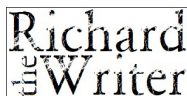


100 Days of
Three
Little
Words

A personal journey into creativity

Richard Jefferis



Self-published in Australia by Richard Jefferis,
aka Richard The Writer.

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How It Began

It was Christmas Day, 2018. I was sitting alone in a hotel room. I was 60 years old and I dislike large groups of people. I also dislike Christmas so when my wife said she was having family round for Christmas Day I decided to do a runner to Melbourne and opt out.

So, I was sitting in the hotel room eating a cold chicken kebab with my feet on the bed watching some god-awful crap on the TV and I start to think “What the fuck is going on with my life?” Apart from some minor casual work I hadn't had a job since I was made redundant 10 years before. My wife had walked out of her job 3 years later as they were making her life very unpleasant. We had a few rough years of very little money but my mother left me some money when she died so we were able to pay off the mortgage. A couple of months before this little Christmas trip my wife got a low paying job which, because we had no mortgage, was sufficient for our needs. Also I'd lost my driver's licence because I'd been a naughty boy and been caught doing 98kph in a 50kph zone. There were a couple of other issues going on in my life as well but they're not interesting to anyone other than me.

Surely there was more to life than this?

Well, if there was I wasn't creative enough to think of what it could be. A few days later I was back home, trawling the net looking for something of interest when it occurred to me that I could google “how to be more creative”. So I did. About 3 trillion things popped up – wow, there are some creative people out there! I started looking through some of the suggestions and, frankly, the first few were decidedly iffy. Not me at all.

One, however, did grab my attention. It seemed straightforward and possibly even achievable. Most importantly it didn't require me to get out of my chair or give up smoking. It's amazing just how many suggestions to improve creativity involve exercise and healthy living, which was a deal-breaker for me. Not my style. “Open a dictionary at random, take three consecutive words and write a short story using them,” sounded not too bad at all. I lit a ciggie and pondered. “Yes,” I thought to myself, “I should be able to manage that”.

So I found a dictionary, opened it at random and looked at the three consecutive words my finger had landed upon.

Creutzfeldt-Jacob Disease

Crevasse

Crevice

You have got to be fucking kidding me.

Write a short story about Creutzfeldt-Jacob Disease? Using Crevasse and Crevice?? Get real.

Anyway, I did it. Sometimes you just have to decide to do something and to hell with the result, and with words like those who could blame me if my story was pure garbage? God dealt me a bad hand and was sitting back waiting to laugh at me for not trying. Just as well I'm an atheist.

"Sod it." I thought. "I'll give it 20 minutes then go back to surfing the net. Maybe there'll be something interesting on YouTube."

24 minutes later I had written a story. OK, it's not the greatest short story you'll ever read and it's only 317 words long but I did it and I used those words. All by myself. That was pretty cool. Kinda fun too. So the next day I did it again. Different words, a different story. Not as long but still fun. And challenging. The next day I did it again. Then again. Sometimes I missed a day but I made it up by writing two the next day.

I didn't tell my wife or show her the stories. My greatest fear in life, even more than heights or spiders or losing my cigarettes, is looking a fool and being laughed at. I knew she'd think I was a fool and that she'd laugh at me so I clutched my little endeavour to my chest like a porno magazine and kept it secret. But after 74 days of surreptitious writing when she wasn't around there was a breakthrough and I took down the wall I'd built around my secret writing. I told my wife about it and she was outraged that I could think she'd laugh at me for trying to do such a thing. I printed all 74 stories out and left them in a folder for her to read, which she did over the next few days. After 12 years of marriage it's difficult to be impressed but she said she was impressed

and managed to keep a straight face while saying it so I believed her. Love moves in mysterious ways.

For some reason, what had started as an idle exercise to while away the time had become something of an obsession and frankly I was astonished as time went by that I could always find something to write. I'm also deeply curious as to how much longer I could keep it up. No doubt truly creative people will say I can keep it up forever but I have my doubts. Surely there must come a day when I simply can't think of anything else to write?

My wife, bless her heart, when she'd read the first fifty stories or so thought I should write a novel. I was around day eighty five when she said that (as I kept them secret from her for 74 days) and pooh poohed the idea. I was struggling to write a thousand words and a hundred thousand words was an impossible dream, even if I did manage to come up with an idea that was sufficiently sustainable. But here's the thing. Day ninety nine's story was so abysmal that I abandoned it mid sentence and decided to rewrite it from scratch from the same words for day 100. Tossing around ideas for the words for day 101, it occurred to me to carry on with day 100's story from where I left off and I kept going with that and ended up, after 17 days, with a 67,000 word novel.

I don't know if I'll ever do anything with that novel but Oh My God! How on earth did I manage to write a decent sized novel when only 100 days previously I was struggling to churn out 300 words of trash?

I want this book to inspire you. If I can do it, an unemployed 60 year old with no drivers licence, you can too, and probably a lot better.

What's In This Book

This book contains the first 100 short stories I wrote in an attempt to develop my creativity. Well, 99½ to be precise because there are 1½ stories missing and there is an extra, unscheduled one which wasn't based on any dictionary words. They are in this book in their original form, warts and all, exactly how I left them at the end of my time limit. None have been sanitised, worked on, improved, edited or whatever. This way you can see all my faults and not be intimidated

by perfect spelling or correct tenses. Creative development and learning to spell are completely different things and I'm convinced that creativity must never be held back by petty rules. The petty rules can always be applied later but if you focus on the petty rules to start with you'll probably never end up with a decent story. I've given the words I got from the dictionary, the time I spent writing the story and the word count. I've also pointed out any logical errors I thought of later. Incidentally, the time taken was from when I got the words to deciding I'd finished – there was no time set aside for preliminary thinking or planning. I've also given some comments about what, if anything, I was trying to achieve with each story – generally not much more than finishing something coherent but sometimes I was trying for something in particular. When relevant I've also given some background and, in some cases, how my wife reacted when she read it. She wasn't always positive! I've checked our wedding vows and sadly there wasn't a clause that covered this. Also when I consciously used someone else's ideas I've mentioned it. If I've unconsciously used someone else's ideas I apologise unreservedly.

Have I produced any decent stories? Well, I'll be the first to admit that many of them are not good. Some have no point and others miss the point. However one made me cry as I wrote it and makes me cry every time I read it or even think of it and some have made me laugh. Which ones they are doesn't matter. What matters with any story is how *you* react to it, not me. If I can get you to laugh or cry, other than over the quality of my writing, that's awesome.

Also, and this is an important point, much as I'd like you to think how clever I am that is not the objective. The objective is to inspire you and encourage you to develop your own creativity. I'm showing you my garbage so you can see that garbage is an essential byproduct of creation and you must NOT be put off or frightened by it. I'm sure Shakespeare and Dickens wrote plenty of garbage that never saw the light of day but no one can learn from it because it was burnt.

Maybe you think my garbage is great. Well, in that case thank you very much. Maybe you think what I think is good is actually garbage. Well, that's good too. All creativity comes down to personal judgement and taste. One of these I wrote as a quick joke, simply to catch up with a missing day and my wife found it meaningful and moving. She

was aghast when I told her it was just me farting around. The thing is you will produce your own garbage and your own great works. Own the garbage as much as the brilliance but don't stress over it.

The real point is, I think, that you can do better than me if you only try. This book is about trying and not giving up when the dictionary gives you Creutzfeldt-Jacob Disease.

Some Tips For When You Try This Yourself

1. The most important tip of all: Just do it and don't be scared. The hardest thing in the world is taking the first step.
2. Set a short time limit. Perhaps more scary than a blank page is aeons of empty time stretching ahead of you. It's intimidating. 20 minutes or so worked for me to begin with. At the end of 20 minutes, bring it to a close and be done with it. You will probably find after a while that 20 minutes isn't long enough. No problem, just increase the time limit a little. Don't force yourself.
3. Don't worry about spelling or punctuation or tenses or any of the technical crap. Get the words out and you can do the fancy stuff later or not bother. It's the ideas that matter not the bureaucracy. Rules are for small-minded people, not you.
4. If you are struggling to even start, cut the 3 words down to just 1. Pick the most difficult word and write about it. For me Creutzfeldt-Jacob Disease was an absolute bummer. Crevasse and Crevice wouldn't have been too hard to include eg "He fell into a crevasse but managed to climb out by sticking his finger in a crevice" but Creutzfeldt-Jacob Disease nearly killed this entire exercise off before I'd got started.
5. Don't be afraid of nasty words. If you don't know the word then read the meaning next to it, it's in a dictionary after all! Or cheat and redefine it the way you want, that's creative too. There are no rules except the ones you impose on yourself.
6. Don't be afraid to steal other people's ideas. Apparently there are only 5 basic stories in the whole of human existence so whatever you write will be a variation of one of them. Just don't copy someone else's ideas verbatim. Change them and make them your own.
7. Remember, no matter how bad your story is, someone else has written a worse one! Actually, it was probably me and it's in this

book somewhere.

Am I just being arrogant?

Frankly I've been called many things in my time and at least "arrogant" isn't particularly rude. Someone once said I was a "cult" which pleased me no end until I realised I'd misheard. Am I being arrogant showing off my short stories? Probably. So what? They're my stories and I can do what I want with them.

Seriously though, read the first few stories and then read the last few. I'm sure you can see a huge change in the quality, depth, flow, complexity and, dare I say it, creativity. How did that happen? I have no idea but I'm awestruck by it. Yet it has happened and it happened by me deciding to do these stories and to stick with them. Whether its just practice or there's been some change within me I don't know, but I feel there *has* been a change within me which is flowing into other areas of my life. Life is full of uncertainty.

Day 1 ~ 31st December 2018 Words: Creutzfeldt-Jacob Disease, Crevasse, Crevice

Mayla strode purposefully with all the vigor of her 19 years along the well marked path across the campus lawns towards the Arts Building where she studied photography and indigenous art. As she walked she hummed gently to herself and contemplated the grade she might get for her last paper which was due to be returned today. A crow swooped overhead and landed heavily on the grass to the side of the path a few metres ahead of her. “A crow!” thought Mayla, “what would be a good way to photograph it so that the image could be representative of 17th century Aboriginal art?”. The crow ignored her introspection as it sought for worms in a crevice in the earth, repeatedly jabbing its beak. As Mayla neared the crow the grass melded into a lumpy smoothness and faded to off-white. Frightened, the crow launched itself with repeated “caws” as the crevice in the earth rapidly enlarged and widened into an ice-bound crevasse and the crow crashed to the ground looking suspiciously like a penguin. Startled out of her reverie Mayla lost her footing, fell on her backside and slid remorselessly into the crevasse which yawned bottomlessly. As she fell into the ever deepening darkness Mayla decided she must have got an A for her paper as no God, Aboriginal or otherwise, would be so twisted as to snatch her life away just before receiving a poor grade.

“Yes, I confirm that death occurred at about 9.25pm” said Dr Koothrapali to the duty nurse as he completed the inevitable paperwork that surrounds a death. “Creutzfeldt-Jacob Disease is always fatal and at 84 Mayla has done well to survive this long.”

“You know” the nurse replied thoughtfully. “K-J destroys the nerve cells in the brain so I wonder if she still had any thoughts up to the end or was her mind just blank and empty?”.

(317 words, 24 minutes)

Well, here it is. The first story in all it's glory. No, you don't have to say anything, just accept it.

After finding out what Creutzfeldt-Jacob Disease actually is I thought it might be interesting to have Mayla as a 19 year old in her mind while she

was dying at the age of 84. Looking back on this story now, I think I was trying too hard to be creative. I'd set out to write a creative short story and I was damned well going to be creative! I've heard that usually someone's first story is auto-biographical so maybe I should have written about some incident from my past rather than about what's going on inside the mind of someone at the moment of death. On the other hand, there is no experience in my life that would help me write about Creutzfeldt-Jacob Disease so I had to be creative, even though I simply didn't have the imagination or skill to produce a good story on this theme. For all its faults, however, it is still undeniably a short story that is coherent, has a point and doesn't ramble or crash all over the place. I hadn't written any fiction since I'd left school some 45 years previously – we won't count my resume or any performance reviews I've had to submit to employers over the years. They weren't 'technically' classed as fiction.

Well, look at me! I'd stepped outside my comfort zone, had a go and produced a story. And more importantly still, I had another go the next day.

Incidentally, the eagle-eyed may have spotted that the doctor's name is from a character in the TV show Big Bang Theory. Where I got the name Mayla from I've no idea.

I think that possibly a significant contributing factor to me actually getting started was the date. I felt I want to have a go at this creative writing exercise/challenge but I could oh so easily have put it off to the next day. When you have little to do each day, putting things off becomes surprisingly easy. The thing is, being a strange and contrary sort of person, I really, really didn't want this to be "just another New Year's resolution." New Year's resolutions are such a cliché that giving up is more or less a foregone conclusion. This kind of applies to things started on the 2nd of January as well. By starting on the 31st December it wouldn't be a New Year's cop out; if I failed it would be a real failure.

Yes, I know I'm weird.

Day 2 ~ 1st January 2019 Words: Participate, Participle, Particle

“I don't really understand participles” said Billy.

“Oh they're really simple” replied Molly. “You know a verb is supposed to be a 'doing' word, don't you?”

Billy nodded

“Well, they aren't really.” continued Molly. “Verbs are the idea of doing something not the actual doing.”

Billy grimaced. Molly laughed.

“Take the verb 'to cook'. Its about the idea of cooking but only in the abstract. When someone actually cooks something we talk about it using the participle of the word. For example, the verb is to cook but the action or the participle is 'I am cooking the chicken' or 'I cooked the chicken' depending on whether I'm doing it now or I did it in the past.”

Billy screwed up his face and twisted his lips.

“That's a good example”, said Molly. “There is a general idea in the verb 'to grimace' but you are actually 'grimacing' so you are really doing a participle right this moment! You are participating in a participle”.

They both laughed at the idea of participating in a participle.

“Oh!” said Billy, his face lighting up as an idea hit him. “So if I was an electron in a wire and you turned the switch on so that electricity flowed I'd be a particle participating in a participle!”

“That's right” said Molly. “The verb is 'to flow', the electron is a particle and it is participating in that flow so the flow is actually happening and we need to use the participle of 'to flow'. So if you were an idealist electron, you'd be a principled particle participating in a participle! Well done. Give me another example.”

Billy groaned. “My head is too little for this.”

(22 min, 289 words)

I didn't know what a participle was so I read the definition and looked online for examples which might explain why this one is shorter than yesterday's. Then I simply decided to write a little story playing with words to do with participles rather than any “serious” story. Word games can be fun although I sort of saw myself in Billy. On Day 2 I was feeling that maybe my head was too little for this creativity malarky.

On the positive side, I did not make a New Year's resolution to abandon this and watch ABBA videos instead.

Day 3 ~ 2nd January 2019 Words: Eke, Elaborate, Elan

They looked through the faintly misted cafe window along the Rue de St Bernadine, reflections of street lights shimmering on the freshly drenched tarmac. A lone walker scurried along the pavement on the far side, hurrying in case of another downpour. A car gently nosed into a parking space.

“That looks like an old Bently”, whispered Jean-Luc to himself. “Such style, such elan. C’est magnifique.”

Terese nudged her seat closer to Jean-Luc’s so their shoulders touched.

“I never know whether I should feel envious of someone who has a car like that or grateful that I don’t have the debts and responsibilities that go along with that lifestyle.” Terese’s deep brown eyes sparkled with amusement.

“We eke out our wages but we manage to have a comfortable life. And an occasional coffee at a cafe like this is romantic whereas if we could afford to come here all the time it would just be routine.”

“Yes”, replied Jean-Luc. “Our lives are simple but rich but if we had a car like that our lives could easily be elaborate but impoverished. And you are far more beautiful than any car could ever be.”

Their fingers gently touched in shared love and understanding.

(24 min, 205 words)

When I got these words my mind stayed blank and I started to wonder if I’d lost what tiny spark of creativity I had already. Looking around the room for any sort of inspiration I saw a print on the wall, which I love. I got it at a market in Melbourne for \$160. I saw it and just gazed at it for a while then asked the stall lady how much it was. Money was very tight at that time so I wandered off and caught up with my wife. I told her I’d seen a picture that really grabbed me and asked if it would be OK to spend \$160. To her eternal credit she said “Yes”. Wonderful lady my wife.

I have no idea who did the picture. Anyway, for want of anything better to

do I started to write about the painting. There was something about the word 'Elan' which suggested France and the French so I made the girl and boy in the picture French and imagined the cafe to be in a wet, seaside town like Calais. This story is shorter than the other two but of the three I think it works the best. Perhaps because I was imagining it from a picture, I can almost see this story really happening. Certainly its unrealistic to think that this creativity exercise is having any effect yet. My brain was undoubtedly still in shock at being asked to do something so unnatural.

Day 4 ~ 3rd January 2019 Words: Fibrosis, Fibrous, Fibula

The motorcycle's rear wheel skidded and the entire machine crashed down on Dilmar, trapping his left leg underneath it. The cow crossing the lane didn't even bother to give him a cursory glance. When he eventually got to a hospital – things don't happen fast in country villages in India – Dilmar found that he'd managed to break both the tibia and fibula of his leg but fortunately only the side mirror on his bike was broken and the clutch handle was a little bent. His body would heal but motorcycle parts were expensive.

