed in the far corner, she'd listened as the doctor spelled out her options. She could either keep attending classes and lose the baby or endure four months of bed-rest and give birth to a living child. Of course she chose the latter.

"Minister, you wanted to speak to me?" Mac, her body-guard/minder said. He wore the standard black government army uniform, overlaid with bulky body armour and holstered weapons. He was a lean fighting machine and oozed a no-nonsense air.

"Can we talk?" she whispered. He nodded to the red light on the transmission scrambler carefully tucked into his jacket pocket. They learned early on that they needed to be very careful.

"Is everything ready?" she asked.

"I've set the explosives," he whispered. "We can disappear at any time during the next hour. Are your people in place?"

"Yes, they know what to do."

"Do they know the risks?"

"I told them about Geoffrey."

Geoffrey Palmer, Minister for Food, had been Mac's previous charge. His little-known refusal to add mind-controlling drugs to the population's water supply led to his body being found in a squalid back alley a month later. Yes, they all knew the risks.

"We had better go," she whispered. "We don't want to be late."

Ellen noticed Jackson watching them closely as the small hovercraft pulled away from the semi-submerged building. The government had spies everywhere. As soon as they reached clear water, Mac opened up the throttle and sped upstream, past disintegrating office blocks and crumbling warehouses, all standing in four or five feet of water.

Traffic in the middle of the river was light today. They could make the Shepherd's Bush appointment with time to spare. When they reached Battersea, the two chimneys of the old power station still visible on the skyline, the river ahead was empty. She used her wrist computer to phone ahead. It was important they heard the engines running.

"Hi Peter, it's me, Ellen. Put the coffee on, we'll be with you in about ten minutes."

When she finished, Mac reduced the power to the hydrofoils, letting the craft drift slowly towards a nearby pier. She peeled off her wrist device and left it on the floor, Mac did the same. He helped her disembark, turned the craft around, engaged the throttle and jumped clear before it headed back out into the river. Standing at her side, panting a little, he took out a remote detonator and pressed the button. The force of the explosion rocked her back on her heels, the sound echoing from the buildings all around. Flames engulfed the charred wreckage before it slipped slowly beneath the water.

"They'll hear that all the way to Shepherd's Bush," he warned. "We'd better get moving before they send the army to investigate."

In a nearby shelter they found the army uniform he had hidden for her. Wearing dummy wrist devices, disguised as one of the many foot-patrols, they walked the two miles to their

destination.

"How are we doing, gentlemen?" she asked, entering the underground bunker and finding three anxious, youthful faces turning in her direction. The terrified look held until she tore off her military beret and let her trade-mark blond hair cascade down around her face.

"Thank God," Ewan whispered. "For a moment there, I thought we'd been caught."

"We hacked into the BSMC yesterday and dumped all the Trojans," Henry, their fly-by-the-seat-of-his-pants programmer told her. "There's been no chatter on the line since, so it looks like we're good to go."

"What is it you are doing exactly?" Mac asked, standing behind Henry's chair and peering at his computer screen.

"As you know, the government routes all internet traffic through their boosters at the BSMC," Henry explained. "That's how they keep tabs on everyone, using that and the location sensors in our wrist devices. We selected the most inflammatory information you brought us; the culling of the elderly in the 40s, the mood altering drugs in the water supply, the killing of over three hundred student protestors in Manchester and, later today, at eleven minutes past eleven precisely, all our files will download onto any device linked to the BSMC network. The government will try to pull the plug, so, as soon as I press this button," he declared, holding a dramatic finger above the Enter key. "My computer will download a piece of software which will lock them out for a full ten minutes before burning their hard drives and backups to a fried crisp."

"Would you like the honour," Ellen asked Mac, pointing to the key. "After all, you brought us the files."

"No," Mac mumbled, "I was just an angry bodyguard. You

were the one who had a plan.”

Ellen had been angry, too, remembering the infirmary and the choices she made. She had sacrificed her dreams to ensure a future for her son, only to find she was creating a future where everyone’s life was controlled by three old men determined to stay in power. She’d had enough of Malcom’s hand around her throat all these years, she wasn’t going to let the junta dictate what she did or how she felt. It was time for a radical change.

“Gentlemen, are we ready to unleash chaos and bring down the government?”

The boys nodded. “Do it!” Mac whispered, and for the first time since she had known him, he smiled and then, horror of horrors, winked.

Taking a deep breath, hoping James would one day understand her reasons for doing what she did next, she leaned over and pressed the key.

The Devil dines with Gnomes in mind

The imps and devils all laid a great feast,
 for hell's greatest minions and their King, the Great
 Beast.

Huge bowls and basins were placed on the boards.
 And next to the tin plates were the tridents and swords.
 The menu was vast, as sins on a list.
 Liar's tongue in aspic, too tasty to be missed.
 Great silver salvers of fried hand of thief.
 But what most fought over were the garlands of teeth.
 Eyeballs and liver may feed devil health,
 but teeth could be moulded into hell's greatest wealth.
 To torture the souls that defied hell's call,
 they're moulded into totems to ensnare them all.
 So what did you think that garden gnomes were?
 Just badly made pottery whose eyes seemed to stare?
 They wait till you sleep in the dead of night.
 Knock over your plant pots, hide the bins out of sight.
 Fermenting hatred, they stir up dismay.
 Creating new sinners for their master this way.
 These crudely wrought shapes; a magnet for sin.

Wherever they are placed, discontentment creeps in.
So when you see gnomes just standing around,
stomp hard on their thick heads, grind them into the ground.
But don't be surprised if in the dust far beneath,
you spy the faintest glimmer of rows of white teeth.

Dragon Eggs

Earthquake lay her long jaw on the floor of the cavern and sighed. She was bored. She'd been in the same cave for weeks now and every day which passed had been a repeat of the day before. Squirming and arching her head to get at the itch between her shoulder blades, she raked a broken tooth across the erect scales. Satisfied she had savaged the itch into submission, she rested her head back on the sandy floor and went back to thinking about food.

Weeks of waiting had taken their toll. Once she'd had a full rounded belly; bloated on ripe maidens and plucky minstrels, but now all she could see was the rippled outline of dragon ribs on her iridescent flanks. Looking beyond, she could see the reason for her self-imposed abstinence. A slight bulge in her lower abdomen pinpointed the spot where months ago she had laid three blue eggs on the soft sand before immediately covering them with her huge body to keep them warm.

As a fledgling sitting on one nest among hundreds of others, she had seen the mating flights of the older dragons, heard the females' calls, challenging the males to rise from their lairs and join them in their mid-air couplings. It was much later, when

the mated females grew too fat to chase after their own food, that the bad-tempered snarling and growling started. The nest would give a collective sigh of relief when the gravid females finally took wing and flew south to the birthing caverns.

As the years passed, Earthquake grew from fledgling to youngling and from youngling to hunter. The mating flights were repeated each year, each time witnessed by a new batch of fledglings. Over the years, she developed a hunger for humans, which turned her into one of the nest's best hunters. She ignored the mating calls, determined not to give in to such weakness, but that was before she met Red.

She had not realised it, but the day they met, they had both spotted the same human digging in an open field from opposite sides of her favourite hunting ground. Diving from above, talons extended, she was ready to grab the first good meal she'd seen for weeks, when she almost collided with another dragon, who had the same thought in mind. Startled by his unexpected presence, she swung aside at the last moment, giving the human an opportunity to race like a startled deer for the nearest clump of trees.

On the ground she growled her displeasure at the other dragon, recognising him as Red, one of her nest mates. She had seen the human first; he had interfered, she snarled. His interference made her lose her prey. How dare he! His response was to stamp around in a circle, flattening the grass, obviously embarrassed. She snarled at him again but he ignored her this time, instead lumbering up to the trees and opening his jaws and hurling out a long gobbet of white-hot flame. The nearest trees caught fire. With smoke billowing and twisting in the breeze, she almost missed the pale blur of her human as he bolted from his hiding place, spooked by the flames. A snap

of the huge red head and the creature was hanging limp from Red's jaws. She watched with narrowed eyes as Red opened up the carcass with a delicate claw and nudged the liver and other organs to one side, for her. He swallowed the head in one gulp.

Afterwards, as she dined on the sweet-tasting innards, Red gripped the remaining limbs in his claws and flew back to the nest. She knew part of his prize would be fed to that year's fledglings.

That was why when the next mating season arrived, and Red called to her across the nest, she took to the skies with him and coupled. It was only afterwards, when she got too heavy to chase down her own food, did she realise how long it would be until the next good meal.

Females left the nest for a full half a year, hatching their eggs in caverns to the far south where it was warmer. Only after the eggs hatched, did they return, carrying one little dragonet at a time in their mouths. They returned because all the fully grown dragons at the nest site took part in feeding them.

Since laying her eggs, however, feeling hungry had become a way of life. She woke hungry and went to sleep hungry and felt nagging hunger pangs at all the times in between.

A clanking sound caught her attention. She craned her long neck until she stretched it far enough she could see out of the cavern's entrance. In the late afternoon light, she spotted a human covered in a shiny grey skin, carrying an equally shiny flat stick, clambering up the scree outside. He stumbled in her direction. She withdrew her head and waited. She had heard about these types of humans. Most of his kind ran for cover when they spotted dragons in the sky, but some, a rare few indeed, ran out to meet them.

Her nest mates had told her stories of the grey-skins — the

humans who waved sticks, shouted and screamed, but died just as easily as the rest of his ground-crawling fellows. The only difference was their hard-as-rock skin. Dragons too impatient to carefully crack the skin open and tease out the sweet flesh inside, complained it got wedged between their teeth, sometimes taking years to rattle its way out. After months without food, Earthquake began drooling at the prospect of fresh meat getting within biting distance. She counted her thudding heartbeats as she waited, holding her breath until a grey shape stumbled into the cavern, and shaking its shiny stick, raced towards her. At last. *Crunch! Crunch! Burp!*

Why do Penguins waddle?

Ever wondered why a Penguin waddles?
Why it never flies or jumps or leaps?
Why in a hurry it always dawdles?
Weaving its way to the ocean deeps.
Could it be the length of its little legs?
Could it be the spreading of its waist?
Could it be the many fish it digests?
Or the too few dangers it must face?
Whatever the reason we all agree,
a penguin waddles when it walks, dear.
It's quaint and sweet for all of us to see.
But I've heard it moan when it talks, dear.
For Penguins are birds that want to fly high.
They'd love to be lithe and swift and light.
And circling high they'd be able to dive
bomb, those who laughed at their grounded plight.

Sowing the Wind

John poured the freshly brewed coffee into two mugs, adding plenty of cold milk to both. He didn't put any sugar in his but added two spoonfuls to his companion's.

"This is yours, I believe," he said, lifting the yellow mug and saluting the body sprawled on the kitchen floor. "No, don't bother to get up," he added as he tipped half the mug's contents down the sink.

"Two spoons of sugar? You do know this stuff rots your teeth? Not that you'll be worrying about your teeth after tonight," he added with a scowl.