Once able to walk tolerably well again, Dilmar stole a mirror and fitted it to his bike and managed to straighten the handle with a piece of pipe and liberal use of a hammer. The previous owner of the mirror came to Dilmar's house and confronted him but Dilmar claimed he was unable to walk because of his leg so the disgruntled owner had to leave with disbelief written all over his face but fortunately no evidence.

It was soon after this that an angel came to visit Dilmar. She didn't have wings but she did have a very fetching pale blue nurse's uniform and a badge proclaiming she worked for the same mining company that Dilmar did. Dilmar believed she was an angel because she was so perfectly beautiful that she could not be human and she smiled at him. Admittedly she had come to warn him that early signs of pulmonary fibrosis had been detected in his lungs in his annual medical exam but that was of no real significance. Dilmar's motorcycle was repaired and she had smiled at him. Life was wonderful! The threadbare tapestry of his life was becoming thicker, more fibrous and yes, more lustrous. Admittedly she hadn't agreed to see him again but it was early days yet. Angels are not impulsive but can be persuaded.

(24 min, 316 words)

This is an interesting story. The given words strongly suggested something medical but why did I elect to write about an Indian? I'm a white Australian although I do have a British background and the British do have a historical inter-relationship with India. Why also was the girl in the story an angel? As I've said elsewhere I am an atheist and have been since I was old enough to make a conscious decision about it and, much as

I like pretty girls, I don't think of them as angels. Perhaps there is an element of creativity beginning to come through?

On the other hand, I used to be a biker and I once broke my leg in a crash so I was on confident ground with that aspect of the story. I also remember deciding that I didn't want to write everything from a middle-aged white male perspective.

Feel free to disagree with me but I think this effort is the first to have a "real" (whatever that means) and coherent story. If nothing else, I seem to be beginning to benefit from writing practice.

Day 5 - 4th January 2019 Words: Outflank, Outflow, Outfox

At the bottom of the garden was a small stream. It was a tributary to a larger stream that became a river further down the valley. The house was an old weatherboard built on stumps in which a couple of dogs lived. Louis, the male, was several years younger than Ayla, the female, who was a little overweight and getting a little arthritic.

Anyway, to cut a long story short, there was a water pipe which ran from the rain tank to somewhere near the bottom of the garden. Its function was to channel surplus rain water down to the stream, presumably on the grounds that the garden wouldn't need the excess water if there had been heavy rains which caused an overflow and it was good to recycle the unwanted water back to the stream.

Regardless of the original intent, the outflow pipe stopped short of the stream by perhaps a metre and when it was wet this area got very soft and muddy. Of course, when it was dry, as it so often is in this part of Australia, the area was dry and quite hard.

I'm beginning to ramble so let's get to the meat of the story. Or rather, the bone of it since all the meat had been eaten by Louis some days previously before he had buried the bone in the mud below the outflow pipe. As he so often did, he mounted a guard over the burial site to prevent its theft. Ayla, who very much liked bones but hadn't been able to steal it from Louis, had watched Louis bury the bone and bided her time.

On this day Louis had managed to acquire a ball from somewhere and was chasing it around the garden because he was young and energetic. Ayla would occasionally join in causing Louis to grab the ball and run away from Ayla. Sitting on the veranda I became aware of Ayla's strategy. Each time she tried to take the ball she approached from the outflow pipe side. This meant that each time she outflanked Louis he moved further away from the pipe. And, of course, the bone. Cleverly she was also manouvering him towards some bushes. Over the course of about 15 minutes, Ayla managed to herd Louis and leave him with the ball behind the bushes so he couldn't see her when she suddenly rushed over to the pipe area and rapidly dug up the bone. When Louis emerged triumphantly from the bushes with the ball in his mouth, Ayla was happily gnawing the bone on the far side of the garden. Louis soon realised that the bone was his, although it took a

couple of trips to the burial site to be sure, and despite his every effort of snarling, barking and generally acting tough he was unable to get his bone back. He had been completely outfoxed and finished the day sitting mournfully beside his food bowl, watching Ayla's every move.

(23 minutes, 497 words)

My wife was OK about the previous stories but this was the first one she actually liked. Very probably because the two dogs are in fact her own dogs although it's usually Louis who steals Ayla's bones. Being old myself I thought the story would work better with the cunning of experience outfoxing the energy of youth. Yes, I know that was a little pretentious of me.

"Outflank" and "Outfox" both suggested some sort of competitive game-type story or perhaps a war story but I'm not interested in war stories. The "Outflow" suggested something to do with water. I suppose I could have written something about an attack on a military latrine during WW2 but it never occurred to me until just now. I think the story of the two dogs is the better idea. Certainly, since I knew the two dogs very well it was easy to visualise the story unfolding so in a sense I was able to just sit back and describe what I was visualising.

I'm probably wrong but I feel there is a touch of whimsy, even perhaps idyllic innocence, about this one. At any rate, I'm still going after 5 days which is encouraging and there has certainly been an improvement in quality (and length) already.

I seem to remember that while I was writing this one I felt a faint connection with Rudyard Kipling's Riki Tiki Tavi story about the mongoose fighting a cobra. Arrogance I'm sure but having Rudyard Kipling along for the ride will undoubtedly help with my creativity!

Day 6 ~ 5th January 2019 Words: Liven, Liver, Liverish

“Wop bopa-a-lu a whop bam boom” howled over the speakers causing consternation and panic among the members.

“Tutti frutti, oh Rudy Tutti frutti, woo”

Garcon, the head steward, strode to the gramophone in the far corner beside the newspaper rack. With every fibre of his body language screaming outrage he bent and turned down the volume control until the “music” was barely audible.

“Got a girl named Sue, she knows just what to do”

“Good Lord”, exclaimed Sir Percy from the depths of his leather bound armchair. “I wonder what is it that Sue knows how to do, what!” He guffawed and leered at the room in general.

“I’m Sorry, Garcon”, said Henry. “I was only trying to liven things up in here. Its like a mausoleum.”

Garcon gazed mournfully at Henry. “I shall report this to the Committee and ask for their ruling on music of this nature.” he told Henry, “although I fear that the Committee will not view it favourably.”

“Oh come now Garcon, you dont view music you listen to it”, responded Henry trying to be humorous but merely sounding sarcastic.

“I got a girl named Daisy, she almost drives me crazy”

“Good God, this is driving me crazy too”, old Wimsey, Earl of Lancaster muttered to Singen-Jones. “It’s definitely making me feel liverish”.

The music came to an end.

“Speaking of liver old chap”, said Singen-Jones. “I wonder what’s for lunch”.

(21 min, 245 words)

(Lyrics from “Tutti Fruitti” by Little Richard, 1957)

This one was a doddle to be honest. This is the only story I've written where I had the basic idea before I'd even written the seed words down in my word processor. The word “liverish” immediately conjured up old men in a stuffy Gentleman's club in the late 1800s and “liven” made me think of how such a club would cope with the arrival of Rock 'n' Roll in the late 1950s. I have no idea if such clubs still existed then but if you know Little Richard's Tutti Fruiti you'll know how its opening line is loud, demanding and meaningless and you can imagine how some stuffy old men would react the first time they heard it.

Of course, where these word associations come from I have no idea. Certainly I like some period dramas on TV like Jeeves and Wooster and Downton Abbey so that will be a factor and being a child of the fifties I grew up with Rock 'n' Roll.

Did the story work? No, it's unadulterated garbage. Rereading it now I find it embarrassing. It doesn't have any atmosphere. It doesn't conjure up any sense of a group of old gentlemen at their club getting outraged or even of the 1950s. The dialogue isn't plausible and the characters have no character. I don't think I managed to relate to the story myself as I wrote it because it's the second shortest story I've written, which is why it seemed a doddle. No particular effort went into it. Maybe the pressure of the first week of this was getting to me. My wife thought it was the worst story so far.

Day 7 ~ 6th January 2019 Words: Hoodoo, Hoodwink, Hoody

It was beginning to drizzle. A cold, clammy drizzle that made your bones weak. I zipped up my hoody and pulled the hood over my head. OK it made me look dodgy but so did looking miserable. I kept walking. I was supposed to meet Stephanie at 8 and it was already 5 past.

The homeless guy dossing in the doorway called out to me as I passed. "Got any spare fags mate?"

I ignored him and shuffled on, hands deep in my pockets and my head sunk into my collar bones. This was not a good night to be on the street. Maybe I should have got a taxi. I didn't have any money on me but maybe I could've hoodwinked the guy. Some fast talking or just legging it down the street. But maybe he'd recognise me from other times I'd done that so it wasn't really worth the risk. Save ot for sometime when its important. It's not like I can't afford it - I've a decent job and money in the bank. I'm just a cheapskate at heart. One of life's lost souls. All on account of Stephanie.

She put a hex on me when we first me. A hoodoo, a spell. I'm not joking. Back in her flat the next morning I woke and found myself smeared with blood and white chicken feathers. 'Parently she'd worked a spell on me while I was asleep. It freaked me out at the time. As it would. Waking up all bloody is too Godfatherish for my liking and doesn't happen in real life. 'Cept it did. To me.

I didn't realise for a while what that bitch voodoo queen of New Orleans had done. Thought it was just a sick joke or she was just frikking weird. But I can't escape her. Whenever she call I come running. I have no control over it. My limbs take over my mind. Whenever she tells me to do something I do it. I have no control. No say. No agreement. So much for consent.

She's cute, I'll give her that. And so far she hasn't made me do anything particularly bad. But one day, one day my time is coming I know. I can feel it in my bones. Well, I can't tonight cos my bones just feel cold but normally I can. Maybe she'll make me kill someone. Or eat a raw chicken. Or join the living dead.

“Hi Steph”. I'd arrived. She was waiting.

“You're late” she replied unsmilingly. Then “I've had an idea”.

Oh no. So tonight's the night I'm going to hell is it? My heart speeded up dramatically and my cold bones suddenly felt warm. The drizzle seemed to stop.

She turned away and started walking up the street.

“Let's go and have a burger at McDonalds and I'll tell you all about it.”

(23 min, 483 words)

Now this one was a surprise. I'd realised by this time that the trick was to work on the most difficult word and for some reason I picked on 'hoody'. If I had these words again I'd probably say “Hoodoo” was the hardest. And hoody conjured up a teenager in a hooded jacket loping along the street, looking a bit scruffy but how it turned into a somewhat dark dominance type thing with elements of voodoo I have no idea. What's a little worrying is that I could obviously relate to voodoo and dominatrix better than I could to old men since the word count is double that of the previous story. Hmm, I think we should move right along to the next story although I do think I captured the atmosphere and the relationship reasonably well.

My wife sort of liked this one too. I don't think she liked the idea but she said it was definitely a story. I would have found that encouraging but at this point I was still hiding my stories from her.

Day 8 ~ 7th January 2019 Words: Railway, Raiment, Rain

Mr Moosan rolled a cigarette between his fingers.

“Truely it is as Mr Kipling spake. 'A woman is only a woman but a good cigar is a smoke.' ”

He lit the cigarette with an old fashioned brass petrol lighter.

“Although in certain raiments a woman can surpass a smoke on occasion. No matter. It now befalls me to take my leave of you. I must perforce be at the abode of the Iron Horse.”

He ambled gently to the door, bowed with old-fashioned civility and departed, closing the door almost silently behind him. His umbrella, tightly rolled as always, beating a staccato rhythm to accompany his footsteps.

Mr Jane watched him through the window.

I, being somewhat less joyous of Mr Moosan's company and eccentricities, returned to the veranda.

“Did Moosan take the wrong turn again? He's only lived in this town for 18 years. You'd think he would know where the railway station was by now. Especially as thats his only form of transport.”

Mr Jane joined me on the veranda.

“Yes, he turned right as usual rather than left. Why do you suppose he carries that infernal umbrella? He never goes out if it looks like rain so the thing is pretty redundant.”

We pondered the question of Mr Moosan for a while. As, indeed, we did every time we met him.

“You know”, I said after a while. “I don't think he really exists. I think he is just someone made up for a short story.”

Mr Jane stared at me in bemusement.

“If that's the case then surely we only exist in a short story as well.”

He paused, staring at his neatly polished shoes that encased his feet which were currently residing on the coffee table.

“But if that is the case, how do we tell the difference between reality and a short story, if indeed there is a difference?”

(22 min, 323 words)

Yup, another failure. I blame this on the words. 'Raiment' is an old fashioned word so I went for something old worldy but there's no real story and I realised that part way through. With nowhere to go the story turned into some nonsense about whether the people in the story realised they were just a story. Absurd. And the dialogue is embarrassing to be honest.

After this attempt I was seriously thinking about abandoning the project. It was becoming fairly obvious I was getting nowhere. There was nothing creative coming along and even just the basic writing wasn't up to much. I remember a feeling of emptiness as I was writing it; a kind of “what the hell are you wasting your time for?” I'd given it my best shot and it wasn't working. After all, not everything you find on the internet is worthwhile. Unlike ABBA videos on YouTube which are always worthwhile.

Still, it wasn't as though I had anything pressing to do. So the next day I wrote another one, almost certainly my last.

Day 9 ~ 8th January 2019 Words: Filler, Filler Cap, Fillet

It had been a long day. She'd arrived before dawn and set up site but the fish hadn't been biting. She'd spent the whole day casting and sitting with nothing to show for it. Admittedly there had been a few moments when she'd thought she'd seen a UFO. There had been a sudden hush in the atmosphere and a glowing *something* had slowly glided overhead and disappeared into the distance. She'd felt quite excited at the time but later felt nauseous when she remembered tales of alien abductions she'd heard and worried about *what if* the UFO had taken her on board and carried out nasty experiments on her reproductive system. But, several hours later she'd convinced herself that nothing had happened. It was probably a minor illusion because she hadn't drunk enough water and had been a little dehydrated.

The important thing was that she'd caught nothing so there'd be no nice fillet of fish for dinner or cold left-over fish for breakfast. Slowly she packed up her fishing equipment and carried it over to the trees where she'd parked her bike. The setting sun cast deep shadows among the trees but a beam sparkled nicely off the chrome of the rear wheel. She strapped everything to the bike and climbed aboard. She removed the filler cap and wobbled the bike a little. Yes there was enough fuel to get home although maybe it would be a good idea to stop off at the Caltex near home and fill up rather than forget about it tomorrow and get stranded somewhere.

Yes the Caltex would be a good idea as she remembered she had some bread at home but nothing to use as a sandwich filler. The Caltex might have some sausages or cold meat but if not they'd certainly have some peanut butter. She slowly trundled across the field keeping the river carefully in sight. The road wasn't far but it would be deeply embarrassing to drive into the water and have to get help getting the bike out. But the time she reached the road the twilight was nearly gone and she switched on her headlight. Accelerating down the road she glanced in her mirror and noticed a glow on the horizon behind her.

"Oh that must be the last of the setting sun" she thought dismissively. A minute or so later as she was passing the derelict farmhouse it

occurred to her that she was heading roughly west and the setting sun should be somewhere in front not behind. She glanced in the mirror again. The glow had come closer, was more like a large ball and was some way above the horizon. She pulled over and got off the bike to get a better look. She became aware of a faint but deep throbbing noise and a pale beam of what looked like light came out of the glowing ball and illuminated her.

As her knees jurned to jelly and she started to turn preparing to make a run for it an amplified, almost mechanical voice pinned her to the ground.

“This is the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries. We have recorded video footage of you illegally fishing in this river. Please do not move.”

(27 min, 541 words)

'Fillet' led to fish and 'Filler Cap' could get me back onto comfortable ground with motorbikes. So I started writing about someone going on a fishing trip on a motorbike. Reading this story later I can see that the character was clearly based on one of my step-daughters but I wasn't conscious of that at the time. I quite enjoyed writing this and trying to get some suspense building up with a possible alien abduction. The aliens weren't part of the story plan as there was no story plan when I started typing. They just came in and abducted the story as it unfolded. But, for the first time, I had to make a decision about ending the story. With all the previous ones I pretty much ran out of anything to say around the time limit (or long before in a couple of cases!) but with this one I could easily have continued it by having the girl abducted by aliens and following through with the experiments (oh goody, a sex story) and the aftermath as the newspapers got hold of it and so on. But there wasn't time so I thought of a little twist.

Is it a good story? Yes, I think so. Not particularly well written but it's definitely a story. There is some suspense and it's entirely believable. Not having any dialogue got rid of the problem of unbelievable dialogue. I don't know if the Government really uses helicopters to catch illegal fishermen but they just might; it's not unbelievable. Maybe there was hope after all. I'll try another tomorrow.

Day 10 ~ 9th January 2019 Words: Station-Wagon, Statism, Statistic

“It is quite absurd”, said Gregory Baker “for a free market economy to apply to motor vehicles. By allowing this we have arrived at a ridiculous situation whereby just anyone can own a huge, uneconomical, polluting status symbol of a vehicle when in reality people in cities should use public transport and those in more remote areas should use either small efficient compact cars or, if they have a large family or small business, a station-wagon or estate car.”

There was some muted applause scattered through the audience but most had arrived in their huge, uneconomical, polluting status symbols and didn't fancy going home in boring, boxy estate cars.

“I know I am accused of having totalitarian beliefs”, continued Gregory Baker “even of being a fascist. I categorically deny this to you all, here and now. I am committed to Statism, which means that I believe the State should control some aspects of society.

Totalitarianists and fascists believe that the State should control ALL aspects of society. I do not believe that. I believe that the State should control only those aspects of production and consumption vital to the well-being and efficiency of the State. For we, the people, are the State and we, the people, should therefore produce and consume only what we need for the benefit of us all and not over produce and over consume for the benefit of those few who own and control the capital needed for production.”

He paused for applause but none was forthcoming. The audience was mulling over what they'd just heard and wondering how close it came to Communism, an anathema as most were small to medium sized business owners. The businesses being small to medium sized that is. The owners were on the whole somewhat on the larger size. Particularly the Mayor, whose gargantuan frame tended to obscure those other dignitaries on the stage.

“Climate change is an example” continued Mr Baker. “Statistics show that the climate is undeniably changing, in large part due to the pollution caused by the polluting symbols of capitalist greed and it is our duty to ourselves, our children and our children's children to

reverse the trend and bring our climate back under control so it is fit for us all to live in.”.

The mayor smirked quietly to himself. Although he was a greedy capitalist, he could argue that his Rolls Royce was, to all intents and purposes, an estate car and therefore he was without a doubt a man of the people. His future seemed assured even if, as seemed unlikely, Gregory Baker was elected as the local MP for the National Socialist Workers Party.

(27 min, 445 words)

According to the dictionary, 'statism' is almost fascism so I launched straight into a story about a fascist trying to get elected. In case you don't know, the word NAZI comes from Hitler's party which was the National Socialist German Workers Party. Since my story is most likely set in Britain, I took out the word Germany.

Yesterday's story must have improved my confidence since I felt up to attempting a political statement through fiction.

Day 11 ~ 10th January 2019 Words: Wedding Ring, Wedge, Wedgewood

“I have no ideas”, said Richard to himself. “The deadline is looming and I have no ideas.”

His leg was hurting, the damaged nerve below the calf muscle was playing up and causing stabbing pains in his ankle. The cigarette between his fingers kept going out making him irritable.

“I wonder if Neanderthals had wedding rings. Did they form pairs and if they did did they have some sort of symbol to recognise that pairing? Oh for God's sake.”

He had less than half an hour to file 300 words on Trump's latest outrage but sadly Trump had been fairly quiet and subdued in the last couple of days.

“Does Melania wear a wedding ring? I've not seen one but then I haven't really looked.” he thought. “Maybe I could do a scurrilous piece about how they aren't actually married.” Richard pondered that for a few moments but decided he wouldn't be able to get it past his editor.

“What do you give a billionaire as a wedding present? I would imagine he already has every possible material good that money can buy. I daresay a gravy boat wouldn't hack it even if it was a Wedgewood.”

Suri the cat came in the door yowling piteously in protest at not having been fed for several days even though she'd eaten barely two hours previously. Seeing that Richard ignored her she jumped onto the couch and proceeded to lick her bottom vigorously.

Rescanning the Washington Post online again Richard spotted a small item near the bottom of the web page. Apparently about ten Republicans were siding with the Democrats on a budget vote they hoped would break the budget deadlock and let the American government restart after the longest shutdown in American history.

“Hmm, maybe a short piece about how the Wall is driving a wedge

between the Republicans and the President.”

Seventeen minutes and twenty eight seconds later Richard stopped banging at the keyboard and did a word count. 319 words. Two minutes later the edited piece was exactly 300 words long and Richard saved the document prior to attaching it to an email to the editor.

“Wedding rings, Wedgewood and wedges”, he mused. “This is no life for a writer.”

Suri farted.

(23 minutes, 379 words)

Whatever confidence I had gained from the last two days' stories totally disappeared here. Basically this story is about me not being able to think of a story. I couldn't think of anything. My leg was hurting, the cat's name is Suri and earlier that day I had read about some Republicans going against Trump to end the Government shutdown. Looking back at it now, I think it shows a fair amount of creativity because I was able to turn it around and get a story but it severely dented my confidence at the time. The cat's attitude pretty much sums it up.

This is I think a good learning point. Pretty much anything can be turned into a piece of fiction.

Day 12 ~ 11th January 2019 Words: Ancient, Ancillary, Andante

The biggest problem I've had with developing my AI-based historical analyser is, paradoxically, giving it a sense of time. Oh it can easily determine time numerically. This event occurred on such and such a date, there were this many years between these events and so on ... that's easy. The difficulty lies in giving it a non-numerical sense of time. Of time as a flow and the levels of the past. For example it has no sense of the qualitative difference between the recent past and the distant past, no sense of time as a developmental distance, of ancient and modern. It knows that there are 2000 years between say an event in Roman History and an event in British history but it can't appreciate the qualitative concept of a Roman event being ancient. I'm not even sure I can explain it myself.

I suppose I ought to introduce myself. I'm a lecturer in neuropsychology at a fairly well known university in Britain. A few years ago I became interested in applying neuropsychology to history; to try to interpret events in terms of the perception of these events. In part I want to try to apply artificial intelligence to the study of history to see if and how the interpretation of history would be altered by a non-human analysis of the subject. Essentially all I managed to achieve was a sense of my own naivety, my own foolishness as it were. After all history exists solely in the perception of it by a human. Without a human interpretation, history is essentially meaningless. History becomes a matter of simply "things happened".

By way of analogy, take the word "andante". Objectively it is merely the Italian equivalent of "slowly" in English. End of story. However, it has great and significant meaning to a human. When written in a musical context it literally means "play this section of music slowly" but along with that technical instruction it carries a wealth of ancillary symbolism to do with the history of music and why Italian words are used for technical terms in many other languages, not just English. In that sense, "ancient", "modern" and so on carry a wealth of overtones that mere numerical dating can never capture.

(22 min, 373 words)

On the other hand, maybe I am becoming more creative. How else do I

explain a story about a neuropsychologist using artificial intelligence to study history?

My wife thought it was 'clever' but didn't like it as a story. I'm inclined to agree.

Day 13 ~ 12th January 2019 Words: Sheet Music, Sheikh, Sheila

We found a cafe and went in. It wasn't overly busy and we found a vacant table near the back. I grabbed an unused chair from nearby and brought it over. A waitress appeared and offered a couple of menus which we ignored.

“Just a couple of cappuccinos please” I said “and some blueberry muffins if you have any.”

She nodded and disappeared.

Sheila was gazing round slightly vacantly.

“Look at the walls” she murmured.

I glance at the wall next to me. It was covered in sheet music. At eye level was, appropriately enough, the music for Eye Level, an instrumental I vaguely remembered from my youth. I think it was the theme to some TV show. Some sort of cop show I think. Anyway, it looked like the sheets had been pasted up then covered with some sort of clear plastic laminate. Presumably to make it easier to clear. Looking round, the whole place was papered with sheet music, floor to ceiling. Some classical, some pop. Just behind Sheila was a jazz piece. The classical music looked the most artistic.

Anyway, this wasn't getting the baby washed, so to speak.

We sat in silence for a while. Neither of us quite knowing how to begin. The waitress came back with the coffees and a muffin each then went off in search of some sugar.

“Tayi is prepared to increase his offer a little,” Sheila said.

I didn't respond. Sheikh Ibn Taymiyyah was an extremely wealthy book collector and had a reputation for being both generous and a ruthless negotiator at the same time which was no mean feat. The fact that he had hired a woman negotiator for this deal showed how little he rated it.

“He'll go another 10”.

Still I didn't respond. £10,000 wasn't much of an increase considering the previous offer had been £935,000

I let Sheila stew for a little. I didn't really understand her reluctance to increase the offer as the sums involved were tiny – the Sheikh earned, if that's the right word, this sort of amount every second or two.

“I'm not even going to stay and finish my coffee unless the offer is doubled”, I said. “Let's call it £2,000,000 even”.

I couldn't see the sheet music for Abba's hit, Money Money Money, anywhere but it would have been appropriate. Nor, now I came to think of it, Money That's What I Want.

Sheila sighed and leant back.

“My commission is 10% and I'll never work for Tayi again as he doesn't trust women. Sod it. I agree to £2m on condition that of anyone asks we negotiated for over 4 hours.”

“You have a deal,” I said. “Would you like another muffin? My treat.”

(29 min, 462 words)

There's a bit of a logical issue with this one. Since Tayi doesn't trust women why did he give Sheila this assignment? Rereading it again, his low rating of this particular purchase isn't an adequate explanation. Also the story isn't clear on this, the Flying Lizzards did Money, That's What I Want not ABBA. Other than that there isn't much to say. The word 'Sheikh' was the prime driver of this and 'Sheet Music' reminded me of a cafe I once visited in Queensland whose walls were covered from floor to ceiling in 12" album covers.

Day 14 ~ 13th January 2019 Words: Itemize, Iterate, Itinerant

Endless darkness.

A few stars here and there.

Not a lot of point looking out the windows.

!#@ph tended to ignore the windows. They were only useful when coming close to a new world. On the rare occasion !#@ph came to a colonised world the windows were nice to look at the others but frankly !#@ph would rather mingle. !#@ph was very social. Some of the time.

!#@ph spent a lot of the time on the *\$&&% which kept a detailed inventory of the goods !#@ph was carrying for trade. Each was itemized in great detail, including the emotional response that the item was expected to cause, detailed by species. You see, !#@ph traded in dreams.

Although !#@ph spent some time in unexplored parts of the galaxy, much of the time was spent iterating between known and reasonably productive locations. !#@ph's goal was the ultimate dream. Each dream was traded for another, each transaction generally generating a new dream that !#@ph had never experienced. Sometimes the new dream was not as good as the old dream but that was a fairly subjective judgement. Most times !#@ph was able to get a better dream (subjectively of course) which would produce emotional responses that were new, ones that !#@ph could never have begun to imagine. What was particularly exciting was when the trade was with a new species

!#@ph had never encountered before and so was able to experience dreams beyond imagining.

Of course there were times when the new dream simply could not be dreamt as !#@ph's neurology could not handle them but such times were rare. There was a densely populated planet out on the edge of the galaxy which had been a disaster. The apparently dominant bipedal omnivores occupying most of the planetary surface varied widely in terms of emotional dreamability. This was apparently in

relation to the extent of their body hair as the nearly naked ones had a wider emotional range than the most hairy but it was largely conjecture as !#@ph had been unable to interact with any of their dreams. The only ones !#@ph was successful with on that planet either had 6 or 8 or no legs.

Still, !#@ph's voyage was continuing to be successful. Every itinerant dream trader had to have dreams and !#@ph had some of the best.

(22 min, 386 words)

Well wow! I've been doing this for 2 whole weeks! Incredible and somewhat surprising since my enthusiasms tend not to last this long. I decided to celebrate with some mind-expanding science fiction; some itinerant trader on the edge of space. When my wife read it she thought it was total rubbish – she's a Star Trek fan so knows a fair amount about Science Fiction. What particularly annoyed her was !#@ph as the hero's name and she didn't connect with the idea that !#@ph was some sort of insect/reptile type life form. She liked the idea of trading dreams though. I don't think that's ever been explicitly covered in Star Trek but there are plenty of episodes over the various series about the mental aspects of aliens. It's even possible that we'd watched a Star Trek DVD that evening but I don't remember.

Day 15 ~ 14th January 2019 Words: El Nino, Elocution, Elongate
(written 15th January)

Sanchez leant on his walking stick. The road wasn't steep but it was uphill and inclined to make him tired. The weather was warm and humid; it was definitely going to rain later.

There had been a man here a few years ago. From some institute and asking a lot of questions. Sanchez had told him that whenever it was hot and humid this time of year then it would mean the fishing would be bad come February. As a retired fisherman Sanchez thought he knew what he was talking about. The man told him it was because of El Nino, whoever he was. Seems like this man lived somewhere in these parts but sometime went away and when he was away the fish went with him and the weather changed. He must be a very powerful man if he can change the weather and control the fish. It would be nice to have that much power. Sanchez wasn't too sure of the details but the man had spoken nicely and seemed very clever. He'd suggested Sanchez got some elocution lessons so he'd be able to speak better himself but Sanchez didn't see how electricity would help him speak better and the man seemed able to understand him well enough even though it sometimes took two or three attempts for Sanchez to get his words out. The accident that had damaged his leg had also done something to his talking although he could still get young Nina in the village to shriek with laughter at some of his jokes. Young Nina, in her forties for all that Sanchez called her young but still a widow and he children now moved out to their own lives.

He started walking again. Maybe he should get himself somewhere to live at the bottom of the hill rather than the second to last house at the top of the hill. Still, the views were nice, especially of the elongated headland to the north-west and he could get deep lungfulls of the sea air in his lungs. The exercise was good for him, although not as good as the exercise young Nina could give him if she'd only say the word. Sanchez grinned at the thought. Maybe one day he'd see El Nino from the top of his hill. That would be a sight to see.

(22 min, 391 words)

When I got these words I remembered reading in the newspapers a few

years ago about a man in America called Al Nino who'd been getting death threats for mucking around with the weather so that became the basis for this story. My wife liked the idea of Sanchez confusing 'elocution' with 'electrocution' but that was her only positive comment. I wasn't demotivated by this since her opinions were still some weeks away. I liked the story and I enjoyed writing it. Enough said.

I don't remember why I didn't write a story the day before but it was bakingly hot. My diary says the 14th went over 40° centigrade (around 110° F) so I was probably just too hot and sweaty to bother. I made up for it though on the 15th by writing two stories. It looks like I was pretty committed to thi by this points. Certainly I was very conscious that if I missed a day it would be easy to move on to giving up entirely so rather than make excuses to myself I did penance with a second story ...

Day 16 ~ 15th January 2019 Words: Fretwork, Freudian, Friable

I'm a huge fan of flash mobs. Seriously. I love the way someone starts to play or dance in a public place then others join in until there's a major "happening" happening. It's awesome. Probably deeply freudian as well. No doubt a psychiatrist could find some deep sexual need in me that generates this as a substitute for a real human connection. "Whatever" I say. I like them and screw you shrinks!

What I don't understand is why they're called "flash mobs". The name implies they're spontaneous but they aren't. Months of planning has to go into these things, not least getting official permissions and rehearsals and so on. There's no way the orchestration or choreography would fit like fretwork if it was spontaneous. I guess they're named that because of the way they appear to be spontaneous.

Like I've seen a few on YouTube where a couple are strolling along somewhere and someone starts to dance then some music starts and others join in and the couple sopts to watch then suddenly it turns out to be a gigantic organised event for the guy to propose to the girl and its all romantic and lovely. Aww so cute!

I think what I like also is that their very nature allows for things to go wrong up to a point. It doesn't really matter if performers are in the wrong place or if members of the public get in the way. Its all part of the fun. And although they are staged they don't seem staged. Its the randomness of having a concert or dance party inside a shopping centre or railway station or somewhere other than a formal concert hall or dance venue.

I've just realised that this is supposed to be a short story not an essay so that gives me a challenge. I have 3 or 4 minutes left to convert it into a story. So I guess a story could be about a couple who encounter a flash mob and the guy proposes to the girl and she gets all weepy and says "yes" and they get married and have kids and lead wonderful happy lives and the kids grow up to be wonderful people and at family reunions their parents reminisce about the awesomely romantic flash mob where he proposed and isn't that just a wonderful story? For some reason great literature always seems to be about the friability of life and relationships and trials and tribulations. Someone should

write a story about a flash mob proposal and how wonderful everything was from then on. Not me though. I apparently have too many deep freudian issues to be able to write a story like that.

(23 min, 450)

Guess where the idea for this one came from. Yup, YouTube. I'd been watching some videos on YouTube about flash mobs so when I settled down to my 'writing task' – I was still thinking of it that way – I picked up on 'Freudian' and wrote about flash mobs. When I'd finished I realised that I hadn't written a story, just an opinion piece so I quickly added another paragraph to try and make it a story. Which begs the question, what is a 'story'? I don't really know to be honest. As I'd already written a story that day it didn't seem a big issue. The important thing was to write something, anything, to make up for not writing on the 14th.

Day 17 ~ 16th January 2019 Words: Delicious, Delight, Delimit

You got off the bus outside the bakery in the High Street. You looked around, presumably to orientate yourself but I can't imagine why as you'd done this a hundred times before. You then walked purposefully along the High Street past the post office and the veggie shop and turned up Clarendon Lane. You kept walking, your head in the air and your pony-tail bouncing deliciously past the little boxy houses with their ill tended front gardens and sad little picket fences until you reached your house. Number 38. 3 and 8 add up to 11. I'm sure you know this. And one and one is what we are. And one day one and one will make two but until then I'm keeping both eyes on you. Protection. We don't want anything to happen to you.

You have a low wire fence and a rickety wire gate. You also have a front garden that is an embarrassment to the neighbourhood I'm sorry to say. Its not like you to have a garden like that as you keep your house all spick and span and I know you like gardening as your back garden is a delight with roses and ivy and shady romantic spots and I've spent many happy hours watching you gardening. Your rickety wire gate clangs mournfully behind you. I know its mournful because it delimits us. For now I can only go beyond that rickety wire gate when you are at work but soon that will change. Soon the rickety wire gate will clang happily when *we* go through but so far its mournfully only you.