"You thought you were such a clever bastard, didn't you?" he snarled at the unconscious man as he stood over him, mugs in both hands.

The bruise on the side of the head where he'd hit him with the cane was colouring up nicely. Matt Cranfield had been his friend for more than fifteen years. With dark sandy hair and boyish features, at thirty-two he still looked like the eighteen-year-old boy John had played football with back in high school.

After that head-spinning Senior year, they both went to different universities but still kept in touch. The, following

their college graduations, John found a well-paid job as a claims adjuster for a major insurance firm in Michigan City, while Matt went back to Pillsborough with a degree in forest management and worked for his father at the local sawmill. After two years in Michigan, John met Pauline at one of the firm's dinner parties. Six months and one quiet wedding later, Pauline became Mrs John Houldsworth.

Matt never married. Although his letters were full of comments about the girls he dated, none of those girls had been "the one" apparently. As the years passed, John climbed the corporate ladder, while Matt laboured ten hours a day as the sawmill's underpaid accountant, sales manager and general dogsbody. His letters from that time were all full of bitter words about his paltry wage and his father's arrogance. That all stopped when the old man died. The first John knew about his friend's change of fortune was a rushed email from Matt, telling him about the sale of the mill and how Matt had decided to move to Michigan to start a new life.

They met on Matt's second day in the city. Pauline had been as thrilled as John that they would be seeing more of her husband's high school friend. Matt hadn't been in town long, however, before she started finding fault. She pointed out how driven he was, how he always played to win, whether it was golf, poker or a light-hearted game of basketball. John explained about the rivalry they had enjoyed back in high school, and after ten soul-destroying years in a backstreet sawmill, he couldn't begrudge his friend a little bit of one-upmanship.

As he stood over Matt's comatose frame, John remembered that evening clearly. He and Pauline had been in the bedroom the night she mentioned Matt's need to be the best at everything. John had taken Pauline into his arms, nuzzled her neck and

promised her that Matt was a really great guy and she would soon get to like him. Remembering Pauline's smile, the smell of her hair, the softness of her skin brought tears to his eyes. Reminded of what he'd lost, he swung round and kicked Matt as hard as he could in the back of the head. His glance strayed to the knife block, the ebony handles clustered together, the blades hidden deep inside within the wood.

"Stop it!" he snapped at himself, the sound of his voice drowning out the hum of the refrigerator. "You've got a plan worked out. There's no room in it for messy improvisation. Just stick to the bloody plan!"

"What you forgot, Matt," he growled at the man on the floor, "is that claims adjusters like me wade through bullshit and lies every day of our lives, digging out the truth, and you," he punctuated his point with another kick in the ribs, "are a crock of lying bullshit!"

That's enough, he told himself silently. He crossed the room and put both mugs down on the coffee table. Taking care to not touch anything else, he headed down the corridor.

The plan he'd devised was the best he could come up with in the time available. He had busted a few high-profile insurance scams in his time, so he knew a good con when he saw it. He had taken everything he knew about Matt and wrapped it up in a neat bow. Matt would pay dearly for what he'd done.

In the bathroom, John pulled out a pair of latex gloves and put them on. He had no intentions of leaving fingerprints. After opening the medicine cabinet, he searched through its contents, looking for Matt's sleeping pills. A few weeks earlier his friend had complained about not sleeping and needing help. John soon found what he was looking for, a small bottle of pills labelled Lunestra. The instructions told the user to take one at

bedtime. He carried the bottle to the lounge, where he carefully dropped two small cream pills into his mug of coffee. The instructions said use one pill only, but he needed them to work quickly, and he needed it to look as though someone wanted him unconscious, not merely drowsy. He then retreated to the kitchen and left the open bottle next to the coffee machine. Back in the lounge, he reviewed the scene he was setting up.

"One cup for Matt," he said, putting the half empty coffee mug at one end of the stylish white and chrome coffee table, "and one for me," he continued, placing the coffee with the two sleeping pills in front of his chair.

Sitting down on the white leather settee, he stared at the doped coffee and reminded himself why he was there. Pauline had never really liked Matt. At the time John had put it down to jealousy because of the time they spent together; the weekends on the golf course, the days at the racetrack. They bet on everything. Sometimes John won, sometimes Matt did. It was like their high school days all over again. Only this time they had money to burn and were having the time of their lives. When Pauline complained she was being neglected, John did what any other husband would have done. He cancelled his next jaunt with Matt and took his wife to the beach instead. When he met up with his old friend a few days later for their weekly game of golf, it was obvious Matt wasn't happy about being benched for a while. It didn't help that he played badly that day and lost a lot of money. Matt really hated losing.

A few days later, when John was at work, he received the call to say Pauline had been in an accident and had been taken to County General Hospital. Fearing the worst, he flew down the stairs and sped across town like a maniac, only to arrive a few minutes too late. Pauline died before he reached her bedside.

Matt was his constant companion through the nightmare which followed, through the weeks where John closed his eyes, shut out the world and grieved. He reminded John when to eat and when to shave. He cooked simple meals, helped arrange the funeral, and chose the floral tributes when John couldn't bear to think about them. He even picked Pauline's parents up from the airport. Matt couldn't have been a better friend. Two weeks after the funeral, Matt moved back into his rented house, the house they were in at that very moment, while John returned to work.

The guys at the office were very patient, giving him all the time and space he needed to come to terms with his new existence. Matt insisted they go out as before, but John just tagged along behind, not seeing the point. There was a hole in his heart eating away at his reasons for living.

It was more than two months after the funeral before he could bring himself to open Pauline's closet and bundle her clothes into green plastic bags destined for the charity shop. Everything went in. The pink shoes she cooed over for weeks before buying. The green jacket she always wore to the movies. He bundled her life and memories so sharp they cut like knives into six sacks, before tossing them in the back of his car like garbage. It was while he was sorting through the cardboard box holding the bits the cops had rescued from Pauline's wrecked car that he came across her purse, diary and mobile phone. He left them next to the drinks cabinet and sat down with three fingers of Jack Daniels and stared at them. He drank quickly, needing the whisky's fiery courage to open her diary and let her words reach out to him from beyond the grave. He opened it at the last entry and skipped back a few pages. As he turned page after page, he saw the name "Matt" mentioned repeatedly.

Matt came early....Matt is always hereMatt was horrible to me, said I wasn't good enough for John.... Matt scares me. I wish he'd go away. I wish John would send him away.

He remembered closing the small diary and resting his hand on its red leather cover. Poor Pauline. He hadn't realised she felt so strongly. Why hadn't she told him? He couldn't expect her to like all his friends. They could have come to some arrangement. It was only when he switched on her phone and checked through the text messages that he realised why she hadn't complained more. She hadn't dared.

Bitch. I've had enough of your whining. Once more and I'm gonna tell him about your dad and what you two got up to when you were a kid. Keep your mouth shut whore, or I'll shut it permanently.

John recognised the number. The text message had come from Matt's phone. Learning this horrified him. What the hell had been going on? What had happened to her as a kid? A quick flick through her other text messages threw up several more from Matt, all in the same vicious, threatening tenor. It was reading the last message, however, which chilled his blood.

Too late bitch. You were warned.

That message was dated the day of the crash. John sat in stunned silence, absorbing the realisation that Pauline may not have died in an accident. She could have been murdered...by Matt. His first thought was to take everything he had found to the police, but he soon realised there was nothing conclusive. Although the feeling in his gut told him he was right, he knew Matt of old. His so-called friend was articulate and intelligent, and could easily pass the whole thing off as a tragic misunderstanding. The police had already checked Pauline's car. If Matt had sabotaged it, they would have already found evidence of his tampering. After mulling over the text messages

for hours, armed with a piece of paper and a felt tip pen, John drew up a plan.

From his seat in the living room, he could just see the top of Matt's dark head and an arm stretched across the kitchen floor. He couldn't help a small grin of satisfaction. Two days ago he put his plan into action. A slip down the stairs at work gave him a broken leg, or at least the pretence of one. When he turned up at Matt's house walking with a cane, showing him the cast beneath his trousers, his friend was suitably sympathetic. When he turned away, he hadn't been prepared for John to slam him over the head with the thick end of the cane, rendering him unconscious.

The first part of John's plan had gone without a hitch.

"Now for the grave," he told himself, his voice strident and intrusive against the muted sounds of the house.

A door from the kitchen opened to the stairs which led down into the garage. John pointedly ignored the knives as he strode across the kitchen's terracotta tiles. He pushed the door open and descended the steep concrete steps beyond. Garden tools lay in a cluster in one corner. He picked up a shovel from the equipment left by the workmen who'd recently landscaped Matt's back garden.

Pauline had been right about Matt. His house was bigger than theirs, his car newer, his lawn greener, his furniture more contemporary. Looking back, John could only see one area of his life where Matt hadn't tried to compete. Pauline had been John's pride and joy, his brightest jewel. She was beautiful and kind, slender and a bit of a sports buff. What more could a man want?

Matt had no one. He killed Pauline because, as John's wife, she was in his way. No matter what twisted reasoning he'd used

to justify what he'd done, John was going to make him pay.

He took Matt's bright yellow baseball cap from a hook next to his golf cart, jammed it on his head, pulling it down to cover his ears. Leaving by the door to the garden, he deliberately let it bang behind him. With hunched shoulders, he strode out into the night. As expected, the light from the house provided plenty of illumination for the task ahead. In addition to the light from the house, a new moon hung serene in the dark heavens above. Every leaf and blade of grass shimmered with a pale silver gleam.

He strode across the garden with the shovel in his grasp. At the far end of the yard, under the delicate canopy of a tall rowan, he pushed the shovel into the newly-planted flower bed. The fresh loamy soil was easy to dig and soon lay in a long line on the grass. It didn't take him long to excavate a shallow depression six-foot long and three-foot wide. Before returning to the house through the door to the garage, he knocked the soil from his shoes, scuffing them on the grass to clean them before entering. The shovel he left just inside the garage door with dirt clinging to its face. He returned the yellow cap so it hung from the golf cart handle.

Back in the kitchen, he knelt down and rubbed dirt into Matt's limp hands. Then he grabbed his friend by the wrists and dragged him across the floor towards the garage. Keeping the door open with one foot, he wedged his forearms under Matt's armpits until he could lever him upright. It took all his strength but as soon as he had Matt's upper body weight resting comfortably against his chest, he twisted and pushed, hurling Matt head first into the garage. There was a satisfying clunk and smack as the body rolled down the concrete steps and ended in a huddle of bent arms and splayed legs at the bottom.

John breathed hard as he switched off the garage light. Back in the cloakroom, he tore off his gloves, wrapped them in toilet paper and flushed them down the toilet. As they'd done when he'd tried this at home, the gloves instantly disappeared. After collecting his cane from the kitchen floor, he returned to the lounge, where he sat down and reached for his cold coffee. He brought the mug to his lips, knowing that drinking its contents would push him past the point of no return. Once he drank the sedative, he'd have five minutes at most before he fell asleep. The knives in the kitchen whispered to him. They promised justice, an eye for an eye. John ignored their call, choosing to swallow the coffee instead, sticking to his carefully constructed plan.