I keep on walking past another 5 houses and turn down the alleyway which leads to another alleyway which cuts down to the back of the shops in the high street and runs between your back garden and the back garden of the house behind you in Norton Street. I discovered last year that this house has a derelict shed from which, once I'd made an unobtrusive hole, I can see into all your back windows and there's a useful shelf where I can keep my binoculars and camera under a dirty cloth so no one bothers to look.

I'm just in time. I can see you've gone into your kitchen and put the kettle on. And if you are true to form you're going to go upstairs into your bedroom and slowly change out of those tight, figure-hugging work-clothes and into something light and billowy and comfortable. With no underwear. And take off your hair band and let your long

blonde hair fall freely around your face and shoulders.

Oh yes, soon. One day soon. One and one will become two. Whether you like it or not.

(23 min, 457 words)

Having been writing for over two weeks and, I thought, making some progress I wanted to branch out and experiment. I'd read a book a couple of years previously about a man stalking a woman. I had never come across a book written in the second person – the man is talking in his mind to the woman throughout, 'you did this, you did that' – and I figured I'd have a go. You can't copyright ideas, can you? Anyway, I apologise to Caroline Kepnes for stealing her idea and she did it way way better than I could. It's a great book and I recommend it. I won't tell you how it pans out.*

My wife thought this story was 'creepy'. I must be getting the hang of this writing thing.

** You by Caroline Kepnes, Simon & Schuster, 2014*

Day 18 ~ 17th January 2019 Words: Copious, Copolymer, Cop-out

Martha was just passing the front door when the doorbell rang, otherwise she probably wouldn't have answered it. A young black man was standing there with a broad white smile and nice eyes.

“I'm sorry to be disturbing you at this time of the day m'am but I'm Stanton Frakes from Tyler's Roofing Services and I couldn't help wondering if you have ever thought about the benefits of our new Bonded Copolymer Drainage Clearance System which guarantees that”

Martha gently closed the door mid-drone. It was a shame as she could have done with an hour or two of Stanton Frakes undivided attentions in the bedroom as it had been a while but – and she readily admitted this to herself – at 53 she wasn't a spring onion any more and Stanton Frakes was, ohhh, all of 19. “Maybe spring onion isn't the right word” she muttered under her breath.

She opened the door again but Stanton Frakes was no longer there. No doubt he was talking to Natalie next door. Martha sighed and closed the door again. Then giggled. Although her husband had often suggested a three-some over the years she somehow didn't think a black man was what he had in mind.

She'd always refused of course. She felt it was the right thing to do for someone in her social position even though she liked the idea of it very much. Her husband was ... she searched for the right word ... attentive was about the only word she could think of. He certainly wasn't skilled or copious.

She clattered a coffee mug on the counter and started to make some coffee, her mind on fine eyes and handsome young skin. Blaming her lack of infidelity on her social position was a cop-out she knew. It was “right” to restrict herself to the occasional sanitised lover on her yearly trip to New Yorke but oh my lord the days in between trips were boring. In truth though it was more about her inhibitions. She wanted to be a plaything but was too inhibited to try.

The doorbell rang again.

“Oh God he is back” she thought. Sexy Mister Stanton Frakes was back with his bonded copolymers. She had a mild panic attack. “He knows what I want to do with him and he's come back to do it, oh god oh god”.

Pulling herself together she ran her hands through her hair and marched to the door. Determined to follow through on her thoughts.

“I apologise for taking liberties m'am”, young, virile, sexy eyed Mister Stanton Frakes said “but I took a look round the outside of your structure and you definitely have some areas that need urgent attention, particularly in the bedroom area”.

“Weeell”, replied Marth, in what she hoped was a sophisticated drawl but suspected it was lacking in some way and probably sounded desperate. “You'd better come in and tell me all about it”.

(22 min, 496 words)

How I went from 'copolymer' to a frustrated housewife and a drainage salesman is a question that will never be answered.

Day 19 ~ 18th January 2019 Words: Drive By Shooting, Drive In, Drivel

DRIVE BY SHOOTING

That's the headline I saw when I looked at the Melbourne Age website as I was having my first smoke of the day and psyching myself up for a sip of coffee. It caught my eye because drive by shootings are not the Australian way. This isn't Chicago. That's not to say that killings don't happen here but with very few guns and very strong gun laws Aussie crims resort to other tactics.

Having said that it could be just an example of the drivel that newspapers sometimes put out in the early hours. I've seen any number of articles in the online news that disappeared within hours and never reappeared. And we all know how newspapers like to sensationalise, don't we.

I lit another cigarette and pondered the item. Who would do a drive by shooting? Bikies maybe although they preferred knives or bombs. Drug dealers? Maybe but a drive by is too open, too in your face. It attracts attention. Maybe some of the more esoteric immigrants? Perhaps. Organised crime? Unlikely. A professional? Very unlikely. Could it be anyone I knew? I doubt I'd know any of the victims but there was a chance I knew the shooter. After all, it was my profession and I need to know my competitors and any newcomers. I was also a little put out that not only hadn't the contract been offered to me but that I'd not even heard it was available. Maybe it was just one of those random things that do happen. I'd better check it out either way. After all, if I was being phased out I needed to do something about it.

Half a cup of coffee and a fair amount of mind wandering later I looked back at the headline.

DRIVE IN SHOOTING

Hmm. I read the short article. It seems that a new movie called "Drive In" was starting filming today and some streets in Melbourne were going to be closed for a few hours while they shot a couple of scenes although the big star wouldn't be involed. Also the production

company would like some people to turn up to be unpaid extras.

Funny how your mind can play tricks on you first thing in the morning.

(25 min, 377 words)

A simple everyday tale of a professional assassin misreading a newspaper headline. I can remember thinking that a story about a drive-by shooting was too obvious so I tried to give it a twist.

I don't think it worked. Your mind can play tricks on you in the evenings as well.

Day 20 ~ 19th January 2019 Words: Dune, Dung, Dungarees
(written 20th January)

It's a beautiful day. Cloudy but not too hot and not too humid. The diggers enjoy weather like this and I can hear their happy chatter in my tent. Its been about three weeks since we had any significant finds and I'm beginning to worry that we may have missed our target. Giles, my colleague, has long felt that the city wall we were hoping to uncover is a little further to the west and I'm beginning to wonder if he might be right. We have an east-west trench running at the moment but most of our finds have been the kind of detritus you'd expect to find behind a city wall rather than inside it. Still, we have several months finance left for this expedition and if needs be we can extend the trench further west. The only real issue is how much longer to wait before doing that.

I've just noticed the distant chatter from the diggers has changed a little in tone. It makes me wonder if someone has found something of interest. I get out of bed and pull on my dungarees in anticipation. Someone will be along to get me in a minute or two if they've found something. I grab my trowel and paint brush and push through the flaps of my tent. Sure enough Salim is hurrying over at a half run, stumbling in the sand. I call him name and ask what's been found but he just keeps repeating "come, come".

Giles too has come out of his tent. He squints in the mid morning light and starts towards the main trench. We meet a few yards further up the dune and proceed together. As we breast the top we can see the entire trench, all 200 yards of it, and the diggers and support crews milling around. Clearly there is something happening at yard 19 west as a knot of people has formed. We hurry our way over. Giles calls for a water carrier to refresh the men. A break in the digging has occurred so its worth utilising it for refreshment. The men expect that sort of thing.

One of the diggers, whose name I've forgotten, points at a solod looking lump protruding from the sand in a bottom corner of the trench. It is certainly an anomoly as this area is all loose sand. Giles uses the tape measure to establish its exact position and takes several photographs. When he is done I jump to the bottom of the trench and

start to investigate the object. Frankly it doesn't look much but then none of the major finds ever do. Objects buried in the sand always look like sand after a few years, let alone a few centuries.

There is nothing as yet to indicate what it might be. I brush it carefully with my paint brush to get rid of as much sand as I can and tease the edges with my trowel. Slowly and excruciatingly carefully I clear around it, stopping every few minutes so Giles can take more photographs. After several hours I have cleared it enough to pick it up. It looks suspiciously like ancient dessicated dung. This could be an important find but I won't get excited yet. If it turns out to be human it would suggest that we are very near the city wall as city dwellers in those days tended to defecate just outside the wall. The dung of their animals was generally used as fertiliser.

(25 min, 585 words)

We had some relatives visiting so I couldn't write on the 19th.

This one was wholly driven by the words, in particular "dung". I didn't want to become tasteless so the dung has to be in some way sanitised. 'Dune' suggested somewhere hot and dry and the two merged to form an archaeological dig. 'Dungarees' fitted into that. I don't know much about archaeological digs but I used to enjoy The Time Team on TV.

Day 21 ~ 20th January 2019 Words: Karaoke, Karat, Karate

The little fish slid smoothly through the shallows near the river's edge. The woman sat and watched. She was dressed sedately, nothing fancy yet not really suitable for a day's fishing. A cigarette hung in her hand, as yet unlit. The river darkly flowed, the clouds mirrored on its surface. Another fish joined the first. Together they continued to explore, seeking god knows what.

"If fish could speak, would they sing karaoke" the woman murmured to herself. "Perhaps they do and we just can't hear them.

The man sitting further up the river bank said nothing. He sat and watched the woman watching the fish. Perhaps if he watched the fish directly it would be more efficient but he wasn't interested in the fish. He was interested in the woman. The woman, on the other hand, was interested in the fish, not the man. She knew he was there, that much was obvious. Whether or not she knew him was another matter. In the far distance a dog barked and a heavy lorry changed gear slowly.

"Why do you suppose the Americans spell karat with a K?" said the man. "The correct spelling is with a C."

The woman ignored him. To her the sparkling fish were more interesting than sparkling diamonds. After all, she had several diamonds but she had no fish.

The man seemed to shrivel a little in the face of her indifference. He turned away and looked upstream, perhaps for inspiration, perhaps for a sign. A sign of what? He didn't know.

The two fish swam out of sight, unaware of the humans or of being watched. The woman continued to watch though they were gone.

"Do you suppose a Roman Army ever camped along this bank?" the man said. "Do you suppose Italian or English blood was spilled here?"

"Caw", replied a crow.

"Look", said the woman. "The fish are back".

“This could have been the site of a major battle” the man said.
“Although if it had been I suppose there would be some sort of memorial or plaque. Or maybe someone from the town comes here to give pilates lessons, or maybe karate.”

Even the crow stayed silent now.

(18 min, 372 words)

I wrote this later in the same day as the last to catch up with my self-imposed schedule. I remember being irritated by the American spelling of 'karat' but that doesn't explain how this strange little piece appeared. It is significantly shorter than they have been so maybe I was just tired.

Day 22 ~ 21st January 2019 Words: Ranch, Rancid, Rancour

“In an epoch of credulity, curiosity withers through scarcity.”

“What a load of pretentious tosh” thought Minners. “Obviously if you believe everything you lack curiosity. This is just pseudo-profundity, nonsense.”

She tossed the book aside without rancour and reached for another. She'd bought a box of assorted books to read on his sojourn and had so far discarded 5 as tedious or stupid and enjoyed 2. Fortunately it was a big box. In fact the box was possibly more interesting than the books because it was a solid wooden box and had stencilled on the side “Cutty Sark 1880”. Minners had spent quite a while wondering of the box had come from the famous tea clipper ship the Cutty Sark in 1880 or if it had been a case of Cutty Sark whiskey. Or possibly neither. A couple of days ago she had spent a pleasant few hours lying on the bunk fantasising about how she would track down the origins of the box and write a bestseller of its history and adventures.

Minners tossed the new book back into the box and stood. She was feeling a little hungry and figured it was probably time to find something to eat. The somewhat makeshift cabin had a surprisingly large and well stocked pantry with a huge freezer full of assorted lumps of meat. None were labelled but thus far all the pieces she'd tried had been beef.

The refridgerator had a small stock of salad vegetables left. The bulk of the vegetables were in the pantry and were root vegetables that stored quite well in large dark containers. Sadly the mayonaise had turned rancid the day before but there were plenty of fresh eggs from the chickens in the run outside and a couple of gallon cans of oil so she'd be able to make some more.

She sat down again, a little breathlessly. She's taken this former ranch cabin in a desolate place for piece and quite in order to write but apart from the box history she'd not had a singe idea for anything to write about. All she did was eat and fiddle with the books in the box. The whole exercise was beginning to seem a little pointless.

(22 min, 374 words)

Just before I got the words for this one I had scanned the newspapers online in case anything had happened in the world and had seen yet another headline about Trump shouting about how everything was fake news. So when I started this I tried to write something clever about fake news and thought it was pretentious nonsense so I invented a character and had her say it. The rest seemed to follow on logically. How would she have come across the sentence? In a book. What did she do after tossing away the book? Pick up another. And so on. Obviously the day's words had to be fitted in; she was at a 'ranch', some of the food was 'rancid', I wasn't sure what 'rancour' meant but it's usually written after 'without' so I did the same.

I wonder now if the last couple of lines was my inner self commenting on this daily writing. Three weeks in and there doesn't seem to be any particular progress. Oh well, it's becoming a habit I guess. Something I 'do' during the day to pass some time away.

Day 23 ~ 22nd January 2019 Words: Cartridge Paper, Cartwheel, Carve

After five minutes I still haven't thought of a theme for a short story let alone any sort of plot. Both dogs have started barking because there is some laughter coming from one of the neighbour's houses. It's almost midnight and still around 30 degrees. Apparently we're having a heatwave in Australia but frankly summers are always like this. An extra degree makes no practical difference. At least not to humans with houses and air conditioning. No doubt an extra degree is the difference between life and death for creatures and plants in the wild.

Over the past few years I've been carving a little niche for myself. Not much of a niche I have to confess but it generates enough money to keep myself in cigarettes. Well, for a few months of the year at least. I sit on the pavement on a fairly busy street in Melbourne and draw. Very occasionally someone buys a drawing but more usually passersby toss a few coins or sometimes a note into my hat which, by incredible coincidence, always sits in front of me as I sit. I don't do it for the money, which is just as well as there isn't enough money in it to live on. I do it mainly for the freedom to draw whatever comes into my mind at the time. The only costs are for crayons and cartridge paper.

I have no amusing or fascinating tales of street life. In all honesty, I spend a lot of my time concentrating on the image I'm producing and don't take much notice of what is going on around me. A couple of times I've had run-ins with homeless people who want the spot I'm sitting in and each time I give it to them because their need is greater than mine. I've also had some run-ins with the police but since I have a valid permit from Melbourne Council there isn't really much they can do about it.

I'm home at the moment, as I alluded to at the beginning of this missive. Interestingly I've managed to include two of the three words I have to include. I ought to explain that I have this daily challenge of taking 3 consecutive words from the dictionary and writing a short story incorporating the words in about 20 minutes. I've been doing quite well since I started but I have to confess today's is a challenge. Carve and Cartridge Paper have been fairly easy to incorporate but I'm at a loss as to how to work Cartwheel in. Also I have to admit that

this isn't really a story. OK I don't know what the formal definition of a story is but what I've written here doesn't "feel" like a story to me. I feel that a story should have some sort of plot and "go somewhere" and, if at all possible, have a point and be "pithy". I don't know what "pithy" means but it ought to be in there somewhere.

Ayway, I've spent 23 minutes on this so I guess I'd better stop.

(23 min, 514 words)

Oh my word. This pretty much sums up my state of mind. The weather was building up to produce the hottest day ever recorded in my part of Australia and I would have been hot, sweaty and ill-tempered. Being an expat Brit I'm used to colder weather. I've acclimatised some but above 35°C I'm just a listless sweaty dollop.

I had nothing to write about so I wrote that I had nothing to write about. Then I had a brief surge of inspiration that lasted barely two paragraphs then I started bitching about this stupid story writing thing.

A bad day.

Day 24 ~ 23rd January 2019 Words: Unhurt, Unhygienic, Uni

The Student Cafeteria was deathly quiet. There were a lot of people there but most were hunched over their phones oblivious to those around them, silently communing with the ethereal world of the net. There was a short queue for food and I grabbed a couple of sandwiches and a carton of low fat milk. I spotted an empty chair and made a beeline for it.

The first sandwich was nice, salad with a little chicken in it but the second tasted a bit funny. It had some sort of sauce which, when I looked closely, seemed a bit bubbly and flecked with something not quite right. I reflected for a moment on how I had no idea how unhygienic the place was where it had been made or even how old it was and decided to abandon it. The milk was fine though.

I saw Evan coming towards me. I'd met him at a uni dance a couple of weeks ago and we'd got quite friendly. Friendly enough to have spent a couple of nights together but maybe not friendly enough to eat lunch together. Seems he wanted to change this and move things along. He's a nice guy but do I really want a relationship with him? Well, we'll see. I smiled and gestured at the occupied seats around me. He stopped and jerked his head towards the verandah with a raised eyebrow. I paused for a heartbeat then grabbed my bag and milk and joined him. There were no vacant seats so we perched on the railing.

"So would you like to go to a party with me Saturday?" he said, slightly hesitantly. It's not like this was a first date but I guess he was still unsure of my reactions.

"Sure" I replied, ever the chatty one. "Where?"

"It's at the Whatsit Pub in Prahran, a friend is going to Europe on sabbatical and is throwing a goodbye party."

"Oh yeah, like I know that pub. Nice place. Sure" I replied, trying to seem cool. I'd never heard of it but I didn't want to seem a party pooper. I scratched my beard. "You wanna pick me up or meet me there?"

"I'll meet you there", Evan replied. "I crashed my car yesterday so I can't pick you up."

That was a shame since we'd first made out on the back seat of that car and I had fond memories of it. Truth be known I wouldn't have minded getting reacquainted with that back seat.

"I'm unhurt" he said. "No one was hurt, thanks for asking".

I froze for a moment at the implied criticism. It had never occurred to me that anyone might have been hurt and I was intrigued that my thoughts were about sex instead.

"Glad to hear it" I said. "I'd hate to think you weren't up for a shag".

(26 min, 485 words)

'Uni' set the scene and 'unhurt' brought in a car crash but the weather was too hot and I was too lethargic to cope with the budding relationship between a man and a woman so I gave my character a beard and made him gay. Notice that I couldn't even be bothered to invent or google a pub name, I just left it as 'whatsit'. I wasn't trying to make any sort of statement with a gay character, I just wanted to get the story over with. I'd used my words so the day's task was done.

According to my diary this was the hottest day ever recorded in my part of Australia. Incidentally, when I say diary, don't think I have a journal of my thoughts, emotions, story ideas or creative exercises. It's actually just a spreadsheet where I record when I start another pouch of tobacco for my roll-ups. I like to see if I'm smoking more or less than usual and make a note of why that might be. When it's this hot I can't sleep so I end up smoking more.

Day 25 ~ 24th January 2019 Words: Groan, Groats, Grocer

It was a cold, clear night in late January. Some snow had fallen in the morning someone said but it hadn't lasted and the skies had cleared. Lt Commander Reg Asquith shouldered his kitbag and strode off the platform at Kings Cross station. He doubted the bus to Holloway would be running but it was worth checking just in case. No, it wasn't. He doubled back to the taxi rank but that was deserted. 7pm on a Tuesday evening and London was deserted. Still, he was a fit young officer so the walk shouldn't be a problem. Ordinarily he'd be able to do it in an hour or so but there was the black-out and Reg wasn't entirely sure of the way. "Stiff upper lip and all that" he thought wryly to himself and set off up York Way.

Mrs Reg Asquith, or Becky as she was known to her friends, was at home worrying about her husband's arrival. He'd sent a telegram earlier in the week to say he had some days leave and she was at her wit's end to know what to feed him. Although Becky was excited by having him back for a few days she desperately wanted to be able to show off her cooking skills the way a new wife should but there was very little in the pantry and the grocer hadn't been much help. She herself had been living off groats for the last few days so save the meat and egg rations for Reg but she was sure it wouldn't be enough. She had, however, found a bottle of wine and that was cooling on the window sill.

She lit a cigarette and sat tensely on the edge of her chair. A fire blazed merrily and the room was cosy and inviting. There was a knock on the door and she leapt out of her skin in panic.

"Oh my lord he's here" she exclaimed and rushed to the door, pausing only to check in the mirror in the hallway that her hair was presentable. She opened the door and there stood Reg. As dapper and charming as ever in his naval uniform and a cheeky smile on his lips. They stood gazing at each other for a few moments then she groaned and collapsed into his arms, the tears rushing from her eyes.

"There now, there now" Reg said softly as he hugged his wife. "I'm home and I love you".

Becky dragged him inside and started to run around doing things, more from excitement than from any need. Reg grabbed her and sat her in a chair.

“Calm yourself my dear.” he said. “I’m here for a week and my kitbag is full of food I got off a Yankee destroyer that’s been in port. We’ll be feasting like royalty and I’ve even got you some nylons.”

(23 min, 481 words)

‘Groats’ was the key word here. It’s an old English name for oats so the story couldn’t be contemporary. I didn’t feel up to a medieval story so I went for WW2. Yes, I know. It didn’t work.

Day 26 ~ 25th January 2019 Words: Widespread, Widget, Widow
(written 26th January)

The steppes of Mongolia are vast. The ambitions of the minds of great men are incomparably vaster. Thatcher had no such ambitions. His world was small, very small and his ambitions were dwarfed by his world. He knew no better and could imagine less. He was 32, a roof thatcher in an english village of no more than 500 souls. He had little charm, few skills, no prospects.

He had one ambition however, even if he had no idea of how to achieve it. In the village 3 miles to the east there lived a woman by the name of Tilly. She was but 29 years with two young children and no husband. He had died 3 years prior from some unknown palsy leaving his family with a small hut, some furniture, a tiny stash of coin now long gone and no future. His widow survived as best she could. Living off the charity of neighbours, working at whatever she could to earn food for the children and, inevitably, entertaining men in a myriad of ways that they were able to pay for. Thatcher's ambition was to one day make her his wife.

Thatcher had approached Tilly with his offer some months back but she had laughed in his face. It seemed her widespread affections, whilst not providing much of an income, still earned her more than Thatcher could offer and the nature of any formal arrangement with him would severely curtail her rights and freedoms. Thatcher could barely afford to replace his twister – a widget used in thatching to twist the wires that held down the rushes.

It has been said that having great ambitions means that even if you fail you will likely have achieved much. Thatcher was living proof of the corollary. He had little ambition and no achievements and was destined to stay that way until God chose otherwise.

(25 min, 314 words)

Yesterday was too hot and humid again and I basically did absolutely nothing. Today was significantly cooler so I wrote two stories to catch up. I quite liked this one although my wife didn't. I suspect I was relating to someone with little more to offer than hope.

Day 27 ~ 26th January 2019 Words: Mollify, Mollusc, Molly

“Democracy is extinct” said Molly. “If it ever lived that is”.

Jess, Karen and Beth sighed. She was off again. A wrong word here and Molly would start a rant that would last the rest of the evening.

“Do they have male strippers here” asked Karen, knowing that of anything could get Molly off politics it was sex.

“Don't change the subject” said Molly severely. “Men's genitals cannot begin to compare with the social injustice of modern populism.”

“Oh I'm not to sure about that” Beth said as the others sniggered. “Men's genitals seem to be as popular as ever whereas politics is drooping in popularity.”

“Oh balls” retorted Molly. “We need to stand up for our rights and men's genitals aren't even on the table”.

The others laughed out loud.

“If there were any on this table we wouldn't be having this convo” said Jess “and you wouldn't be the only thing standing for your rights!”.

Molly glared at her.

“Let me get some more drinks. Do you want anything to eat” said Jess, pretending to mollify Molly. “How about a nice sausage?” She collapsed laughing.

“Oh I am fucking sick and tired of politics” said Molly. “I need to get pissed and laid, not necessarily in that order”.

“We can get you pissed but we can't get you laid” said Karen. “Look around, all the guys here are taken.” Admittedly the bar wasn't crowded but the majority of patrons were women and there were no loose men to be seen.

“Let's go somewhere else. Somewhere squalid and nasty with hunky

guys undressing us with their eyes” said Beth. “Somewhere where we're likely to get crabs or worse”.

“The only place I know to get molluscs round here is the Fish Market in Clarendon Street and that's closed at the moment.” said Karen.

“We could always try the Cavendish” said Jess. “They're having a pool competition and where there's a pool table there's usually guys.”

(24 min, 338 words)

Later in the day I was feeling more positive. Politics is always an easy subject since it's mostly fiction anyway and you can put forward any view you like. 'Mollusc' was a bit of a problem. Not one of my best stories, but at least I'm back to inventing pub names.

Day 28 ~ 27th January 2019 Words: Frothy, Frou-Frou, Frown

It was after midnight and the club was jumping. We were due to go on stage in 10 minutes, maybe 20, maybe longer. Who knows. We, by the way, are an all-girl medium-heavy rock band featuring a conventional lineup of singer, lead guitar, bass guitar and drums and me to make it not conventional. I play the sax. No-one plays sax in modern rock bands. Except me.

The club wasn't really a club. It was a disused warehouse in an industrial suburb of Melbourne whose owner had managed to get an alcohol and entertainment licence because he'd figured it at his age it was easier to get the girls to come to him rather than chase them all the time. I don't know if his theory worked but the place was still in business after almost a year which was kinda unusual. And on Friday nights it was usually packed.

We weren't your usual frothy sweet girl band. No little frou-frou cocktail dresses for us. We were leather and chains girls. Hard bitches and proud of it. Bit like Suzi Quattro on ice. We play hard and fast and very loud if not always in tune or in time. But since we never got to play before midnight the punters were beyond caring. Too drunk or stoned to care so long as they could dance and scream.

Anyway, we were a non-entity band on the fringe of the Melbourne rock scene with a small following. This is why I'm telling you this story because tonight everything changed. Bali was tuning her bass – we called her Bali because it was short for Big Alice and Bali sounded nicer. Shaz was caressing her guitar and looking faintly sick as usual. Miranda was checking her lyrics for the opening number – a simple love ditty involving motorcycles, lesbians and a cocktail of illicit drugs with a pounding beat – and Sticks was nowhere to be seen. I was playing scales and generally warming up my sax as the opening number opened with a wailing sax solo for the first 4 bars.

Anyway, Sticks suddenly appeared just as the MC said we'd be on in one minute, so all was good. He was frowning but no one particularly noticed. People usually frowned when they first saw us in our leather and chains outfits. We assembled on stage and I was just about to launch into my solo when someone shouted very loudly “Fucking look

at that fucking ugly fat bitch”. I turned to my right just in time to see Bali leaping off the stage with her bass in her hands and onto the guy who'd shouted. The rest of us put down our instruments and followed her and half the audience joined in. OK no one got seriously hurt other than a lot of stitches although the club nearly had its licence revoked. More importantly we got our pictures in the papers with headlines like “Melbourne's leading all-girl rock group brawl with audience”. Which got us bookings all over Australia and a recording contract with a major You Tube music channel. And an email from Beyonce.

(32 min, 524 words)

I've always liked saxophones and for some reason they don't figure much in pop music anymore, which is a shame. I also like all-girl bands so I wrote a story about an all-girl band that was tough and hard and not in the least 'frothy' because quite a few all-girl bands are judged on their looks and not their music, which is a shame. I think that perception also influences their choice of the music they perform. Anyway, since my recent stories have been negative I thought I'd make this a success story. I like this one and it was fun to write.

Day 29 ~ 28th January 2019 Words: Zephyr, Zeppelin, Zero

Marsha paused at the Entry Gate and flicked her hand at the sensor which identified her embedded chip and acknowledged her right to entry. A vaguely dog-shaped robot scanned her carry-on bag and deemed its contents acceptable under the rules of Verne Ferries SA and a nicely modulated synthetic voice welcomed her on board the Verne Zeppelin, wished her a pleasant flight and requested she followed the LEDs which would lead Marsha to her Executive Cabin which had been equipped to her personal taste within the confines of her Travel Terms and Conditions appropriate to her funding level. As always, you get what you pay for.

The trip to New York would take about 12 hours and having an Executive Cabin – the cheapest cabin available – meant Marsha wouldn't have to interact with any of the other passengers even though the cabin was really just a reclining chair in a box. Once in the box however it was quite pleasant as the colour scheme had been set to her preferences and there was a small supply of her favourite snacks and beverages. This was all encoded in her hand chip so it was easy for the automated systems to produce.

Marsha sat in her designated chair and the canopy slid shut. After a moment the walls and ceiling became translucent and then morphed into a three dimensional underwater scene. Above her head a small air conditioning unit caused a small number of threads to dance like a zephyr to reassure her that the life support systems were working properly.

Around her the huge ferry hummed busily but inside her box she seemed to be simply floating in the ocean. The ferry itself was a huge cigar-shaped hull which contained the engines, fuel, luggage and the vast quantities of compressed purified air needed to sustain the 200 passengers for their trip. The passengers themselves were in a small carriage-like container slung beneath the main hull and designed to separate from the hull in the event of an emergency.

Ever since the environmental catastrophies of the mid 21st century mankind had moved underground as the air was too polluted and the climate too extreme to survive. Vast cities had reversed themselves

and were now underground and fed by giant air manufacturing and purifying plants. Air travel had disappeared and was replaced by underground tunnels on the land masses and large passenger-based submarines through the oceans. The human population had shrunk dramatically over the past 100 years or so and the non-human population had largely disappeared. But that was history and Marsha was living in a time of great and fertile progress. Great strides were being made in environmental systems science and the world was getting better for every one.

There was a discreet ping and the nicely modulated synthetic voice advised Marsha that cast-off would commence within a minute. Zero-hour had arrived and Marsha was about to experience her first underwater trip. According to the sales brochure the cabin would simulate the ocean through which she would be travelling. Marsha was looking forward to seeing a real-live simulated fish. After all, she'd only seen video-book images of fish up to now. When you are 12 these things are exciting.

(33 min, 538 words)

After my failure with 'Groats', the era of 'zeppelins' (1920s?) didn't appeal to me so I made this a futuristic sci-fi type story. My thinking was that climate change had made us live underground and we travelled in large underwater vessels rather than aeroplanes. I think it works and my wife liked it.

Over the last few days I'd been feeling restricted by the 20 minute time limit so I increased it to 30 minutes. This was the first 30 minute story and I think that shows since it seems to have more depth to it than the earlier ones. An extra 10 minutes doesn't sound much but it was still a 50% increase. It also shows an improving confidence and, I hope, a little more creativity. After all, I'd been doing this creativity exercise for a month by this time and surely something must be happening.

Day 30 ~ 29th January 2019 Words: Dredge, Dregs, Drench

"I'm a bit of a recluse", I said. "I have difficulty interacting with other humans except on the most superficial level such as at a supermarket checkout."

"How do you mean" said the girl.

"It's difficult to explain but most of the time I'm either bored with their stupidity or intimidated by their intelligence". I laughed. "There doesn't seem to be a mid-way, or at least not often."

The girl thought for a minute.

"So I must be a mid-point for you then since you seem to be able to interact with me and you don't seem bored with my stupidity or intimidated by my laser-like brilliance."

"You're right". I paused. "Please don't feel insulted. I didn't tell you that in order to be rude. I was just trying to explain why I'm often quiet when you're around."

"Oh I'm not insulted. I'm not flattered either though. I'm not sure how to take it so I'll just let it lie. When in doubt do nothing is my motto."

She looked at the dregs in her mug and looked as though she was about to offer me another coffee but seemed to change her mind. She opened her mouth to speak and again changed her mind and relapsed into silence, thoughtfully gazing into the mug.

I gazed around the cafe. It was half full, or half empty, depending on your perspective. There were a few solitary patrons and a few couples but no groups. The cafe lacked a definite atmosphere; it reeked of 'this is a business' rather than having any particular character. It was raining quite heavily now.

"Can I ask why you invited me for a coffee?" I said after a while.

"Ohhh," she said, "I got the feeling that you liked me but were too shy to do anything about it. Seems I was wrong". She laughed self-

deprecatingly “as I so often am.”

I dredged my mind for a suitable reply. I wasn't clear on my objective though. Was I trying to pick her up or was I just being civil? I decided to try to empathise.

“I can understand your dilemma”. I said. “I do like you and I am too shy to approach you directly and I have this nasty habit of saying wildly inappropriate things at the wrong moment. If you want to go then feel free but I would like it if you stayed and had another coffee with me. I'll try not to be too weird if you do.”

She gave me a long considering look from under half shuttered eyes. “OK”.

As I order the coffees at the counter I noticed out of the corner of my eye that she was slipping out of the cafe door. For a few heartbeats I battled with conflicting emotions. Part of me felt pleased that this awkward situation was over and part of me felt sad that this friendly and seemingly nice person had had enough of me already. I grabbed my briefcase and wandered out the door as well.

She hadn't done a runner. She was standing under the edge of the awning lighting a cigarette. She glanced at me and said with a smile “It was a choice of getting drenched or staying with you. I chose the lesser of the two evils”.

For some reason I felt absurdly pleased.

“You know”, I said, “I'm absurdly pleased that you think I'm a lesser evil.” I hesitated indecisively then blurted “Can I take you to dinner one evening?”.

(31 min, 594 words)

This one is an exaggerated version of me. My social skills aren't the best although I like to think my heart's in the right place – somewhere between my dick and my stomach I believe ...

There are at least two ways to look at this story. On the one hand it's

basically about me so it's not particularly creative but on the other hand, because it is about me, it shows I'm becoming more confident and willing to 'put myself out there'. Although, since I'm a fairly logical sort of person, I wasn't putting myself out there since no one knew I'd written the story and they wouldn't have known it was about me anyway until they read this paragraph where I admit it.

Certainly my wife recognised me in this, when I did eventually open these stories up to her, although the woman in the story is made up and not based on anyone. I'm definitely getting better at dialogue.

Day 31 ~ 30th January 2019 Words: Monochrome, Monocle, Monoclonal

Roswell is a name that is imprinted on the minds of everyone with even a passing interest in aliens and ufology because it is the one incident where, for believers at any rate, actual aliens were found at the crash site. Inevitably there are a lot of sceptics, debunkers and conspiracy theorists and the whole incident is now rather murky.

There was another incident which occurred in Australia in 2013 which has never been made public. I know about it because I was part of the research team who investigated the alien bodies that were recovered. Why was it never made public? Well, no members of the public were involved and the Government threw an immensely tight security lock on the few people who were involved, who were a handful of air force personnel, a small team of civilian researchers and perhaps 10 government bureaucrats. When the will is there and the numbers are small, secrets can be kept for a very long time.