The problem was, no matter how convinced he was of Matt's hand in Pauline's death, he couldn't be completely certain. You couldn't cut a man's throat based on a feeling, at least he couldn't. He needed to be sure. He had to stick to the plan. It was the only way.

Leaving a swallow in the bottom for the police to analyse, John put the mug down and picked up the phone. His hands trembled as he dialled 911.

"Can I speak to the police?" Already he could feel the drug's effects; a tightness across the forehead, a dryness at the back of his throat.

"Hurry up," he whispered, knowing he didn't have much time left. Long minutes passed as he fought the compulsion to close his eyes.

"This is the police, how can I help?" a female voice crackled in his ear.

"Please," he croaked, his vision blurring. "I think I've been drugged. I'm at...16 Pensacola Avenue. Please, hurry. He's

coming back.”

At last John let the phone slip from his grasp and lay back with a sigh. It was done, now he could rest. The police were on their way. They would be here soon. They would find John with his leg in a cast, unconscious on the settee. Matt would be found equally unconscious in the garage with dirt on his hands and a shallow grave prepared in the garden.

It had all been staged to look like an attempted murder gone wrong, Matt slipping down the garage steps before he could finish his grisly work. John wanted the cops to see Matt as a potential killer and to look at Pauline's death with fresh eyes. With any luck they would dig around the edges of Matt's story until they unearthed the truth; then John would know for sure.

He lay back, closed his eyes and let the drug take effect, waiting for the sound of sirens. It was the click of a door opening which brought him instantly back to life. He stared in disbelief as Matt staggered across the kitchen with the shovel in his hand. His hair was dishevelled, his left eye bloodshot. An arm was pressed close to his body as if cradling a broken rib.

“What the hell happened?” Matt demanded, staring wide-eyed at John.

“Oh damn,” John whispered as his eyes grew too heavy to keep open. They closed, and he tumbled head first into the darkness.

John awoke with a start, and found himself in a sterile hospital bed. A quick check confirmed he was mostly unhurt and still had all his appendages. A nurse appeared and checked his vitals before warning him the cops wanted to have a word with him. As John lay there waiting for the police to arrive, all he could think about was Matt. Where was he? Did the police get there in time?

When the young cop turned up to take his statement, John

learned they'd arrived at the house to find him out for the count, and very much alone. After taking notes and promising to inform him as soon as they apprehended the culprit, the hospital sent him home.

Dropped outside his house, John opened the front door carefully, holding his cane like a weapon as he hobbled inside. He would get rid of the imitation cast later, but for now, the more helpless he looked the better. A piece of paper on the hall table caught his eye. It was his original plan, written in red felt-tip pen. Only he hadn't left it there. On the reverse, in the same colour ink, someone had written a message.

Well - I didn't see that coming - still, no hard feelings. For the record, I fixed that bitch just like I fixed my dad. You know we're better off without them.

Now there is just the two of us. Since we're having such fun, here are the rules - there are no rules. Catch me if you can, John - but not if I catch you first!

John felt something harden inside. Now he knew. Now he was certain, he could act. The analytical part of his mind suddenly took control. Picking up a pen and finding a fresh piece of paper, he began listing the ingredients for a new plan.

Change the locks

Organise a month's leave

Ditch the cast

Find Matt - follow the money

Get a sniper rifle and a pack of soft-nose bullets

Matt thought this was all still a game. He also thought he knew his rival, but John doubted he knew about the sniper course his dad had wanted him to take, nor the late-night hacking of off-shore servers to find illicit financial transactions for his job. Matt wouldn't realise the stakes had changed until it was

far too late. He might have gone unpunished for his father's murder, but John wouldn't rest until he paid the ultimate price for Pauline's.

In the Dark of Night

When I cannot sleep in the dark of night.
 When shadows move and crawling scare me.
 I reach for those friends of great strength and
 might,

seeking the comfort they can spare me.
 There are so many books upon my shelf.
 Some tell, some chill, others they thrill me,
 but all will take me away from myself,
 and with courage and daring fill me.
 How do I choose which noble friends to share
 the long dark hours that seek to drain me?
 A cover bright, is the foreword a snare?
 Will it inspire, or hurt or pain me?
 Ignore the cover, read the words within.
 The shiny wrapping does not hold me.
 I open the book and then soon begin
 treading the new world that enfolds me.
 Such friends are held ever close to my heart.
 Their tall tales repeatedly charm me.
 And free from their thrall, I'd not wish to part.

They drive back the void that would harm me.
When I cannot sleep, in the dark of night.
When the gloom moves and the black calls me.
I reach for those friends who hold me so tight,
dispelling the silence that walls me.

Wrestling with Philosophy

When I was much younger, somewhere between a teenager and an adult, I thought the world was a wonderful place. I adored music, loved art and marvelled at the variety and richness of ancient civilisations. Fascinated by the way things worked, I studied engineering at university. It was only when I peered into the Pandora's box labelled Philosophy that I came across an area of human thought which utterly confounded me.

It's not that I didn't try to understand what was being said; I did. I thought a lot about the BIG questions and came up with my own unique answers.

"If a tree falls in the forest and no one hears it, does it make a noise?" (George Berkeley) - Of course it does. Ask the traumatised rabbits.

"I think, therefore I am." (Descartes) - A rock doesn't think, therefore it isn't?

"He who fights with monsters should look to it that he himself does not become a monster. And when you gaze long into an abyss, the abyss also gazes into you (Nietzsche)." - Don't shout at the noisy neighbours, or you'll end up being as disruptive as they are.

And don't stare, you'll only antagonise them.

One of my favourite philosophers was the great British thinker Bertrand Russell, (1872-1970). He was that rare combination of aristocrat, logician, mathematician, historian and pacifist. He famously said that, "Philosophy proper deals with matters of interest to the general educated public, and loses much of its value if only a few professionals can understand what is said." However, much of his work was still written in a language of such complexity that I felt completely lost when reading it. In his "Principles of Mathematics," he presented a mathematical system based on purely logic, using notions such as proposition and class. It wasn't long before he discovered a contradiction in his system. The Encyclopaedia Britannica recalls what he said about this flaw;

"If some classes are members of themselves (e.g., the class of all classes), and some are not (e.g., the class of all men), we ought to be able to construct the class of all classes that are not members of themselves. But now, if we ask of this class "Is it a member of itself?" we become enmeshed in a contradiction. If it is, then it is not, and if it is not, then it is. This is rather like defining the village barber as "the man who shaves all those who do not shave themselves" and then asking whether the barber shaves himself or not."

After reading that I gave a frightened whimper and hid behind a throw cushion. For a long time I thought William Castle had the right idea.

"An expert is a man who tells you a simple thing in a confused way in such a fashion as to make you think the confusion is your own fault."

I am sure that most people would think that philosophers fall into this class of "experts". Even enlightened philosophers like Bertram Russell find it impossible to present their ideas simply,

so that the general educated public could understand what they were trying to say.

Over the years, not to be beaten, I regularly lifted the lid on the philosophy box and took a peek inside, but equally regularly, slammed it straight down again. As I got older, (and hopefully wiser) I began to understand more of what was being said, and to my surprise, found myself shaking my head in disbelief. I hadn't realised that I was such a pragmatist.

While I found nuggets of pure gold under the lid — "*All that is necessary for evil to succeed is for good people to do nothing.*" (Edmund Burke)— I also stumbled over hundreds of theories on the nature of truth. I read a few before giving in to an overwhelming urge to hurl the book I was reading across the room in disgust. Perhaps it was the down-to-earth engineer in me, but I couldn't see why anyone would waste time thinking, much less writing such arrant nonsense. The authors of those theories were supposed to have been some of the greatest minds of their time. Trying to understand what sort of people they were, and why they had thought the way they did, I dug into their backgrounds. I found out that the majority were independently wealthy men living with their mothers. Very few got married, and even fewer took an active interest in raising subsequent children.

I have to admit feeling rather smug after finding this out about these famous intellects. No wonder I couldn't understand what these mummy's boys were trying to say. As the mother of three grown children and an engineer of thirty years, I wrestle with the twists and turns of logic and truth every hour of the waking day. Too busy with the practicalities of life, I had never felt the urge to try and quantify the essence of truth, and much less to write it all down. What would have been the point? That was when I realised that I needed a philosopher with my

sort of background; a mature woman, a mother, someone with something new to say about the human condition.

It only took a little while to find that person and to revel in what they had to say. I found I understood every word, and could easily see the relevance of their writings to our hectic modern lifestyle.

"It is not until you become a mother that your judgment slowly turns to compassion and understanding."

"All of us have moments in our lives that test our courage. Taking children into a house with a white carpet is one of them."

"I haven't trusted polls since I read that 62% of women had affairs during their lunch hour. I've never met a woman in my life who would give up lunch for sex."

And that unforgettable classic, quoted daily in our household;

"Never lend your car to anyone to whom you have given birth."(Erma Bombeck 1927-1996)

Trailer Nights

N ight falls, but summer's fiercest heat
will not release its grasp.
Its only with the pallid dawn,
that coolness comes at last.

As check-out girls we suffer most,
the nights, alone, we share.
We're lowly trash to Bolton folk
In passing draw their stare.
It wasn't always thus we know.
Our childhood home was grand.
A dairy farm in Egerton,
Sold ice-cream with our brand.

We both recall the toys and slides,
that suddenly were lost.
The farm, the house, our very lives,
Dad's errant judgment cost.
He left us then, and later Mum,
her body worn with care,

gave up the fight and slipped away,
to bliss we could not share.

We now call home a trailer park,
our meals come from a tin.
We make enough to eat and work,
but not enough to sin.
But yesterday at Tesco's till,
Jeff stood and looked and smiled.
I touched his hand and leaned in close,
Saw something there beguiled.

Blue eyes glittered with naked lust,
hands twitched that longed to touch.
He turned away, I gave a sigh.
Perhaps I'd tried too much?
The night air clings to heated limbs,
in shifts we strive to breathe.
With windows all thrown open wide,
To trap the faintest breeze.
A rogue sound pulls us from our beds.
Through doors two sisters peer.
See Jeff's shy grin and in each hand,
a pack of Black Sheep beer.

White Ants

The rain hammered against the window as thunder and lightning raged overhead. James stood in the lounge room of his three hundred year-old farmhouse and watched the branches of his apple tree swaying wildly in the wind as he sipped his coffee. Through the water running down the window and sheets of falling rain, he could just see the rolling, misty upland that was Exmoor. On a good day, with the sun at your back, it was a harsh, forbidding place; a vast landscape of exposed rocks, dried bracken and yellow-tipped gorse.