My understanding is that an air traffic controller at the town Airport spotted what appeared to be an aircraft in distress. Knowing that there were no civilian aircraft in the area, he contacted the Royal Australian Air Force who advised him to keep tracking it, record whatever data he could and not mention it to anyone else. They also despatched a small team which arrived within 30 minutes of his contact with them. During that time the controller had tracked the craft which appeared to have landed - crashing or safely he couldn't say - somewhere on the line at 323 deg from the town, probably no further than 20km or so away. The crew impressed on the controller the need for absolute security and set off in search of the craft. It's never been explained to me why the RAAF had a crew ready at such short notice nor why they reacted the way they did. It does imply that the RAAF knew more than they have admitted so far about the craft but implications are not facts.

Suffice it to say that the RAAF crew located the craft within 18 hours and within 36 hours had brought the craft to the RAAF Research Facility in an undisclosed part of an unspecified state which, because of the time factor, is most likely Victoria. I, and some other civilian scientists were drafted in over the next 48 hours or so. I never saw the

craft in real life, as it were, but I was given a detailed description with photographs in my briefing. Essentially it was a football shaped object some 28 metres long and 3.2 metres in diameter at it widest point. It was a dull monochrome silver-gray in colour with a single monocular transparent area – presumably a window, but made of a form of plastic that we were unfamiliar with. No other markings were apparent on the surface and the craft appeared to be impervious to x-rays.

A decision was made by someone somewhere to open the craft and this was achieved with a high speed diamond cutting tool. Inside we found 14 organic objects which we presumed to be the crew of the craft. None of the crew showed any signs of life and their temperatures were steadily cooling as one would expect with dead bodies. As the geneticist in the research team I determined over the next few weeks that these bodies – for want of a better word – had a DNA structure similar to Earth-based life but with a triple helix rather than a double helix and with 5 nucleotides rather than 4. This meant that considerably more genetic information could be contained within a significantly shorter length of DNA which consequently made it more efficient. Of particular interest was the observation that the DNA from each of the 14 was identical in every respect, suggesting that the bodies were monoclonal, meaning that not only were they all clones of a single entity but they were clones derived from a single cell from that entity.

(34 min, 674 words)

'Monoclonal' basically means 'cloned' and cloning means sci-fi. This was probably too ambitious a story to be embarked on for a 30 minute exercise! Still, I did manage to use all three words in a reasonably coherent way, bearing in mind they're not easy words to use in everyday situations.

This is the only story that had been edited. In the original I used the name of the town where I live so for privacy reasons that name has been replaced with "the town". I'm sure you understand and forgive me.

Day 32 ~ 31st January 2019 Words: Caster Sugar, Castigate, Castilian (written 1st February)

Last week I was castigated by my boss. I nearly got fired but I managed to charm my boss out of it. I still don't know what I did wrong but thats life. Bosses can be unpredictable, regardless of gender. Anyway I didn't get fired and thats what matters. Chances are if I do get fired the official reason will be different to the real reason so there are no problems with judgements or whatever.

It's Friday today. Not that that is significant in any way, I just wanted to orientate myself. I tend to lose track of time, at least in the sense that you humans experience time. Chronologically linear. My species experiences time in blocks or chunks. We experience all the events that occur between two specific events and we choose the specific events to limit the block. Its difficult to explain to the chronologically challenged but I can, for example, choose to experience a block that is delimited by two particular shipment days and so I experience everything in that block simultaneously. Or, if I'm after something in particular, I can choose to ignore certain things and concentrate on other things. Just as a human can look around and see only the people but not any of the other myriad of things that are in the field of view. This way I can experience the events leading up to an action, the action itself and the consequences of it before deciding whether or not to be involved. What complicates things is that the events within the block are constantly changing as other entities experience the block but you get used to it.

Needless to say I am here incognito. I am masquerading as a human in order to fit in. More specifically, I'm masquerading as a Spaniard, a male from Castile. It seemed appropriate in the block as the primary areas I'm involved with speak a language called "Spanish" but can easily be changed if necessary. I am here because one of our routine exploratory missions encountered a substance you call "caster sugar". We have never encountered anything like it before and research has found that the substance easily fulfils certain biochemical functions that we have previously had to deal with in more complex ways. By obtaining large and regular supplies of caster sugar we can save ourselves quite a significant amount of energy. My task is to identify the source of caster sugar and devise a means of supplying it to our

world.

One problem I have encountered is that caster sugar does not occur naturally. This was fairly inevitable as if it did we would have likely encountered it in the past. The first decision is therefore whether to grow the sugar plants ourselves and process them into caster sugar or whether to obtain the caster sugar from you pre-processed. Either way a secondary and more significant problem arises. You seem to have evolved with a very strong need to exchange things which means that in order to obtain caster sugar we have to exchange something with you. Whatever option we choose we need to exchange something for either the caster sugar itself or for the land and labour to process it – the plants won't grow in our dimensions.

The problem is more intractable because you humans insist on receiving in exchange something which does not exist but must be supplied in a very specific form. You call it “money” and we still haven't understood what you mean by that. The net result is that I strongly suspect the Council will decide that the only viable option is to simply take what we need, as and when we need it, by force. This will have consequences for your race but that isn't really our concern.

(35 min, 631 words)

Another three awkward words! Even caster sugar is awkward because in most situations we just say 'sugar'. I suppose I could have had some one following a recipe but I seem to have still been in a sci-fi mood. According to my diary I had been unable to focus on anything the day before so I hadn't written a story.

Day 33 ~ 1st February 2019 Words: Devalue, Devastate, Develop

I mixed a little white into the vermillion to soften the tone a little and loaded my brush. The canvas sat before me, vast and forbidding even though it was only a couple of feet wide. There was a partially completed landscape on it and even though I knew how I wanted the finished painting to come out progress was slow. For some reason my flow had become a dribble, and a hard-fought dribble at that. Every brush stroke was a torment of indecision. Many times on this work I'd wished I was an abstract painter who could just throw a couple of buckets of paint at the canvas and claim the result was "Art".

China, my occasional friend, burst into my flat and stuck his head in my fridge.

"What?? No beer??? I'm effing devastated!" he cried and without pause put the kettle on.

"Have some coffee" I said too late, as he had already got the jar out of the cupboard and found a reasonably clean mug. "I'll have one too".

He ignored me.

Two minutes later, coffee in hand and fag in mouth, he was behind me looking at the picture.

"I don't mean to devalue your work", he said "but that's crap".

I knew it was crap but I didn't like hearing him say so. I did my best work 4 or 5 years ago and had been missing the target ever since.

"It's sentimental, bourgeoisie, uninspired, gaudy shit".

I turned and painted his nose with my paintbrush. China grinned and poured coffee down my trousers. We both went and sat down. China in my best armchair and me on the floor.

"I know it's crap. I've lost my soul" I admitted. "It's been bugging me at nights but I can't seem to find any inspiration any more."

“Ahh” he said helpfully and relapsed into silence. The neighbour's TV was broadcasting what sounded like a football match.

We sat in football assisted silence for a while.

“I've been thinking” I said a little hesitantly as landscape was the only genre I was any good at. “I've been thinking I might abandon landscapes for a while and try a different genre. See what develops”.

He nodded and rolled another fag. After he'd lit it and got it burning to his satisfaction he leaned back in the armchair and swung a leg over the arm.

“What would you try? You're even more crap at everything else”.

“Yeah I know. I was hoping you'd have some ideas”.

“How about accountancy?” he said helpfully.

I just ignored him. He could be very helpful when the mood was on him but most of the time he was just plain irritating.

“I'm serious”, he said. “Challenge your creativity by focussing on artistic representations of accountants and accounting. No one else has ever done that and your weird sense of colour could become an artistic and economic statement.”

I just stared at him.

“Come on dumbfuck” he continued. “Thousands of people have painted horses and dogs for centuries. Surely you could churn out some artistic statement on accountants.”

I just stared at him.

“Jesus”. He was starting to get annoyed. “If you're going to be a prick I'll bugger off.”

I just stared at him.

He chucked his fag in an old beer can and stomped into the kitchen in search of food.

I just stared at the chair.

Twenty minutes later he left having eaten most of the food in my fridge. When my subconscious registered the door closing I started to come out of my trance.

“Accountancy” I muttered to myself. “A painting about accountancy”. I could see a glimmer of an idea in front of me. I took the landscape canvas off the easel and propped it against a wall. I took a fresh canvas and propped it on the easel.

“I think I'll do it in shades of grey”.

(33 words, 664 words)

I think I am definitely showing signs of creativity here. Following on from two sci-fi stories, I wrote this story about an artist gaining inspiration from 'Devalue', 'Devastate' and 'Develop' which I think is no mean achievement. Perhaps this story is a cry from the inner me, wanting to be more creative. I was an accountant myself from my mid-20s to late 30s so I can see that accountancy as an inspiration for art is a very original and creative idea.

Day 34 ~ 2nd February 2019 Words: Buffalo, Buffer, Buffet

She looked the kind of girl who'd given up on finding Mr Right and was happy to settle for Mr Will-Do-For-The-Night. Of course sitting alone at the bar, dressed a certain way and casually glancing around the room at intervals lead to a certain kind of stereotype being applied which was quite probably wrong. Anyway, she wasn't my type. Meaning that her glance had passed over me without pausing for an instant which meant I wasn't on her radar which meant that, quid-pro-quo, she wasn't on mine. Oh the games we all play!

Anyway I was working. My job tonight was to wait for a certain gentleman to arrive and then watch his movements. Particularly the small, casual movements which could hide the passing of something potentially of interest to someone else or to a place where someone else could collect it some other time. Maybe even the girl at the bar. Anything was possible at this stage of the investigation. All I knew was what this gentleman looked like and that he might be involved in something that he really shouldn't be involved in.

A waitress, and I use the term lightly, came over and I ordered a beer, some buffalo wings and fries. Not that I particularly like buffalo wings but they were the speciality of the place and I wanted to blend in. A guy sitting alone at a bar blends in, whereas a woman sitting alone doesn't. Says a lot about contemporary society I guess although time was a woman wouldn't be allowed in here at all so there was definite progress. And lets face it some hookers did operate out of this joint and were, from what I'd heard, quite successful.

She didn't look the architypal hooker I had to admit. She wasn't the long hair big tits type nor was she under-dressed. In fact she looked more like a well-to-do office lady who'd be more at home at a Church Buffet than an almost-seedy bar that specialised in buffalo wings. She wasn't wearing a lot of makeup either now I came to think about it and her nails were fairly short and simply polished. Not the classic hooker look but times and fashions were changing. And then again she may not be a hooker. Again the lighthouse glance travelled around and over me with complete indifference.

My target and the wings arrived at the same time which was good as

it added genuine colour to my being here. He too glanced casually around the room and passed over me with complete indifference. Its a good thing I don't feel insecure. All this lack of interest in me could get depressing. More interestingly he also sat at the bar but on the other side of the single girl with a couple of stools as a buffer. This was excellent because if he noticed me watching he'd assume I was eyeing up the girl. For a while we both watched her order another drink then he ordered one for himself. It seemed a little suspicious to me that neither he nor I offered to get her a drink but thats the way it goes.

The girl had twisted round on her stool. She was no longer with her back to the bar but almost square on to it, very slightly facing him. Her hair was nice and because she was slim I could see around her quite well and had a good view of my target. I had another wing, wiped my mouth and ordered another beer.

Interesting. The girl had stopped scanning the room and was now glancing oh so casually but oh so regularly at him as if willing him to approach her. He didn't seem to notice though and took out a packet of cigarettes and lit one from a little book of matches. He left both the matches and cigarette packet on the bar. He finished his beer and deigned to notice the girl. He offered her a drink which she decline, gesturing to the almost full drink in front of her. Then he offered her a cigarette which she politely accepted so he slid off his stoll and stepped over to her, sliding the cigarette packet and matches along the bar. He shook out a cigarette which she took and she then reached for the matches and lit it herself. Interesting, I thought. A girl like that doesn't light gifted cigarettes herself.

Then it happened. So quickly, smoothly and naturally I almost didn't notice. She dropped the matches into her purse and closed it. Then she thanked the man and they started talking casually about how often she came to the bar and what she liked about the city and the usual crap. A few minutes later, when I'd finished the last of my wings and was feeling hot-throated and faintly gaseous he politely excused himself and left the bar. So, the girl was the contact. This job was looking up at last.

(35 min, 832 words)

A touch of Bogart or Raymond Chandler private investigator and spy thriller here. Interestingly the length is triple that of my initial writing efforts. I think this one has a good sense of atmosphere and is quite believable. I liked writing it and I quite like reading it. Perhaps because it's a well known stereotypical genre I'm not at all self conscious about this story. This is one of the occasional stories that made me think I was getting somewhere. My wife said she could visualise it quite easily. I'd give myself an A for this but I'm not grading them.

Day 35 ~ 3rd February 2019 Words: Vote, Votive, Vouch

There was a knock on the door just as I was sitting on the toilet. I ignored it as I wasn't expecting anyone and there are some things in life you don't really want to interrupt. There was another knock then silence. I assumed whoever it was had gone away. When my business was done – mostly finishing the chapter of the book I kept in the toilet – I washed and flushed, as you do. Walking past the front bedroom I peered out the window to see if anyone was there. There didn't seem to be. I walked through into the kitchen and made a coffee. Nothing fancy, just a cup of instant, black with artificial sweetner.

Back in the lounge I picked up another book – the house was full of books and I read most of the time. For some reason the door knocking was bugging me. I dumped the book and coffee and went to the front door and opened it. There was no one there. It was a little early for the postman but I decided to go check the mailbox and see if there was anything there. For some reason I was unsettled. Although I do have visitors – I'm not the antisocial recluse I probably seem to be – I rarely get them unexpectedly and in this neighbourhood we don't get door-to-door salesmen. At least since the government made cold calling energy selling on offence. And the Jehovah's Witnesses had been round only last week for their annual attempt to get me to listen to them.

There wasn't any post but there was a leaflet for the Liberal Party telling me that to preserve my way of life I really had to vote for them in the forthcoming election. Interesting. I didn't know there was a forthcoming election. Back in the house, the leaflet in the bin, I booted my laptop and checked online. Sure enough there was a federal election in about 4 weeks time. I know I'm not the most political person around but it was curious that such a thing had been called without my hearing a word about it. My friend, Ashton, had been here only a few days ago and he was a rabid Labor fanatic who would vouch his own mother's life on the sanctity of Labor Party policies. He hadn't mentioned it. Now I come to think of it I don't actually remember anything we talked about that evening although he was here for several hours and we had a few beers.

I opened up my laptop again to check my horoscope. I'm a Gemini so

its only fair that I'm in two minds about horoscopes. It was then that I noticed something strange. My current weekly horoscope was for the week of 4th to 10th February which was absurd as it was only a week into the New Year. I glanced at the date given in the task bar and that said 5th February. How strange. I went online to check a couple of newspapers – they said the same thing and were also talking a lot about the Report of the Banking Royal Commission which, I was certain, was not due to be published for several more weeks. Puzzled I went to my study and checked my mobile phone. It was flat, which it shouldn't have been since I'd charged it only yesterday.

Hmmm. Sitting in my chair in the lounge I lit a smoke and sipped my coffee. Thinking about this logically there were only a few possibilities. It could be a practical joke by someone but I didn't know anyone capable of such a skilled level. It could be that there was some date or time problem with the net but that wouldn't explain the news although as my laptop sets its time from the net that would explain that discrepancy. Another possibility was that I had died and had come back a few weeks later as a ghost. I didn't think this was a serious possibility but I did bang my arm against the arm of the chair to see if it went through or not. It didn't. I suspect also that ghosts don't feel pain either, which I did as my arm was now a little sore.

This was puzzling. Could I have blacked out for a few weeks and come too sitting on the toilet? Well I definitely remembered waking up that morning so maybe I came too during the night. I went into the kitchen and checked the fridge. No that couldn't be right. There was a carton of milk in the fridge which had a use-by date of 12th February on it. Could someone have been coming in and restocking my fridge while I was blacked out? I checked the refuse bin in the kitchen. There were the remains of last night's dinner in it and they showed no signs of mold. Turning round I noticed a letter stuck on the fridge door with a fridge magnet from my local vet. It was a notice that tomorrow the electricity would be cut off due to street maintenance. I distinctly remembered receiving the notice a few days ago and putting it on the fridge but the date was definitely 6th February. How was all this possible. I was beginning to feel a little panic. Logic, my usual refuge in times of stress, wasn't helping me much. Maybe I should be illogical and go to a church and give a votive offering to get redemption or something.

There was only one possible rational explanation left and I was scared to face it. Either I was having memory lapses or I had had an episode of some mental illness that caused me to miss out sections of time. Maybe I should phone my doctor? Or just wait and see?

(43 min, 979 words)

This story is an excellent example of over-confidence leading to abject failure. Following yesterday's quite good spy thriller I launched into this attempt to have someone slowly discovering they're missing some time and trying to figure out how and why. Way too ambitious not only for my skills but for the time limit. My first thought was to write something about a church because of 'votive' and I should have run with that idea. I was trying to be too clever. Silly me.

My wife had no idea what this story was about and, after re-reading it, I can understand where she is coming from. I'm not grading but this one would probably be E for effort if I was.

Day 36 ~ 4th February 2019 Words: Detergent, Deteriorate, Determinant

I was due in court at 10 but I was running late. I ought to mention that I was not on trial personally, I am a journalist who reports on the occasional court case. This particular case was of mild interest but it could produce 2 or 3 articles for my paper. In essence the case concerned a brother and sister who ran a small business selling a range of environmentally friendly domestic cleaning products who were accused of using the products as a cover for importing illegal drugs into the country disguised as exotic ingredients for their products.

The reason I was running late was because a woman had fallen down the escalator at the tube station and been injured which had in turn caused a few minutes delay meaning I missed the train. Its of no consequence to this missive but undoubtedly of consequence to the lady and possibly the London Underground. Not only was I running late but I had forgotten my sandwiches which were still sitting on the kitchen counter at home and were, almost certainly, being quietly nibbled by my cat, Ashton, who loved ham. Anyway, I digress.

As I sidled into the court room, presided over by the laudable but also irritable Justice Langham, I heard the prosecution say something along the lines of “Would you not agree that a determinant in this case is the precise ingredients for the specific products in question?”. I was sorely tempted to answer “yes” but clearly the question was not directed at me.

I slid into a seat in the back row and pulled my notebook out of my pocket. Most reporters are technologically biased and prefer small recording devices but having lost the last 2 I had had, and consequently all the information they had recorded, I preferred now to use the old fashioned ways. I have never yet lost a notebook although occasionally the notes in them have been illegible. After a few minutes I became aware of the other person sitting in my row, not far away. He was immensely fat and was dressed in a very ill fitting pin-striped suit with a waistcoat that bulged dramatically in many different directions at the same time. What drew my attention, however, was that he was sitting there quite contentedly knitting.

“From your analysis, Dr Swanford, what do you conclude are the ingredients of the product known as Eco-Green Environmentally Safe Detergent?”

The fat man giggled quietly to himself and muttered “probably heroin” then swore softly as he dropped a stitch and had to concentrate on his knitting for a few moments.

“And N-methyl-1-(3,4-methylenedioxyphenyl)propan-2-amine is a substance that is more commonly known by the name 'ecstasy', is it not, Dr Swanford?”

The fat man rolled up his knitting and pushed it into a rather large plastic bag that had been sitting, hidden, beside him and took out a neatly wrapped packet of sandwiches. Judging by the smell they were beef and pickle sandwiches.

“And would it be possible, as the defence has claimed, that the product known as Eco-Green Environmentally Safe Detergent could, if left in direct sunlight for an extended period deteriorate into N-methyl-1-(3,4-methylenedioxyphenyl)propan-2-amine, Dr Swanford?”

At this point my fat companion farted rather copiously, causing Justice Langham to look up in annoyance and stare directly at me.

(34 minutes, 556 words)

And then the pendulum swings the other way. It would be nice to get some consistency going. I thought this was a rather good little story, a mix of technicalities (the formula actually is that of ecstasy, thank you internet), a solid lead character and a comic turn. I did struggle to think of an ending then it occurred to me to have a disrespectful one. I think it works. My wife did too.

Day 37 ~ 5th February 2019 Words: Pro-forma, Profound, Profuse

Gareth belched loudly but no one heard over the general level of noise in the pub. Bernie slouched in his seat and slurped the remains of his beer. Tony sat hunched over his, looking on the verge of tears, but that's his normal expression. Gina had disappeared, bored with the lack of conversation. She had either gone to the toilet, gone home or gone off to find someone more interesting.

"I've said it before and I'll say it again" intoned Gareth "Nitchy was spot on when he said 'that which doesn't kill you makes you stronger'. That's, like, really profound and stuff."

The other ignored him. Gareth was generally full of shit and it was rarely worth the effort to argue with him. Gina sat down with a bump and giggled a little.

"Guess who I met in the loo" she said.

"Muhammed Li" replied Tony.

Gina looked at him in puzzlement.

"Muhammed is the most common first name and Li is the most common last name so the most likely person you met would be Muhammed Li", explained Tony.

"Jesus you're full of crap" replied Gina. "No I bumped into Cheryl's mum, you know, Cheryl from the Instant Replays".

"That little blonde drummer chickie?" said Bernie.

"That's her. Anyway, Mick has quit the band and they're looking for another guitarist" said Gina

"Why?" asked Gareth

"Carol's mum said that he writes a lot of songs but the band will never play any of them." said Gina

“Yeah” said Bernie “He was pretty prolific at school when I knew him. Profuse like. Always humming and writing stuff”.

“So I was thinking, why don't we let him join our band? I know we're a cover band but maybe its time to start branching out and doing some original stuff and its not like any of us can write songs. That's why we're a cover band.” said Gina

“Get real” said Bernie. “He write a lot of songs but theyre all shit. I've heard some of them. Anyway, what do we need with another guitarist?”

“I've heard some of his stuff too and they're not shit. They're just different” said Gareth. “More ballady, less rocky”

“Why don't we meet him and get him to play some of his stuff and see if we like it” said Gina.

“OK” said Gareth

“No” said Bernie.

“Sorry, wasn't listening, what was that?” said Tony.

“Gina wants Mick to join the Pro-Formas” said Gareth.

“Who's Mick?” said Tony.

“You know Mick, he's that tall lanky guitarist with the Instant Replays” said Gina.

“Oh yeah I think I've seen him” said Tony. “so what, you like fancy him then do you Gina?. Tony laughed uproariously and then relapsed into his habitual gloom.

“Jesus everythings sex for you isnt it you tosser” said Gina, a little embarrassed because she did actually fancy Mick. “So what you reckon? He can write us some new material”

“What do we want new material for?” said Tony. “We've got stacks of

old hits and no one listens to us anyway.”

“That’s my point” said Gina. “If we had some new original stuff then maybe people would start to pay us more attention as an upcoming band rather than just this endless round of old pub favourites in old pubs surrounded by old pissed drunks”

“Fair point” said Tony. “After all we’ve nothing to lose have we. Not like we’re getting anywhere like this. So you wanna get him round for a chat, like?”

“Yeah” said Gina. “So shall I give him a ring? I can get his number off Cheryl at work on Saturday”

(36 min, 628 words)

Back to bands again. I really couldn't think of a plausible way to fit 'pro-forma' into any story other than one about accountants and invoices so I made it a band name. I think that was really quite creative of me!

The story doesn't really work though. I'm getting the hang of one on one conversations by this point but group conversations are difficult. In real life, members of a group talk over and around each other and I don't see how to show that in a story yet. It never occurred to me to get a book on writing technique and I still haven't. I suspect that books like that are full of endless little rules. Anyway, it's more fun to just write stories and take the risk as to how they turn out.

Incidentally, although there are a lot of spelling mistakes in this, Nitchy was deliberate. I wanted Gareth to know of Nietzsche but not enough to say it right. Also the bit about Muhummed Li was straight out of Big Bang Theory. In one episode, Penny says “Guess who I met today,” and Sheldon says “Muhummed Li, because ...” I have seasons 1 to 10 on DVD. One day I might get the last two seasons.

Day 38 ~ 6th February 2019 Words: Duplicator, Duplicity, Durable

There was a wave of dogs barking which started several doors down in the street running behind mine and slowly came closer. I knew exactly what that meant – my cat was on her way home! She liked to stir up the dogs on her travels by being obvious but out of reach on top of the fences so they went frantic in their frustration. Sure enough, a minute or two later she turned up, serene and confident and wanting her dinner.

I ignored her however as she was too early. I was part of a design team working on a device that would duplicate cellular structure. The idea being that the duplicator would take a single living cell and reproduce it in its entirety. We had created a machine that could duplicate a cell but the copy was not living. Once we cracked that problem we would then be able to move on to duplicating clusters of living cells and eventually an entire organism. My team was responsible for the easiest part which was the data storage during the reproduction. That in itself was a challenge but hey, that's life. There was another team within the organisation that was working on developing our failure into a device for replicating cooked foods – as cooked foods are not alive – which would then be marketed commercially and was widely expected to be a significant money maker. Rumour had it that the main stumbling block was that the device was not durable. According to the grapevine it would work 3 or 4 times then fail and attempts to make it more robust were going nowhere.

Having said that, a machine that could replicate something only 3 or 4 times was still a significant advance in technology and could be marketable if, for example, it first replicated itself then whatever object was needed 2 or 3 times. Subsequent objects could then be made using the replicated replicator. But, it has to be said, it's not a cost effective way of doing things and, of course, the problem arises of disposing of the non-functional replicators. I wouldn't be surprised if the organisation had yet another team working on a device that could break down objects and store them as their component raw materials.

What we really needed was a universal machine that would take an object – living or not – and either reproduce it or break it down for

later use in reproduction. That's a few years away though. Even further away I suspect is a device which not only reproduces a living organism but also reproduces every aspect of it, such as its thoughts and emotions, over and above its simply being alive. In any event, being able to store the data was essential but that also raised ethical problems. For example, how long should the data be stored for? If you are talking about say a television then there is no real reason why its data shouldn't be stored indefinitely – although who would want a reproduction of a 500 year old television? If it were a human though, do we really want to be able to store and reproduce humans for 500 years? There are all sorts of ethical issues around this and it would be duplicitous of me to pretend I understood many of them. And what about the legal liability if errors crept into the data over time?

(31 min, 571 words)

Once again I was stuck for a story so started off with what's happening around me – the cat. But I chose to ignore her because I was working. On what? A duplicator! The rest follows on. Thanks to Star Trek for the idea of a replicator. It's an OK story, what else can I say?

Day 39 ~ 7th February 2019 Words: Seasick, Seaside, Season

A small crab scuttled a couple of inches and disappeared into the stones. A frond of seaweed waved limply from side to side. A pair of tiny fish darted hither and yon. A small boy knelt and studied the activity. He'd been to the sea-side once before, two years ago. It was so very different to the crumbling concrete and brick of his urban base. Back home the only water you saw was either from a tap or in a puddle on the sidewalk and there was never anything remotely interesting in it. Apart from that time he found a ten dollar bill soaking in a puddle but that was different.

He found it all fascinating. He sat back on his haunches and gazed at the sea. Rollers came in regularly and the surf hissed and gurgled as it drove up the shingle and then sucked back out to sea again. An old man walking his dog had told him not long ago that the tide was going out but the boy wasn't entirely sure what a "tide" was. It didn't matter as he gloried in the wildness of it all and didn't care about naming things.

Even though it was the holiday season there were few people about. Mostly old people, mostly with dogs. His grandmother sat on a large towel further along the shore on her own and occasionally shouted to him to be careful then shut her eyes again as she basked in the warmth of the early morning sun. The boy sat and wondered how he could persuade her to let him go out on the sea in a canoe – there were some for hire down closer to the town, where the old man without a dog ran a stall with things for sale and hire. She was convinced that he'd get pulled out to sea, or drown or both. The boy was convinced that neither would happen. He wouldn't even get sea-sick even though he had when they came over on the ferry. No ideas came to him. Maybe another year when he was older and bigger. Maybe when he'd learnt to swim.

He sighed and stood up. Only then did he realise that from the big rocks behind him a small girl was watching him. He guessed she was much the same age as he was and since he was reasonably happy – despite not being able to go canoeing – he smiled at her and waved a greeting. She smiled shyly back so he wandered over and told her his name.

“Whatcha doing?” she said, scratching her foot against a rock.

“I was looking in the pool over there”, he replied “I was wondering where all the things in it come from.”

“Oh from out there” she said, waving her hand at the immensity of the sea around them. “There’s another pool in the bay over there which is full of sea-snails.” She pointed at the rocky outcrop that ended this beach. “Wanna go see it?”

“Oh cool” said the boy “How do we get there?”

“Oh we just swim around the rocks” she said “its not far”.

“Oh” said the boy disappointedly.

“What’s wrong?” the girl asked, looking into his face.

“I can’t swim” he replied, embarrassed that he couldn’t do something a girl could do.

The girl laughed and jumped up. She grabbed his hand and started pulling towards the water’s edge.

“C’mom c’mom” she cried “I’ll teach you, its easy peasy.”

The boy let himself be pulled to the water. Oh this holiday was turning out to be awesome. Maybe this girl had a canoe too.

(29 min, 615 words)

Well 'seaside' was an obvious starting point for this one, and what better way to evoke the seaside than a crab in a rock pool? And let's make it out of 'season' and a child who was likely to have been 'seasick' getting there. This one was pretty straightforward.

Recent stories have been definitely better written. They flow more smoothly and on the whole seem to be more evocative.

Day 40 ~ 8th February 2019 Words: Taffrail, Taffy, Tag

“God damn, its a long way down.” I said, peering over the taffrail and holding on for dear life. From an engineering perspective the sea was four decks below, although it kept changing with the motion of the waves, but from a human perspective it was a very long way down. I lifted my gaze a little and watch the churned water from the twin propellers and the ship – or boat or vessel, I am not a nautical person – forced its way forwards.

“If I fell over the rail and survived the fall would I get cut to pieces by the propellers? I asked.

Percy, one of my second cousins and an occasional sailor, if only small pleasure yachts, laughed the laugh of someone trying to be debonair and experienced when they really aren't, replied “Well it would take several seconds to fall that far and in that time the ship would have moved forwards so you would be well clear of the props and the movement of the water would carry you away from them anyway. It would be difficult to fall in front of the propellers from here anyway. If you survive the fall you'll almost certainly drown rather than be mashed up.”

“I think I prefer it up the front”, I said. “It seems less fraught than it is here at the back end.”

Percy laughed and pulled a bag of taffies out of his pocket.

“Take these” he said. “When you start to feel sea sick you'll find they help a little”.

I turned my back on the sea – although to be honest we weren't at sea yet. We were still in the English Channel having left Southampton less than an hour previously. Despite this, two small children were already playing tag further along the deck.

“I'm going to my cabin to unpack. I'll see you at lunch.”

Perhaps I was being a little optimistic with that assertion as there was already a mild uneasiness in my stomach. Perhaps a good lunch would

get rid of that feeling. A seagull screamed at me from overhead as I strode along the deck to the rear staircase, lurching only a little as the ship gently rolled and pitched.

“I wonder what its like in a storm?” I casually thought to myself. “No doubt I’ll find out once we are on the Atlantic.”

My cabin wasn't far as it was third class and near the back end of the ship. I shared it with another man whom I hadn't met yet although his bags were in the cabin when I put mine there earlier. Percy, of course, was travelling first class and his valet would have finished unpacking by now. The joys of money. I made a mental note to ask Percy where his valet was sleeping, although knowing Percy he wouldn't know. Charles, the valet, made all the arrangements for everything and Percy just paid for things without wondering excessively about the details. He left those in Charles' capable hands. It did cross my mind that Charles might be my cabin companion but it was unlikely. Knowing Charles he would most likely have booked himself a second class cabin. Being in charge of someone else's money was almost as good as having money of your own. Or so I believed. Neither having money myself nor having the charge of anyone else's money I could not be certain of this.

This penurious situation was in fact one half of the reason I was making this trip. I had determined to seek my fortune in America, the Land Of Opportunity. I had scraped together the last of my savings for the ticket and was blissfully optimistic of the opportunities that awaited me in the promised land. Lady Luck was clearly on my side as I had discovered only two days previously that Percy was booked on the same trip and he was gracious enough to give me passenger room in his motor car for the trip from London to Southampton, thereby saving me the train fare and affording me a more discreet departure from that city. I live in hopeful expectation that his generosity would not end with that gesture.

The other half of the reason I was here was still in London and as yet unaware of my departure. Although a delightful and charming companion she was, alas, no wealthier than I and, much as it pains me to admit, was now with child and blissfully anticipating our future wedded happiness in the not too distant future. Fortunately the

bracing breeze made that topic easy to dismiss from my mind.
Opportunities beckon!

(34 min, 782 words)

Not knowing what a 'taffrail' was, I checked its meaning and was instantly thinking about the movie Titanic and that era of luxury passenger liners. I was going to have a Welshman in the story as 'taffy' in a slang term in the UK for the Welsh but I checked to see if it had any other meanings and apparently it's a type of boiled sweet. I can't claim any originality for the ending either. Men have been running away from pregnant women for millennia.

Day 41 ~ 9th February 2019 Words: Focus Group, Fodder, Foe

They say that anxiety can exist at several levels. Mine was a low level anxiety; persistent, nagging, continuous but never near the surface, never high enough to be called out and worked on. It manifested itself in extended periods of low confidence and short, occasional bouts of over-confidence. In dreams. In occasional unexplained panics. In bouts of over-eating, starvation, over-drinking, sobriety, spending sprees and penury. In a mild fear of solitude. In a life of quiet desperation.

I'm not a political person but that week my associate, John, and I were running a series of focus groups for a local politician's forthcoming campaign. We were brought in by a larger organisation so the topics and leading questions were supplied, which is just as well as neither of us really had a clue. Our jobs were to manage the groups, ask the questions, record everything and try to look interested. There was nothing to worry about, it was all straightforward and if anything went wrong it wouldn't really matter. The politician didn't have much of a chance anyway as he was up against a sitting member who had won the last election by one of the largest majorities in the country. It was unlikely that the nation swing to the opposition would have any impact in this constituency.