On a day like today, it was transformed into a warren of bogs and marshes, ancient and deadly, home to the spiteful Spriggans. Gaelic legends told how the Spriggans were the creatures responsible for punishing mortals who offended them and their other fairy brethren. They sent storms like the one raging overhead. They blighted crops, stole children, left changelings behind to work their evil. Although small and wizened, they were said to be able to expand themselves into giants, for all the bashing and stomping they had to do.

James smiled at the thought as he turned away from the

window. The storm put him in a gloomy frame of mind. He stood in front of the fire and enjoyed its cheery dancing flames for a moment. After moving to the kitchen, he opened the fridge door and peered inside, and for the thousandth time promised himself he'd get the bulb replaced. Although it was dark inside, the bottle of cola was exactly where he'd left it. He put it on the kitchen table. It was for his nephew David, who lived in Exeter, but made a point of visiting his old uncle every Saturday afternoon or two.

David was twenty-three. He lived with his mother but shared a bedroom with his teenage brother Alex. James reckoned he came for the freedom and fresh air, as much as for the football.

"It's raining cats and dogs out there!" someone yelled.

James had been so deep in thought he hadn't heard the front door open.

"I knocked," David insisted, removing his coat and shaking off the drops. "No one came, so I let myself in."

James looked at the younger man with his wet, square face, the rain glinting in his windswept hair, and grinned with embarrassment.

"I am sorry. I didn't hear you," he admitted. "Go and switch on the telly. I'll get us a few drinks."

"Who's playing?" David's question followed James into the kitchen.

"Hull City and Blackburn," he called out. "It's on channel two."

By the time he returned with his nephew's cola and a beer for himself, the match had begun. David was sitting perched on the edge of the settee, totally engrossed in the game. James joined him.

"Look at that!" was David's first comment, pointing at the telly.

"That's a foul!" James found himself agreeing.

"What a moron," David added, scornfully gesturing at the footballer who had been pulled up by the referee for deliberately tripping a member of the opposite team. "Send him off!" he shouted, shaking his head in disgust.

And so it continued throughout the match.

"That was a quiet game," David concluded as the commentators started their post-match summing-up.

James found himself grinning. His nephew, normally such a quiet, shy fellow, revealed a more aggressive side of his personality when he watched football.

"I'm sorry but I've got to go," David said as he picked up his damp coat and walked out through the kitchen door and into the back garden.

James followed him and stepped into a completely different world from earlier. The thunderheads were gone, replaced by white, fluffy clouds. The wind had dropped and the air smelt of heather and bracken. A small herd of moorland ponies grazed peacefully on the distant hillside. Sheep meandered along the banks of a narrow stream in the valley below. A forlorn patch of sunlight rippled across the moor, chasing clouds that hurried towards the eastern horizon.

"I know I say this every time I come here, but that view is amazing," David murmured as he buttoned up his coat, his eyes glued to the panorama beyond James' garden wall. "I promised Mum I'd babysit our Alex, so I can't be late," he added with a wry smile.

Alex was old enough to look after himself, but James knew what David really meant when he said he couldn't be late. The last time his nephew had missed the last bus, they'd got into James' old Ford only to find it wouldn't start. It needed a new

starter motor, but James just didn't have the money for garage bills. James barely had enough money for food these days. David knew he couldn't afford to miss his bus.

"I've got to go," David insisted softly. James merely nodded, lifting his hand in a gesture of mute farewell.

He watched his nephew's bowed shoulders disappear around the corner of the farmhouse, feeling he had been cheated somehow. He didn't have many visitors, and a view, no matter how awe-inspiring, was not the same as having someone real to talk to.

As he turned to go inside, a grey blur flashed in front of his face. For a minute he thought it was a pigeon, until an echoing thump drew his attention to his apple tree. A couple of steps and he was staring at an oval object, which looked suspiciously like a huge grey beach pebble. The soil around the pebble hissed and bubbled. Cautiously he touched it, but quickly snatched back his finger. The stone felt incredibly hot. He looked up to see if it had fallen from his chimney, but he couldn't see any suspicious gaps in the stonework.

The sound of the village bus rumbling down the road took his mind away from the mystery of the hot stone. He watched David's bus leave the village with a hollow emptiness, knowing it might be several weeks before he spoke to another living soul. Turning away with a sigh, he went back inside.

It was several days later, as James was chopping up an old shed for firewood, that he remembered the pebble. Examining the spot where he had last seen it, he found the ground churned up, but no stone in sight. Thinking one of the foxes which used his garden as a short cut to the village dustbins may have moved it, he switched his attention to the apple tree. He noticed a clump of honey fungus on one of the branches. His garden,

like much of Exmoor, was prone to becoming water-logged after heavy rain. The wet ground was a haven for diseases of all sorts. Rummaging through the cupboard under the sink, he found a basket of forgotten tins and packets through which he searched, looking for some fungicide, but couldn't find any. He would have to get some the next time he was in town. After all, he didn't want to lose his only fruit tree.

That night as he closed the sitting room curtains, he noticed a strange lilac glow near the base of the tree. Knowing certain fungi glowed in the dark, he shut the curtains, determined to get a chemical drench the next time he went shopping, and thought no more about it. It was two days later when the really strange stuff started happening.

On Wednesday morning, when James stumbled down the stairs in his slippers and pyjamas, he had no trouble pouring the cereal and milk into his bowl, but while adding sugar, his elbow nudged his coffee mug and a handful of sugar ended up on the floor. Swearing and deliberately ignoring the crunch underfoot, he carried his breakfast into the sitting room and ate it while watching the news. Later, when returning the empty bowl to the kitchen, he saw a line of ants marching across the floor, heading straight for the glittering grains. He hated ants, and grabbed a can of fly spray from under the sink, prepared to do battle. Squatting down for a better aim, his finger on the button, he was about to press it when he noticed something odd about the enemy. The ants were all white. Not only that, but they had all stopped moving. He could swear they were standing there staring up at him. Wanting to get a closer look, he left the can on the table and hurried upstairs to get his reading glasses. When he got back into the kitchen, the ants were all gone...but so was his tin of fly spray.

He knelt down on the cold floor and ran his hands over the pitted linoleum. The floor was smooth and sugar-free. Sitting back on his heels, he wondered what the hell was going on. Perhaps he had put the can away without thinking? He opened the cupboard under the sink and stared in disbelief. He blinked, shook his head and looked again, but that only made matters worse. The cupboard was empty. The only thing inside was a crumpled dishcloth and a discoloured sponge. All the packets and tins were gone. For the first time in his life, James felt scared. Whatever was going on was too bizarre even to have a name.

Getting up, he went to the fridge and took out a beer and sat down to drink. Within an hour he had three empty cans keeping the first one company. It was much later, as he staggered upstairs to bed that he wondered if the house might be haunted. Except for the splitting headache giving him double vision, the next day passed quite normally.

Unfortunately, at breakfast the morning afterwards, he found the sugar bowl he normally left on the table completely empty. He tried to fill it from the unopened bag on the top shelf in the cupboard, but that was empty as well. Crushing the hollow paper bag in his fist, James decided he'd had enough.

"You could have left me enough for my sodding breakfast," he shouted to the empty kitchen. "Ruddy thieves!" he added in frustration, slamming the cupboard door closed.

He took the last few coins from a jug on the mantelpiece and strode out into the early morning mist. He was still angry when he got back from the local shop, but not so angry he didn't notice a yellow plastic lid sitting on the table next to his soggy breakfast cereal with a dessert-spoon of sugar piled on top. He hid the new bags of sugar in an old cake tin and pressed the

lid firmly closed. Back at the table, he sat down and sprinkled the sugar from the yellow lid over his cereal. As he scooped out a spoonful of limp frosted flakes, he wondered about the morning's oddities. What on earth was going on?

Later that morning, he decided he needed to find out what was behind all the strange goings-on. After clearing away the debris near the kitchen door, he filled the little plastic lid with as much sugar as it would hold and left it where he had last seen the white ants. Then he sat back in his chair and waited. An hour went by and nothing happened. Another hour and he was leaning on his elbow almost asleep, when a line of ants appeared from under the door. James stared as they moved purposefully towards the sugar. For the next few minutes he watched fascinated, as the ants crawled over the small heap, with the amount gradually decreasing to nothing as they walked away one by one. When the insects finally disappeared under the door, James sat back in astonishment. He had a colony of very strange insects living in his garden.

With a smile, he retrieved the telephone directory and began rummaging through the list of government organisations, looking for one that might be interested in the odd behaviour of his colony of ants. Perhaps he could make some money out of this. Heaven knows he could do with it.

"Mr Brown, Mr Brown!"

James looked up at the sound. It seemed to be coming from the television. The adverts were on. There was a man with orange hair and a white jump suit, sitting at a desk.

"Mr Brown, can you hear me?"

James looked up again from the telephone numbers and wondered what the advert was supposed to be selling. He couldn't see any logos or brand names in the background.

"Mr James Brown, of Upper Meadow Farm in Devon?"

James' ears perked up at that. The man had mentioned his name and address. Suddenly, the advert had his full attention.

"Who are you?" he asked, looking around the room for hidden cameras. He'd seen reality shows where they tricked ordinary folks into believing all sorts of nonsense, using hidden cameras and microphones. He wasn't falling for any of that.

"Mr Brown, I am the chief communications officer of an intergalactic vessel called "The Lens". Our ship was on a routine information-gathering exercise when it was hit by a massive energy surge which burnt out most of our control systems. We had no option but to land and effect repairs."

James' eyes scoured the room once more. Whoever was playing this joke must have got inside his house and planted their equipment when he was out shopping.

"I'm sorry but I can't help you," he said, playing along. "I'm all out of control systems today."

Getting up, he walked towards the window and peered outside, pulling back the curtains and looking for wires.

"That's all right, Mr Brown, we can do our own repairs. What we really need is fuel for our bio conversion process."

"Fuel?"

"Yes. It looks like this," the orange-haired man said, plonking a huge, white crystal onto his desk.

"I don't have anything like that," James insisted, trying to quell the strangest feeling that something was very wrong, and it wasn't just that he was talking to a man on his television set.

"Perhaps from your point of view, you'd recognise it better as this," the man suggested holding up a picture of a bag of sugar.

James went and sat back down on the settee and stared at the screen for the longest time. He found himself noticing things

he had been taking for granted. The man's uniform was white. On the smooth panel behind him, lilac lights ran up and down.

"Where is your ship now?"

"It's...buried," the man in the white jump suit admitted.

James nodded. He knew exactly where their ship was; he'd seen those lilac lights before. He was beginning to think the ants he had so nearly sprayed with deadly chemicals...might not have...been...ants...

"How big are you?" he muttered.

"I see you understand our dilemma," the man claiming to be the ship's communication officer replied with an embarrassed lowering of his head. "To repair our ship, we need what your world can provide, but in our current situation and energy conservation form, without this fuel, it's almost impossible for us to do what's needed."

James felt the sweat trickling down the back of his neck.

"Energy conservation form? You have different forms?"

"We have a bio conversion system on board which provides us with many different forms, each one suitable for different environments, but the equipment used to make those transformations requires a great deal of energy...and fuel."

"When you say other forms, what do you mean?"

"We could grow larger," the man-like creature on the screen replied. "Or acquire different types of lungs to survive in different gaseous environments. To conserve energy during our travels, we always take our smallest form. Unfortunately, that has left us at a disadvantage in this current situation. We need your help, Mr Brown."

There was a hint of desperation in that last statement. For a while James sat motionless.

"Why should I help you?"

"Without your help, we might not be able to get back home," was the simple reply.

"If the situation was reversed," James murmured, thinking hard, "and I landed on your world, would you help me?"

"In the spirit of mutual cooperation, we have already helped you, hoping that you would provide aid in return."

"What do you mean?" James replied, looking around the room, trying to see if there was anything different or out of place.

"Our engineers can repair anything, even devices as primitive as yours. We have modified your transport unit, your cold storage cabinet and this video display device. We expect them to perform faithfully for many time periods to come."

James couldn't help feeling there was an unseen catch in all this. It sounded too good to be true. There had to be something this *alien* wasn't telling him.

"Do you have weapons?"

The face on the screen stared blankly at him. "Yes," it said stiffly, "we have weapons."

"What sort of weapons?"

The way the communications officer shifted uncomfortably in his seat told James he was getting nearer to the truth.

"We have atomic disrupters. They—"

"They make things disappear," James told him, remembering how the fly-spray and packets of chemicals disappeared from under the sink. The communications officer merely nodded.

"And could you make something as big as me disappear?"

Again, the question was met with a stone-like stare and another nod. James knew he was treading on dangerous ground, but he needed to know.

"I thought you were ants," he told him. "I was going to spray you. What would you have done if I had?"

That question was met with a rigid silence. After a moment's hesitation, James got up and switched off the television. He grabbed his coat and stormed out of the house. In the garage he found the car keys on a hook and got into his old Ford. The engine roared to life. Moments later, he was driving down the road as if the hounds of hell were chasing him. It was almost dark when he returned. He'd had time to think.

The cupboard door in the kitchen where he'd hidden the tin of sugar was ajar. He ignored it and went through to the lounge. In the dim glow from the street lights outside, he took a postcard down from a bookshelf. David had sent it from India when he'd gone on holiday with his parents. It showed a painting called the Golden Rule. On it were people; young and old, rich and poor, from all corners of the globe. At the bottom was written;

"Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

Which probably meant no gassing your house guests.

"This image has meaning for you?"

He was not surprised to recognise the voice from the television. Touching the picture with his thumb, James chose his words with care.

"It's all about trust," he said. "My reasons for helping you would be selfish ones. I'm old and I'm lonely. Every day is a tedious repeat of the day before... and then you come along promising to liven things up. Helping you would be a once-in-a-lifetime adventure.

"But," and here he rubbed the image of an African beggar very gently, "can you be trusted? Will I be betraying my whole planet if I help you?"

"I promise you that we mean your people no harm."

"That's what every megalomaniac planet-killing alien says,"

James replied. It was only when he turned his head towards the voice, did he realise the words weren't coming from the television, but from a small figure standing on one of the books near his elbow. James couldn't help staring as the miniature man in a white jump-suit craned his neck to look up at him. He was certain it was the same man he had seen on the television. The same orange hair, even the same overalls, but this man was only eight inches tall.

"Weren't you..." he said pointing to the television screen.

"This is my larger form," the tiny man said, touching a diminutive chest. "It is not as big as I would like, but at least at this size we can handle human-sized equipment and make the components we need to repair our ship. I thought this would make you feel more comfortable. After all, we will need to interact more directly if we are to build this much-needed trust."

James blinked.

"But you're so small. How did you get up here?"

In reply, the little figure walked to the edge of the shelf and stepped off. Instinctively James pushed a hand out to catch him, but then drew it back when he realised the little man was standing motionless in mid-air.

"My anti-gravity belt," the tiny man explained, patting the links around his waist.

Then he rose through the air until his small face was level with James' eyes.

"If you had tried to poison us," he said solemnly, "we would have defended ourselves. But," he added, crossing his arms, "shooting you would not have been a good idea, as there was a seventy-five percent chance that you could have fallen forward and crushed us."

James just stared, wondering what he could possibly say to such a cold-hearted assessment about the merit of killing someone. It didn't take long, however, to recognise a twinkle in those tiny eyes. Honesty *and* humour, James thought, how very human. The realisation made him chuckle.

"Fair enough then," he told him with a grin. "Let me be the first person to welcome you to earth."

The little man responded by bowing from the waist.

"You know, white is an awfully conspicuous colour for a...little person who flies, and goes around fixing things. Have you ever considered wearing something more subdued, like green or brown? In this part of the country, we have an ancient tradition that talks about fairies and pixies, small creatures, much like yourself. They were said to fly about and get up to all types of mischief."

The little communications officer looked down and pressed a button on his belt. His jump suit immediately changed colour to a mottled shade of green. James grinned. He realised he liked this little fellow. There were still a great many questions to ask. Like, how could he speak such good English and how many more of his people were on his ship? But for now, that could all wait. For the moment, it was enough that he felt he could trust this one. After all, they had *asked* for help. With their disruptor thingy, they could have just as easily taken what they wanted.

Life wasn't going to be tedious anymore, he realized with a grin. Oh no siree, it wasn't even going to be humdrum or ordinary. It was going to be *magical*.

Kubla Khan

Now Kubla Khan is a noble cat
 A feline of ageless grace
 With fur the shade of morning mist
 Green eyes in a grey mask chased
 With slight disdain he views the world
 And peers down at those below
 While other cats hiss, arch and scratch
 He inclines his head just so.
 For Kubla Khan is a noble cat
 His breeding pure and refined
 A more superior animal
 We humans have yet to find
 He deigns to sit upon our laps
 His paws as soft as grey silk
 A trembling purr his only thanks
 When offered fresh buttermilk
 For Kubla Khan is a noble cat
 His lineage ancient and long
 His forebears guarded Egypt's tombs
 Their exploits told in song

KUBLA KHAN

The blood of kings is in his veins
The last of his fine line
When a noble cause calls to him
He'll watch and wait supine.

The Next Generation

When I look back at my family history, I find myself worrying about the next generation and whether it will exist. My mother was born in a four-roomed house in the back streets of Newcastle just after the second-world war. She and her seven siblings played among the tumbled bricks of bombed-out buildings, looked after by their eldest sister as both parents worked to feed their large family. It is not surprising she left home at seventeen and married my father, a Royal Air Force Corporal, before she was twenty. I was the first of their five children, a honeymoon baby. After half a century, I now have three grown-up children of my own and have been reliably informed by both my daughters that I can expect no grandchildren from either of them.

How do I feel about that?

My grandmother married my grandfather in 1937. Today there are eighty-two adults and a bewildering number of great grandchildren alive because of that union. It's a population explosion in miniature. A small example of why there are more than seven billion people alive in the world today. If my daughters want to do their bit for population control, then

I can only wish them well, but I doubt that is the main reason for their decision.

I suspect the reasons are a combination of they and their partner's attitudes, and their financial situation. The girls are 29 and 27 and have only recently obtained decent, well-paying jobs. After deducting living expenses, there isn't much left for savings. They are sensible enough to know that having a child will entail substantial costs, or the loss of one salary. Neither of which they can afford.

Delaying or deciding not to have children is not an issue limited to our little family; it is a global phenomenon. The OECD (the international Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development –with 34 member countries) recently published a report showing that in 1970 the average age of a woman in Great Britain (and in most other European countries) at the birth of her first child was 24 years. By 2009 that had risen to 30. Since this was the age my first child was born, I can only throw my hands in the air and admit to being guilty as charged.

Can I take this to mean there is still time for my daughters to change their minds?

Yes there is, but deciding to have children later in life can have serious consequences, consequences I have discussed with them. A woman's fertility declines alarmingly after the age of 30. I can personally vouch for this as I struggled to get pregnant, enduring gynaecological fertility regimes for several years. There is also an increased chance of foetal abnormality and spontaneous abortion with later pregnancies. We suffered the trauma of two miscarriages before the first, healthy child was born. Luckily I was being helped by a wonderful, caring gynaecologist who assured me that having babies was a lot like

driving a car. The initial problem would be getting the car in gear. Once we got the car going, the next problem would be finding the brake. He told me this when I was white-faced and distraught after our second miscarriage. Since it took us five years to have our first baby, but only three years to have another two, he knew what he was talking about. However, his telling me this provided very little consolation at the time.

So, knowing my daughters, will they change their minds?

That is a very difficult question to answer. I cannot remember exactly why at thirty years of age I was so desperate to have a baby. There was this unvoiced expectation from friends and family as well as the feeling that time was slipping away, that it was now or NEVER, and the prospect of never having children terrified me.

I am the eldest of five sisters and we have always been close. We were all married in our early twenties with babies arriving six or seven years later.

Having children gives us a stake in the future, a reason to care how the world around us develops. Young people today face different kinds of peer pressure. As we sisters are close, so are our children. The cousins (11 in all) have seen each other at family gatherings for as long as they can remember. They are now all young adults. Although six (ages 25-30) have long term partners, only one of them is married. None have children, nor do they plan to have any in the near future. None of their friends have babies. It would seem that life for the young middle classes in Great Britain does not include nappies and playschool. There are just too many other issues to contend with.

It is no wonder that governments are beginning to take this rising tide of deferred parenthood seriously. From where will the next generation come? From unemployed, unqualified

teenage girls who see being a single mum as a career move; bringing up children on crowded council estates with government handouts, raising a new generation of low-paid workers? Or will they come from older parents, with all the pressures that reduced fertility, premature births and infant mortality places on an already-embattled Health Service.

Personally, I just want my children to be happy. If that means no grandchildren, then I will support them in that decision. However, it is important they know the facts and the risks they take if they leave it too long before changing their minds. My daughters and son are all well-adjusted, wonderful human beings and the struggle we had bringing them into the world was well worth it. I wish them long and happy lives, and can only hope one day they will decide to have children of their own, of whom they can feel equally proud.

Oh Teacher

I have thought and I've thought
and it's time I was taught
How to rhyme and write poetry
A teacher I have found,
in all forms she is sound,
and agrees she'll try and teach me.
There's a problem you see,
it's the devil in me.
Every time we speak, I must rhyme.
I can see by her frown,
that it's getting her down,
but is rhyming really a crime?
Smiling with wry amuse,
her discomfort I choose,
but I really cannot be still.
Her words they become
a thorn to my aplomb
and I find I rise to the kill
It is really quite sad
Cos one day I'll be glad

OH TEACHER

If my words could sound just like hers
Till then I must rhyme,
Counting metre and time
Getting better? No! I could curse.
Now she calls me a fox,
and on lips she'd put locks,
but really that just wouldn't do.
Without lips how could I,
I just couldn't deny.
Oh teacher I love you, it's true.

The Dancing Lady

Julie had just brought the delicate china teacup to her lips when a loud crash shook the room behind her. She turned to find five-year-old Jack clutching his toy light sabre and staring in wide-eyed guilty silence at the antique bowl in pieces at his feet.

"You wicked boy!" Pamela shouted, flying out of her chair and grabbing him by the shirt.

Before Julie could blink, Pam slapped her son across the face, making him cry.

"Pamela!" Julie cried out, appalled by her daughter's behaviour. "It was an accident."

"Mother, stay out of this," Pamela insisted with a scowl. "Naughty boys deserve to be punished," she continued, addressing her words to the tearful Jack. "They have to learn that when I say no playing in the lounge, I mean NO playing. Now go upstairs," she snapped at him. "I don't want to see that face for the rest of the day."

Jack's bottom lip trembled as a hand-shaped wheal burned itself into his pale cheek. When he looked at Julie for support, she found she had no choice but to agree with his mother.

“Go to your room. Jack. It will be alright.”

The boy glared at her. This isn't right, his expression said, you have to stop this. When he eventually realised she wasn't going to help, the tears increased, bubbling up like a spring. Snuffling, and hiding his face behind a raised forearm, he fled the room. As the house echoed to the sounds of a five-year-old stamping angrily up the stairs, Julie pushed the tray dislodged by Pamela's hasty eruption back onto the middle of the coffee table.

“He is being deliberately disobedient!” Pamela growled as she bent down and picked up the broken pieces of the bowl.

“Pam,” Julie tried, “you're being too hard on him. He's just lost his father. He doesn't need—”

“He didn't lose a father,” her daughter snapped, eyes flashing like a tiger's as she crouched over the broken shards. “His father chose to leave him, to leave us both. He wanted his freedom. Playing *Happy Families* wasn't in his plans.”

Julie could hear the bitterness in her daughter's words, could hear the pain the recent desertion had caused her.

“It isn't right to take your frustrations out on Jack,” she said, trying to keep the tone light but meaning every word. “It's not his fault Jeffery left. He's just a child, he doesn't understand.”

“I am not taking my frustrations out on him,” Pamela insisted, more in control of her emotions as she stood up and loomed over Julie. “What sort of mother do you think I am?”

“One of the best, but—”

“He needs to do as he's told,” Pamela repeated. “Jeffery ruined the boy. Every time I told him to do something, he'd go and get Jeffery to countermand it. It was soul destroying being told what a bad mother you were in front of your own child. Jack wasn't stupid. He soon learned to play one of us against each

other. That has to stop. He will learn to do as he is told. I hope he's a fast learner, for both our sakes."

That last comment sounded suspiciously like a threat.

"I didn't know you had those sort of problems," Julie replied, trying to change the subject. There was a steel-eyed desperation in the expression on Pamela's face. It worried her.

"As soon as Jack was born, Jeffery changed," her daughter admitted, twisting her neck as if loosening stiff muscles. "I know you and Dad never cared for him, so I said nothing."

Julie held her tongue and waited for her to continue. Pamela was normally the quietest and most self-assured of her three children. Julie found it hard to believe her daughter had been having problems with her marriage.

"So," Pamela continued, with a determined shrug of the shoulders, "while I appreciate these visits, I think they're counterproductive. I saw how he looked at you," she added, her eyes narrowing. "He thinks he can manipulate you to standing up for him just like he did Jeffery. I am not going to allow that. So, if you don't mind, I'd like you to go and not come back until we've sorted this thing out between us."

Broken pottery clattered down into the metal waste bin. Julie watched in disbelief as Pamela picked up Julie's handbag and pushed it into her hands. Before she could utter a word, she found herself being propelled along the corridor and out towards the front door. Grabbing her coat from the rack as she passed, it was only when she found herself standing outside the house, with the door slamming shut behind her, did she realise Pamela hadn't been joking. For a moment she toyed with the idea of ringing the doorbell and demanding an explanation. Instead, with a sad shake of the head, she turned away.

She was still shaking her head in disbelief when she boarded

the bus to take her back to the town centre. Her daughter had thrown her out, and all because little Jack had looked to her in a certain way? Pamela was not behaving like her normal self. On the train, as Middleton's houses and gardens flickered past the window in a bewildering blur, Julie took a picture from her bag. It showed Jack wedged between two proud parents, their arms around each other's waists. Her grandson didn't share his father's dark hair and narrow face. He took after his mother, with her blue eyes, straw-gold hair and a button-tipped nose. In the photograph they were all smiling, a reflection of happier days perhaps. Julie could only imagine her daughter's reaction when three weeks ago, her loving husband announced he was leaving on a plant-collecting expedition to the jungles of South America, and he would not be coming back.

He had been a botany lecturer at the local university when he and Pamela first met at a mutual friend's house. Six months later, Pamela brought him home to meet her parents. Julie had not been impressed by his judgemental attitude and the way his lips narrowed like he'd eaten a rotten plum whenever anyone said something he didn't agree with. She sensed her husband, David, hadn't taken to him either. David later complained there was something ferret-like in the way he treated the waiter at the restaurant they had dined at.

Pamela was the second of their three children, born at a time when money had been short and life difficult. Luckily for them, she'd been a wonderfully placid baby, one that soon grew into a quiet and contented child. Mary, their eldest, had been a demanding prima donna from birth, and Ian, born two years after Pamela, a hyperactive collection of arms and legs, driven to reduce everything to its smallest parts. Pamela, by comparison, just sat on the rug watching the world go by. Because she

had been so easy to look after, they often called her their little "Freebie".

Avoiding all the normal childhood illnesses, she sailed through primary and secondary school, going on to study geography at university, before securing a job as a town planner in Southampton, where she met and married Jeffery.

The other two had stampeded and jostled their way through childhood, while Pamela seemed miraculously immune to broken limbs, lost dinner money, questionable friends and teacher's complaints. Their little Freebie lived an enchanted life, causing them little or no trouble...until now.

David was waiting for her when she got off the train.

"I got your text," he said as she climbed into their car. "What happened?"

"Pamela threw me out of the house," she told him.

"What!"

As Julie described what had happened, she found herself getting more and more annoyed. David, on the other hand became quieter.

"What are you going to do?" he asked.

"Nothing," she promised him. "I'm not going to call, or write or email. If she wants to be left alone, then we'll leave her alone."

"But what about Jack? Shouldn't we—"

"One smack is not going to kill him."

They completed the rest of the journey in silence, giving Julie time to wonder how the battle of wills would eventually end, since Pamela normally had such an easy-going nature.

The next few days passed without either of them mentioning their middle daughter, a subject that was obviously uppermost in their minds. It was three days later that David shut the paper he'd been reading and spoke to her across the breakfast table.

"The Ceramics Fair is being held in Abington again. Isn't that the one you and Pamela usually go to?"

Julie looked at her husband, noting the frown lines and receding hair, and the concern reflected in his hazel eyes.

"If she calls, I'll mention it," she promised.

David retreated behind his newspaper, rustling it noisily to indicate he thought she was being unreasonable.

Although she was determined not to be the first one to back down, Julie examined the post each morning, answered the phone as soon as it rang, and checked to see if any messages had been left while they were out. A whole week passed without news. One evening she overheard David talking to Mary on the phone, telling her that her mother and sister *weren't speaking*.

When the following Saturday dawned bright and sunny, Julie got up with a flutter of excitement. On weekend days like these Pamela would often bundle Jack into the car and drive over so they could all enjoy a long walk in the local woods. To pass the time, Julie dusted. It was while she was polishing the porcelain figurines that she remembered the thrill of recent Christmas mornings, tearing the wrapping paper off suspiciously shaped gifts, eager to see what Pamela had brought her that year. She had six Royal Dalton Pretty Ladies adorning the dining table, all in different dresses and poses, all exquisite examples of the porcelain worker's art. When the doorbell rang, she dropped her cloth and smiled as she hurried to answer it. She felt certain that would be her daughter and grandson.

Instead, she saw two tall dark shapes through the glass in the door. She opened it to find two policemen standing there. She froze. Hadn't David said that he was going to the post office to collect a parcel? Please God, she prayed, don't let it be him.

"Are you Mrs Julie Harding?" the man asked. Julie nodded,

too frightened to speak.

"What's going on?"

The question came from behind her. It was David, framed in the kitchen doorway. Julie's heart skipped a beat. For a moment she had been so scared.

"Sir," the policeman continued, speaking to David now, "are you related to Mrs Pamela Nichols of 6 Falcon Crescent, Southampton?"

"She's our daughter," David said, putting a protective hand around Julie's shoulder.

"Then I am afraid I have bad news," he told them softly. "There has been an accident."

Julie's legs threatened to collapse; she clutched at David for support.

"The car ended up in the river," she remembered the policeman saying. "It was totally submerged...both drowned...no skid marks, just a small break in the railings...an inquest will be held...without skid marks, we have to consider suicide...the child's death...the coroner will...murder...balance of mind."

They were just words, meaningless words, terrible words, the sense of which slowly drilled their way into her brain. Her darling Pamela would never come home again. She was dead, lying on a freezing slab in an empty room somewhere. Jack was also gone. In her imagination she witnessed his last moments, the frantic struggle to free himself from the seat belt as water poured into the car, the terror as the muddy cold liquid rose over his head, his desperation as water filled his lungs and his tiny heart struggled to beat.

"Julie...Julie. They've gone, come away."

After that, nothing worked, nothing made sense, nothing mattered. Days were spent in a numb, mindless haze. Mary

arrived, spoke, then left. Julie remembered Ian asking if she wanted a cup of tea. She'd go to bed but wake up in the middle of the night, drenched in sweat. The nightmare was always the same. Jack was in the back of the car, struggling to get free as the water poured in. She watched, helpless to interfere, as a voice coldly told him, "You've been a naughty boy. Go to your room."

"She didn't do it," she told David as they planned the funeral service, deciding where her lovely daughter and beautiful grandchild would be buried.

"The police think—"

"Then the police are wrong. She didn't deliberately kill them both. I don't believe it. She couldn't."

The inquest was a nightmare. Crowded into Middleton's overheated library, they listened to Pamela's neighbours and colleagues describing someone Julie didn't recognise. They spoke of arguments and tears, of a woman in despair, of someone lost. After a while, all the voices and stories seemed to merge together.

Recoiling from what was being said, Julie found it hard to cling to the details, but there were three things that stuck in her mind. One was the coroner telling the police that mentioning suicide before examining the car was nothing more than incompetence. The second was the psychologist explaining why suicidal parents felt compelled to kill their children, rather than leave them behind. The last was Jeffery's absence. He never turned up for the funeral either. She vowed she'd never forgive him for that.

At the graveside she clung to David, grieving for their grandson, sobbing for the life he would never have, for the man he would never be. As they lowered Pamela into her grave, she

felt nothing. They were burying a stranger, someone capable of murdering an innocent child. It wasn't the daughter she thought she knew. Throwing a handful of dirt onto the coffin lid, she wondered where they had gone wrong.

After the funeral and the small wake at the house, Julie was putting away the plates when she found herself staring at the figurines. For the longest time, she stood there thinking of all those Christmas mornings, the sun-filled afternoons at the porcelain fair, and the dark, empty years ahead. The Pretty Ladies stared back at her with their painted porcelain smiles and their painted empty eyes. Once, they had made her smile, but now she could see they were nothing but empty shells. Biting back her anger, she gathered them up and took them outside. She laid them down on the path, and taking up a brick, she smashed each one to pieces. David found her there, kneeling among the wreckage in tears, the brick still in her hand. His strong arms cradled her, rocked her, sharing the pain, sharing the hollow emptiness in her soul.

Mary stayed on for a few more days, but Ian had to go back to work. Julie was forcing herself to water the garden when David came hurrying towards her with a parcel in his hands and a smile on his lips.

"It's from Pamela," he muttered. "Remember that parcel I was going to collect, well, this is it!"

Julie nodded. She remembered very little these days, but that day with its terrible news, she recalled perfectly.

"I put the slip into my wallet and forgot about it, until today. It's for you."

Trembling, she took the precious package into the kitchen. Mary and David peered over her shoulder as with shaking fingers she tore open the cardboard box, peeled back the tissue

paper and exposed the delicate porcelain figure inside. Straw-blond hair framed a smiling face with a tiny button nose. The writing on the bottom declared that the Pretty Lady in the blue swirling dress, the one who looked as if she was dancing for joy, was called, "All my love".

David read the note.

"She says she's sorry for pushing you out of the house when you were only trying to help, and she hopes that you'll accept this in lieu of an apology. It was supposed to be for your birthday. She adds she'll be over to see us on Saturday."

Things moved quickly after that. David took the note to the police, who quickly admitted that it didn't sound like the work of a woman planning to take her own life. Six days later the coroner reconvened the inquest. The police had retrieved the car from the river. Their investigator found the brake line was damaged. Brake fluid was found soaked into the ground where Pamela normally parked her car. The inquest's final report suggested the brakes failed as the car was driven around a sharp corner near the river, resulting in the accident that cost the car's occupants their lives. Shortly afterwards, the coroner closed the proceedings, issuing a verdict of death by misadventure for both Pamela and Jack.

Back home, Julie sat on the settee, turning the pages of an old photo album. One picture showed baby Pam in her pushchair, in another she was playing with her dolls. Turning page after page, Julie came face to face with a little girl in her school uniform, grinning cheekily up at the camera. She was still reminiscing when David came in to give her a cup of tea. With a soft smile, he sat down.

"You never gave up on her," he whispered, covering her hand with his.

Julie didn't deny it, although her faith had been shredded by what she'd heard at the inquest. There had been a time when she felt she had lost the daughter she thought she had raised. Now, in a distant corner of her heart, she felt a flutter of relief. Since the inquest, she had been ravaged by thoughts of guilt.

She knew Pamela was not herself after Jeffry left. The day her daughter threw her out, she should have gone back, got to the bottom of what was troubling her. She could have helped! Afterwards, she could have called but she was too stubborn. She was so certain her daughter could cope with whatever life threw at her. It never occurred to Julie that her daughter needed help. The figurine, and more importantly the letter which accompanied it, confirmed the Pamela she knew and loved had been driving the car which veered off the road and into the river. She would mourn her daughter and grandson till the end of her days, but it would be *her* Pamela she mourned, not the half-crazed woman capable of killing herself and her innocent son.

"I've been thinking about the headstone," David said, taking a piece of paper from a drawer. "What do you think," he asked, handing it over.

Next to Pamela's name he had written, "*Children are a gift from God, but what comes free, costs too much to lose.*" Below, he had sketched a rough outline of Pamela's dancing figurine, the Pretty Lady, complete with her daughter's straw-gold hair and button nose.

"It's perfect," Julie whispered through her tears. "That's exactly how I remember her."

The Lure of Balmy Breezes

“Darling,” Sian asked across the dinner plate.
 “Are we going to Spain soon, or shall we wait?”
 The newspaper crackled, Rhys gave a great sigh
 “I’m sorry,” he said, “not till interest rates rise.”
 “This year, like most Welshmen, we’ll be staying home.
 Sterling has fallen, we can’t afford to roam.
 It all started,” Rhys claimed, “with investment banks,
 lending vast sums to uncollateralled Yanks.”
 “Now confidence has dropped to an all-time low.
 No one’s lending, no one’s spending; I don’t know
 how far house values will fall, with cash so rare.
 Things will only get worse, so we must take care.”
 “But we’ve saved that money,” Sian softly replied,
 holding back the salt tears that threatened to slide.
 “I’ve been waiting all year for some sun and sea.
 Surely we’ve saved enough for this wee treat?”
 Sitting with hands clasped, she was told the world’s woes,
 staring at the slate roofs of wet Llandudno.
 An investment expert, yet he couldn’t see,
 she needed this break, like the wind needs the tree.

These dark winter days, they were strangling her soul.
She longed to swim naked through azure shallows.
To sip golden nectar and laze in the sun;
cook fish on a fire when the day's work was done.
Hear whispering palm leaves, the lapping of sea,
smell jasmine, and lilac, and frangipani.
To feel balmy breezes caress her damp skin.
Enjoy a lover's kiss, then give a sly grin.
While Rhys was still reading she cleared up the plates.
Alone in the kitchen she called her best mate.
"Gwyn," she whispered, "you're still going to Greece?
I know it's next week, but could I get a seat?"
A week later she stood at Gwyn's front door,
satchel in hand, a bulging case on the floor.
Clutching her tickets, a flame leapt in her heart.
Small steps, then big steps, all to make a new start.
"Did you tell him you're going?" Sian shook her head.
"Won't he think you've gone mad, or got yourself dead?"
"He's a world-wide expert," Sian said with a pout.
"No wife, no suitcase, I think he'll work it out."

Jungle Flowers

Machine gun fire erupted from the trees to Amina's left. The metallic rattle of flying bullets startled her, but she remembered what she had been taught and threw herself to the ground. With the cold metal of her gun pressed against her cheek, she listened for the sounds that would tell her where the enemy was positioned. A rustle to her left had her rolling onto her back with the barrel pointed in that direction. Her finger tightened against the trigger, her heart beat fast as she waited for something to shoot at.

"Don't fire, don't fire," a familiar voice softly begged as the rustling grew closer.

When Samba's head emerged from the undergrowth, Amina breathed a sigh of relief and eased her finger off the trigger. Samba, their twelve-year-old leader smiled back at her. She noted his black T-shirt had gained a new tear and he had lost his camouflage bandana, exposing his dark skin and tight, curly hair. He grinned as he pushed his sub-machine gun forward and knelt down at her side.

"They are shooting at birds. Didn't you hear them?" he asked in a whisper.

Amina shook her head and pointed to the trees from where the gunfire had come. Samba shook his head, gesturing in the opposite direction with his thumb, towards the river.

"I heard their boat arrive," he hissed.

Amina wasn't going to argue with him. Theirs was the smallest rebel group in the area. It was made up of Samba, herself and eleven-year-old Mouhamed. Although they carried weapons, fighting was not the reason they were there. Thanks to Samba's unerring instincts, they could move through Senegal's tropical rain forest mostly unchallenged, spying on the enemy, and reporting their position back to the rebel leaders. She and Mouhamed had come to depend on Samba's strange link with his surroundings. If he said the enemy was at the river, then that was where they were.

"Where is Mouhamed?" she asked, careful to keep her words as soft as a breeze. She had been dawdling in their wake, collecting the mildly intoxicating Gata leaves to exchange for ground millet at the rebel camp. There was never enough food to fill three hungry bellies.

Samba's answer was an eloquent shrug of the shoulders.

"He climbed a Bubem tree to collect fruit," he whispered, his glance circling the forest. "I went ahead until I heard the boat arrive. When I ran back to warn him, but he was gone."

After picking up his gun, he made a gesture with his hand to indicate they should move from that spot and work their way towards the river. Samba liked to get behind the enemy. Once they found a good hiding place, they would sit and watch as the soldiers searched the area for rebel sympathizers; scything the trees with their bullets, setting fire to crops and empty buildings.

They had once enjoyed a rare moment of fun when the

soldiers frightened a wild pig and sent it crashing through the jungle, only to race after it shouting and firing. In the confusion, Mouhamed crept up to their camp and stole one of their bags. Once the enemy moved off, they rummaged through the contents to see what they had stolen. They ate the sweets and opened the tin of corned beef straight away. Back at the village the Senegalese Separatists called home, they traded the bag, phone and bullets for an extra bag of millet. That had been a good day.

Amina shouldered the gun, which was almost as tall as she was, and crawled after Samba. She offered up a silent prayer that Mouhamed would be sensible and hide. He had been so proud of stealing the soldier's bag. It made him reckless.

It took them almost an hour to get behind the soldiers and reach the riverbank where, as Samba had predicted, a grey boat lay beached on one of the mud flats. She followed him as he climbed into a tree growing out over the river, its long pointed leaves brushing the dark, rippling water beneath. Sitting in a cleft of branches, hidden from view by a curtain of green, they waited with the patience of stones. The sun rose high in the sky as they snoozed propped up against the branches. After many long hours, the sun fell slowly towards the earth.

Leaning against the spicy-smelling bark, she was woken from a light doze by engine noises and looked up in time to see the grey boat filled with chattering soldiers arc across the river before disappearing downstream in a cloud of diesel fumes.

"We must find Mouhamed," Samba told her, an anxious frown on his face as he nudged her shoulder, indicating she should climb down first.

As soon as Samba's feet touched the damp soil, he was off, weaving swiftly between the trees, re-tracing the route they had

taken that morning. Amina followed, pausing to pick a large pink hibiscus flower from a nearby bush. She remembered there had been flowers like this in her mother's garden, behind the vegetables and the chickens. She would pick a basketful each morning for her mother to dry and use the wrinkled dried petals to make Hibiscus tea.

That was before the government soldiers came, accusing the villagers of feeding the separatists. The elders stood their ground and denied any wrongdoing, but they were shot down where they stood. As their bodies fell to the ground, everyone fled, bullets zinging in all directions. Soldiers strode through the village killing anything that moved.

Amina's mother died with her arms thrown around her small daughter, protecting her from the hail of bullets tearing through her flesh like knives. In the hours that followed, Amina lay hidden beneath her mother's body, the stink of blood and excrement overlaying the magical scent of hibiscus.

She slipped her precious Hibiscus flower under the edge of her bandana and went to look for Samba. She found him standing motionless on the path, looking down. Mouhamed lay on his back in the mud, his arms flung outwards, his eyes staring blankly at the sky above. There was a thick, line of torn flesh across his throat. Dark blood pooled in the dirt beneath his head. They stood together, looking down at their cousin's body. Neither spoke. Amina bent down, pulled the flower from her bandana and laid it gently on Mouhamed's chest.

"When the soldiers went back to the boat," Samba told her, his voice so hoarse she had to strain to hear him, "they were too happy. I knew then..."

They remained standing motionless for the longest time, gazing down upon Mouhamed's lifeless form. Neither spoke,

nor was a single tear shed. When Samba eventually grunted and walked off, Amina followed him, running hard to keep up.

When their parents were alive, if anyone died in their village, there would have been the traditional three days of mourning and prayers, before the body was placed reverently in the ground. That gentle way of life, tied as it was to the seasons and their age-old traditions, was destroyed the day the soldiers came and wiped her village from the face of the earth. She and Samba were all that was left. She carried the memory of all those faces cradled in her heart.

Life was now all about survival, but whenever she saw hibiscus, she recalled that other life. Until the day she died and joined her ancestors in the sky, she would remember them. Lifting her hand to her nose, she breathed the hibiscus scent from her fingers, awaking something locked deep inside. She stopped on the path and turned back towards Mouhamed's body. Tears trickled down both cheeks. She found she could not move, could not leave her cousin's body there for the wild animals to tear apart. They should bury him. In the back of her mind, she heard Samba telling her what needed to be done. *There is no time for mourning. We must get back and report what has happened before it gets too dark to see the trail.*

Taking a deep breath, she wiped away her tears. She spared one more glance for Mouhamed and another for the setting sun. With a tired sigh, she readjusted the gun strap across her shoulder and hurried after her brother.

Betrayal Indeed

You'd think he'd have been more careful,
His wife, his accountant too,
To hide that revealing hotel bill,
from eyes so sharp and blue.
He'd said he'd stayed at John's that night,
a friend from out of town,
But when I'd phoned and probed and asked,
The woman's hair was brown.
I've thought and planned, then thought some more,
The evenings long I've spent,
He'll pay for his lies, his smiles, his guile,
On revenge, I am hell bent
I have written all those letters you see,
and posted them as well.
They'll turn his sweet life upside down,
and make it a living hell.
The longest went to Scotland Yard,
the shortest to the D.T.I.
They spoke of fraud and currency deals,
I really had to smile.

He thought he had been so clever,
that deal with the firm in Spain,
To save paying the V.A.T.,
He's only himself to blame.
Betrayal's met with betrayal indeed.
As accountant I had the tools.
There goes the lid on Pandora's box,
Should never have forgotten the rules.
Look out for you is rule number one,
but then there was rule number two.
You only do unto others my dear,
what you'd have them do, to you.

Note:

D.T.I. = Department of Trade and Industry

V.A.T = Value added tax

Margaret comes to town

Looking through the window at the cloudless azure sky, Elaine shook her head in annoyance. Beyond the wall at the front of the house, the silver leaves of an ancient olive tree curled as the summer heat took its toll. The newspaper said it would be a blistering thirty-six degrees centigrade today. In the coolness behind the lace curtains, Elaine brushed away a stray hair before continuing her dusting.

Her sister Margret was flying out from England that afternoon so she was taking extra care getting everything ready. It was strange, but while she and Margret were as close as sisters could be, there was an unspoken rivalry between them when it came to their houses. On the phone last night, Margret had bragged about her new extension and how it would double the value of their house in Cambridge. Elaine couldn't help feeling that all these last minute phone calls were because an extension, no matter how big, just didn't measure up to a second home in Spain.

She had no intentions of disappointing her sister, so she had taken extra care over her room's decorations. Lilac-scented candles sat on the side table with matching silk cushions strewn

artfully across the pillows. Yesterday she'd even found an empty wine bottle and glued some rope around the base before attaching a light fitting and a lightshade. It made a rather chic bedside lamp.

As she stood in the middle of the spare bedroom, she could see everything was spotlessly clean. There were new rugs on the tiled floor and freshly laundered curtains at the windows. She gave all the surfaces a final wipe with her duster before pausing at the door to admire her handiwork. Margaret would have to be impressed, she thought.

Leaving the duster under the sink, she went outside to speak to Charlie, her husband. From the muffled bangs, she reckoned he was working in the outside storeroom, but as soon as she opened the door, she was met by a billowing cloud of yellow powder.

"What are you doing in there," she demanded, waving a hand, trying to sweep the dust aside and see what was going on.

"Don't come in. Stay out there and I'll come to you."

A moment later Charlie appeared with one of her tea towels tied across his nose and mouth, covered from head to foot in pale yellow dust.

"What's going on?" she asked, retreating slightly from this ghostly apparition.

"We needed a bit more room for storing the barbeque and garden chairs, so I thought I'd just open up the back a bit," he said in a half-choked voice, trying to hide the pickaxe he was still holding.

When they first came to view this Spanish villa, they hadn't realised that the house in the brochure was partially built into the side of a mountain. It was what the Spanish called a cave house. At first, although the property had been carefully

refurbished with a large pool and every modern convenience, Elaine hadn't been convinced it was for them. After all, what would Margret say about them living in a cave? In the end, it had been its imperviousness to the unrelenting heat that won her over. In the surrounding concrete and brick villas, the air conditioning was always on during the summer, but in this particular cave house, with its north-facing windows and bedrooms buried deep inside the sandstone mountain, the interior was comfortably cool without expensive air conditioning. It also meant, as Charlie was proving, if they wanted to enlarge the house, all they needed was a pickaxe and strong right arm.

"Don't forget Pedro is coming at twelve with that new chest of drawers for the spare room," she reminded him. "You do remember where it goes?"

"How can I forget," Charlie answered, his reply muted by the towel across his face. "You've told me ten times already. It goes between the wardrobe and the wall. Don't worry, Pedro and I can manage it without breaking anything. You go and get Margret and give her a kiss from me. Don't worry, everything will be fine."

Giving his shoulders a shrug as if preparing to do battle, he then turned, and with the pickaxe held out in front of him like a sword, re-entered the dust-filled storeroom.

Brushing herself down, Elaine went inside the house to collect her handbag and car keys. Although the house was built halfway up a mountain, it only took a few miles of narrow winding roads before she was out onto the motorway and speeding towards the airport. She arrived early and bought a magazine before sitting down to wait. Margret's plane landed on time. Half an hour later, she emerged from the arrivals hall, dragging a blue

suitcase behind her.

"How was the flight?" Elaine enquired after the ubiquitous peck on both cheeks.

"Not bad, but the food was awful. Still I'm here now and that's what counts. How are you?"

The journey home seemed to go very quickly as she and Margret caught up on family gossip. As they turned off the motorway, Margret started taking more notice of the surrounding properties.

"That's nice", she said as they passed a palatial mansion with wrought iron gates.

"We're still a couple of miles away yet," Elaine told her, worried that impressing her sister with their little house wasn't going to be as easy as she'd hoped.

When they eventually pulled off the road and parked on the driveway, Margret got out and stared at the view.

"That's quite a drop," she said pointing to the steep gorge across the road.

Turning to look at the mountain, her eyes skipped over the house, the garden and the pool. If Elaine had hoped for a "Wow, isn't that nice?", she was sadly disappointed.

"It's certainly hot," was all Margret could say.

"Let's get inside," Elaine said through gritted teeth. "It'll be cooler."

Inside the house, they walked in silence over hand-made terracotta tiles, past the marble-lined bathroom, and down the short corridor to the guest bedroom. Elaine led the way. After pushing open the studded antique door to the bedroom, she stood aside to let Margret enter.

"This is your room. You've got the sole use of the bathroom next door and the towels are..."

That's where it all stopped.

Elaine noticed the dust in the air first, swiftly followed by the sound of grit underfoot as Margret walked across the room.

"Oh, you're back. I thought you'd be longer," said Charlie as he emerged from the bathroom.

In a flash she took in the pile of rubble on the floor, the hammer and chisel in his hand and the freshly hewn recesses between the wardrobe and the wall.

"Pedro rang to say the drawers wouldn't be coming, so I thought I'd quickly make some alcoves so you can put the clothes in there instead."

He sounded so proud. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Margret run a solitary finger across the side table, pushing away the dust and leaving a dark line behind. Then her sister looked over her shoulder and gave her small, condescending smile.

Elaine felt her blood-pressure rising. She was furious. All her hard work, all her planning, ruined! No wonder Margret looked so smug.

"I'll get a duster...and a mop," she blurted out, before turning and leaving.

Her heels beat a rapid *tap tap tap* on the tiles as she strode across the lounge. They went *tap tap tap* on the pathway as she headed straight for the storeroom. Inside she found the pickaxe resting against the door frame. She grabbed it and marched down the driveway. Lifting it high, she crossed the road, throwing it with all her might over the wall and into the gorge beneath. She had the satisfaction of watching it bounce end over end as it tumbled down towards the tiny stream far below.

When she returned to the house, she found Margret waiting for her in the hall. She half expected her to say something sarcas-

tic, something about cave living, something about troglodytes! Instead, her sister smiled warmly and put an arm around her shoulders.

“Men! You can’t live with them and you can’t bury them alive. Harry’s just the same.”

Then she chuckled and gave Elaine’s arm a gentle squeeze.

“Don’t worry, Linny, it’s not the end of the world. I’ll give you a hand to clean up.”

Elaine suddenly realised that Margret was right. Her favourite sister had come all the way to Spain to visit her, and all she could think about was dust and dirt. She was being foolish. Margret knew her better than she knew herself. She wanted to enjoy having her sister to stay, not to get angry over a spoilt surprise.

“No, let’s have a cup of tea and a couple of palmeras biscuits instead,” she insisted. “The mess will still be there when we’ve finished.”

They were chatting companionably in the kitchen when Charlie came in scratching his head.

“You know, I can’t find my pickaxe anywhere. I’m sure I left it in the shed...”

Oops.

The Child Within

A child lives deep within me, there she softly sleeps and waits.

Upon the tread of life's rough road, a turn she sometimes takes.

I try to paint in greys and browns, she deftly picks up blue.

Instead of my short, timid strokes, she daubs the canvas through.

A scampering dog comes into view, it's she that laughs and grins

She dances with the sewing box - I'm left to pick up pins.

It's her that stares at setting suns, I fret about the tea

She devours life like angel cake, not bound by chains like me.

But in the night she clings to sheets, and shakes at drips and creaks

I sneer at her infantile fears, it's just a tap that leaks.

But come the dawn she leaps up straight, and greets the sun with glee.

All fear dispelled and joy unbound, the sluggish one is me.

Although we journey side by side, those final hours I dread

I know she'll be afraid and cry, a thousand tears she'll shed.

The dark is there she'll whisper low, after all of this no light.
They'll lay me deep within the ground, no warmth, no touch,
no sight.

I'll kiss her gently, pull her close, life's been good and long I'll
say.

We've had our turn upon the wheel, we can't delay our stay.
I'm scared she'll sob and then I'll see, I'm twice as scared as
she

But I'm the wiser, elder one there'll be no tears from me.
I'll take her hand and thank her for the shades she brought to
life

For azure skies, the reddest rose, the black and greys of strife
And tightly held we'll turn again, and face the dark beyond.
A tear or two, a whispered sigh, and then we'll both be gone.