Our candidate, the sitting member's foe, was filthy rich and as far as I could tell was running solely to try to stop a new government increasing taxes for the rich. Hence the focus groups – so he could find out what he needed to talk about to the electorate so he wasn't just fodder for the sitting member. Personally I was in favour of it, especially if it meant that taxes for the poor would be lowered as I was one of the relatively poor not the relatively rich. There are many in marketing who make big money but the people who run focus groups aren't among them. I had the usual spouse, mortgage, bills and loans and existed from pay cheque to pay cheque. No doubt this contributed to my low level anxiety. It wasn't the cause because I had earned more in the past and was just as anxious then. I'm sure a psychiatrist would be able to resolve my issues but I couldn't afford one.

Something I'd learned a long while ago was false optimism; a gay, carefree exterior designed to impress bosses and those who hired me

that I was confident and successful. Talk about the tears of a clown. I wasn't even successful at being depressed as I was often overtly happy.

Anyway, she was in one of the focus groups. Quiet, opinionated but reserved. Seemingly strong willed but with a hint of softness behind. Not particularly attractive. Certainly I wasn't attracted at first but then I was a married woman with a family. But we got to talking after the first session. Kept on talking after the second session. Went for coffee after the third session. Kept in touch and as the weeks went by I noticed that my low level anxiety was moving. It was moving up into higher levels of anxiety. Ones that could be identified and perhaps even addressed. Did she like me? Well, it certainly seemed so. She sought my company as much as I sought hers. Did she want to kiss me? Well that anxiety certainly resolved itself very satisfactorily one evening. Did I want a divorce? That was a cute little high level anxiety that dropped like a bombshell on me in bed with my husband a couple of months later. Why would I want a divorce? Life with hubby was fine so there could only be one reason. Was I wanting to divorce a man to live with a woman? Very high level anxiety as I'd never thought of myself as a lesbian. But strangely exciting and attractive none the less. And if I did divorce my husband would she want me? Panic Alert: Anxiety going off the scale.

(34 min, 670 words)

This started out as from a man's perspective but as I neared the end I realised it could just as easily apply to a woman and could well be more interesting as a result. Obviously 'focus group' was the driving idea behind this story and for some reason fitted with 'foe' and 'fodder' to suggest politics to me. It wouldn't surprise me if I had been anxious about something the day I wrote this.

Day 42 ~ 10th February 2019 Words: Nightwatchman, Nightwear, Nihilism

They always came at night. Creeping through the darkness. Only moonlight betraying their vapid forms, nebulous and ill-defined. Fortunately I had curtains so I rarely saw them. Only occasionally, on a full moon night when the curtains weren't fully closed. They would appear in the palely lit strip on the wall and slowly move around the room as the night progressed.

Did they bother me? Of course they did. Although I am a long-term subscriber to “Nihilism Quarterly: The Journal of Meaningless Philosophy” my opinions, views and philosophies are purely intellectual. Faced with the unknown, the animistic and the supernatural I react just like any of the unenlightened masses; my very soul – denied during daylight hours – brimming over with unnamed and unconscionable fears.

Perhaps it was because I lived alone in a remote desolate part of the world. Perhaps it was because I had dabbled in Spiritualism before becoming a Nihilist. Perhaps it was the beginnings (or endings?) of mental illness. Who knows? In any event, some nights I got the heebie geebies. I once toyed with getting a night job, perhaps in a factory or as a nightwatchman but the heebe geebies were never bad enough to overcome my innate idleness. Besides my old war wound – a bad back caused by falling in a ditch when drunk while in the army when I was a callow youth – would count against me, and the small disability pension was sufficient for my needs and my wants were never that overpowering. A Ferrari would look nice in my driveway if one happened along but why bust a gut getting one? It would be fun, I think, to be a night time radio presenter but my knowledge of music is very limited and my speaking voice is somewhat monotonous and flat. And there is always the risk of some nutter like in that old Clint Eastwood movie “Play Misty For Me” where the girl stalks him then attacks him with a large knife. Newsreader is cool, being news isn't.

Sleeping naked doesn't help on those moonlit nights either. Nudity is my choice of nightwear as it is comfortable and cheap. As a child I wore pyjamas but because I often twist and turn when asleep I often found myself unable to breath or with the blood supply to my testicles

cut off because the pjs had gained a stranglehold. So, tonight is a full moon and cloudless. The curtains are tightly drawn and darkness has fallen. I am in bed, naked, pondering the pointlessness of life and what it means to try to draw meaning from the pointless. Around the time I started to ponder what “pointless” actually means and whether it is pointless to wonder if meaning has meaning or not, I heard a knock at the door. Rat-tat-tat. Three firm raps, a pause then again. With a solidity, a confidence. None of the tentativity you might expect from some stranger knocking on a door in the middle of the night. So, what should I do? Stay in bed and hope it goes away or get up and answer the door and risk the personification of the night-time heebies?

What would you do?

(29 min, 535 words)

My first attempt at horror, or is it suspense? I had in mind some sort of supernatural/satanic creatures that tried to get in during the night. I thought I was quite clever posing a question to the reader (aside from the fact that I never anticipated any readers) at the end but my wife shot that down. She pointed out that the “hero” of the story was such an idle, useless wimp that he couldn’t even decide whether or not to answer the door. She’s right of course, I just hadn’t noticed while I was writing it.

Day 43 ~ 11th February 2019 Words: Bow, Bowdlerise, Bowel

Talk about mismatches. Rog was a hulking brute of a man, tattooed and fairly coarse. He was a builder and had a huge collection of heavy metal albums that occupied a set of shelves he'd made that filled an entire wall of their little 3 bed suburban house. Elaine was a fairly plain mousey little blonde with big glasses, very conservative and demur with strong religious beliefs she'd acquired from her parents who were devout Catholics. Rog looked the type to drink heavily and knock his wife about but he never did. He'd stopped drinking after they met although he still smoked evil little noxious rollups. Where and how they met I never knew but what I did know is that they each worshipped the other and, incredible but true, her parents worshipped him too. I was a friend of her brother Steve who played guitar in the local church band. Thinking about it I was kind of like Rog myself. I was a tattooed sax player who'd been thrown out of their church for smoking. I'd gone to watch Steve's band play and assumed it was just another concert. It never occurred to me that smoking in a church would be frowned upon. Not that I'd been to many churches. Anyway, I didn't particularly mind being thrown out as their music was a kind of rock but heavily bowdlerised so that none of the dangerous emotions of rock music could possibly influence the audience. To call it insipid would be a kindness.

I guess the family was unusually tolerant. Or maybe they had hopes of converting us. One thing was for certain, Elaine wasn't as virginal as she looked! Rog was a very lusty man and they went to bed early every night. I didn't go to their wedding as I didn't know Steve at that time but I got to see some wedding shots later – quite why I was shown their wedding pics I don't know – and Rog was a sight in his fancy suit and bow tie. He looked more like a nightclub bouncer than the groom. I came on the scene a couple of years later. At one point I invited Steve to join a band I was forming but he wasn't interested once he found out it would be more like Rog's music – more Iron Maiden and The Number Of The Beast than Kumbaya. I wanted a band that played real bowel churning rock that grabbed you by the ears and ripped your heart out.

Because Rog and I were so similar its strange that we never became friendly. We met every now and then and were polite but thats as far

as it went. He didn't come to any of my band's concerts and I didn't fancy his wife which was strange as we played his kind of music and I fancied anything in a skirt. Probably just as well as Elaine and her family were nice people and I could see that I could be a bad influence on them. Not that I took drugs or anything but more that I was not only a non-believer but somewhat antagonistic to religion generally.

This whole period lasted only 18 months or so and it was 40 odd years ago but for some reason every now and then I think back to those days. Everything was so intense and yet so innocent and its hard to think of Steve, Elaine and Rog as being in their 60s and their parents dead. I don't even know if Steve, Elaine or Rog are still alive as I never kept in touch. I should have done but things sometimes just slide and then after a while it seems wrong to try and change it. Maybe Steve got married and maybe Elaine is now a grandmother. Funny how lives sometimes entwine briefly and then go their separate ways as if it had never happened but leaving fond memories.

(36 min, 662 words)

This one is really an embellished true story although I couldn't remember their names after so many years. But, yes, I was once evicted from a church during one of my friend's concerts for lighting up a ciggie in the back pew. It's OK as a story, nothing special but nothing dire either. I didn't know what 'Bowdlerise' meant – to remove material that is improper or offensive – so it works on two levels. The music is sanitised and I am ejected from church.

Day 44 ~ 12th February 2019 Words: Sheriff, Sherpa, Sherry

“You mustn't confuse the word 'Sherif' with 'Sheriff’”, Ames said. “Sherif is an arabic word that is a title in the Arabic aristocracy, a bit like 'Lord' or 'Sir', whereas 'Sheriff' is a type of policeman in America.”

We'd been watching a rerun of the old movie 'Lawrence of Arabia' and Jonesy had been confused by Sherif Ali, thinking he was some kind of law man and wondering why he didn't simply have El Orrence arrested. Being American himself Ames saw a sheriff as a policeman too but wanted to show off his knowledge. Being British I decided to join in the fun.

“Actually”, I drawled “‘Sherif’ originated in England as an official appointed by the king who oversaw a shire and is now largely obsolete there except as a minor ceremonial thing. Like the Sheriff of Nottingham in Robin Hood's day.”

We were sitting in a bar in Katmandu in Nepal drinking warm sherries and idling out time away until the rest of the team arrived, probably tomorrow. The two Americans had wanted beer but the bar didn't have any because alcohol was frowned upon in Nepal. It wasn't illegal but it was generally difficult to get hold of unless you wanted the local Raksi. Sherry, for some reason, was deemed acceptable.

Don't, by the way, think that we are mountaineers, planning an assault on Everest. While that mountain is only 100km or so away we wanted it only as a backdrop, not a conquest. We were here to shoot some scenery shoots for a movie loosely based on Sir Edmund Hilary, the first (white) man to climb Everest and it would be a sorry movie if it didn't have any shots of Everest in it even though the movie was more about his early life and loves. The rest of the movie was being shot on location in Canada and in the studio. I was technically known as the Third Unit Director, meaning I was charged with getting the scenes of Everest. Ames was here to translate and organise things in Nepal and Jonesy was his son-in-law whose function was to increase the payroll for Ames benefit. The actual camera crew would arrive perhaps tomorrow along with the equipment then we'd all go off in a cute little old tour bus looking for somewhere nice and scenic. Frankly it was

more of a holiday for all of us than serious work and some ideas had been floated for ways of extending it. I'd also heard a rumour that one of the cameramen was planning to get some shots of Nepal for a documentary he was planning at the movie company's expense but of course I hadn't heard that officially. While Hilary had Sherpa Tensing to help him, we had an old British Leyland long wheel-base Sherpa van to help us.

We also had a rough plan of touring around the foothills of the Himalayas for a few days looking for suitable locations. We didn't need to go that far from Katmandu as the mountains are pretty big and can be seen from a fair way away which meant that, most importantly, we didn't need to camp. We could return to the hotel every night and sleep in relative comfort. And warmth, as Everest is a pretty chilly place.

(29 min, 552 words)

This started with me playing on the word 'sherif' and rapidly looked like it was going to turn into mountaineering. I know nothing of mountaineering, not even enough to bluff my way through so I changed it to a movie crew. I suppose it would have been more interesting to have talked about the movie and problems on set and so on but instead I just let it peter out into nothingness. Not one of my better efforts.

Day 45 ~ 13th February 2019 Words: Quark, Quarrel, Quarry

“Stand by Landing Crew, on my mark, main count 5”

“Stand by Tracking, on my mark main count 4”

“Stand by Security, on my mark main count 3”

“Bridge to Engineering, commence landing on my mark”

“All teams, mark commencing 5....4....3....2....1....mark”

The thrusters hummed briefly and a slight thump vibrated the vessel. There was a faint whir and another slight thump as the ramp unfolded to the surface. Through the side camera I could see the first drilling rig slowly descend the ramp and head off towards the left of the field of vision. Another successful landing. Forty eight hours and we'll have quarried all the capsicum from this asteroid and moved on to another.

You may wonder why I, a senior inter-stellar pilot, was on the bridge, to use the term loosely, of a small, ragged and rather disreputable mining transport. The thing is this, when you join a very large transport firm you don't always realise the sub-divisions within the company. So, when I quarrelled with the Assistant Vice President for Human Resource Transfreight I hadn't realised that the organisation included within its extensive group of companies several mining operations or that I would be “temporarily” assigned to the least inviting of them pending “review”. The details of the “review” had not been made available to me but I was given to understand that it boiled down to a grovelling formal apology on my part. Another month or two of this and I would be submitting such an apology. It was already half written and needed only a further swallowing of my pride to complete and send. Whilst the mining assignment was interesting for the first three or possibly even four days it had palled and my bank balance wasn't quite as healthy as it had been; inter-stellar pilots being paid a magnitude or so more than local mining pilots.

“Hey pal” on the radio

“Are you attempting to communicate with the bridge?” I replied

“Course I fucking am” came the reply, inevitably.

“Then say so in accordance with protocol” I replied primly. “State who you are and who you are trying to contact”

“Yeah yeah space cadet” the voice said with a total lack of interest. “We've started scratching the surface but theres a problem with the quantum digger. Thought you might like to know.”

“What is the nature of the problem?” I responded, flicking the recorder to Active so that there would be a record of this.

“Tino reckons there a mismatch in the quark seperator. The capsicum isn't liquidising enough.”

“Can Tino fix it?” I said.

“He reckons he can but he'll need the spare annodiser and some more agnate rods.”

I sighed. This would mean I'd have to suit up and bring the stuff out to them. Beneath my dignity but not a difficult task. On the big passenger routes there were always gophers for this kind of thing but the miners were always undercrewed to save money. Worse, it would add time to the job and mean I'd get the blame when we returned to base. I'd probably be charged for the spares as well.

“OK, I'll come out. How many rods should I bring?”

“Tino reckons 3 should be enough so bring 4 just in case.”

“OK, will do. Be there in 10”.

I disengaged my seat and crawled through the hatch into the suiting room. Checking my suit I found that there was enough air for at least an hour so I moved on through to the storeroom and found the annodiser and four agnate rods and loaded them onto a truck. I then returned to the suiting room and levered myself into my suit. The

rules called for someone else to check my seals but I was alone on the miner so I hoped the seals were all intact. Finally I returned to the truck and drove it into the airlock.

“When I get back to the miner I am definitely going to finish that apology and send it” I thought grimly to myself. “I really can't be bothered with this crap.”

(36 min, 704 words)

The words clearly drive this one. After a quarrel the pilot is assigned to a low grade quarrying job. It more or less had to be a SciFi to get the 'quark' in. My wife quite liked this one; I think she could identify me in it, not as a pilot but as someone who refuses to back down and apologise.

Day 46 ~ 14th February 2019 Words: Xebec, Xenon, Xenophobia

In the period before his A-Levels, Brian told anyone who asked what he planned to do that he planned to take a gap year before university and spend it scuba diving in the Arabian Gulf. This usually caused a brief period of contemplation on the questioner's part before they asked the inevitable question ...

“Why the Arabian Gulf?”

To which Brian had his answer off pat

“Because I love to watch the xebecs sailing in the sunset.”

Most at this point would say something like “Oh yes” and change the subject. Which was just as well since Brian only knew the dictionary definition of a xebec, had never seen one and had no idea what they looked like. Brian had made up this reply because he wanted to seem worldly and in command of his destiny but the reality was that he was a little xenophobic and would never in a million years go anywhere near the Middle East. He didn't even like going to Calais on his family's occasional shopping trips.

Those who chose to continue the conversation but on a different subject usually asked what he planned to study at university. Brian had a reply ready for that question too. He intended to study chemistry because he was intrigued by the noble gases and in particular the use of xenon in anaesthesia. This generally killed off any further questions which was, of course, the whole idea. In reality, Brian had no idea what he was going to do after his A-Levels but he knew he didn't want to go abroad and he didn't want to go to university. It's just that these things were expected of him and until he had some better ideas he had to play along but in a way that discouraged probing enquiries.

This made it quite ironic that, shortly after his last exam, Brian's father brought a guest home for dinner. The guest was an occasional customer of the company for which his father was a senior salesman and there was a reasonable chance that he would become a major customer. Brian's father worked for an arms company and Saudi Arabia is always in the market for arms. Amir Abbas was intrigued to

hear that Brian loved to watch the xebecs and went on at some length about the beauty of the three triangular sails outlined against the setting sun and the dangers faced by commercial tankers from xebecs as they headed to or from the Kuwaiti oil fields. Amir Abbas also extolled the virtues of his cousin Khalid who ran a scuba diving school, amongst other things, in Bahrain who would be most privileged and delighted to equip and guide Brian for the best diving experiences the Gulf could offer. Amir Abbas also implied subtly that Brian could be introduced to a variety of young Saudi ladies who would be equally if not more delighted to make his experience as enjoyable as any experience on earth could be.

Brian pricked up his ears at this. Although he was 18 and liked to think he was sophisticated he had little experience of girls and a consuming interest in dramatically expanding that experience. Sensing that this could be a means of increasing the likelihood of a sale to the Saudis, Brian's father encouraged Brian to talk more about his ambitions so Brian rolled out his second standard answer. Amir Abbas expressed great interest in the sciences and was most efusive about Saudi Arabia's great and continuing need for skilled chemical engineers for the vast array of infrastructure and military projects his country was planning for the future.

Brian went to bed that night thinking about beautiful arab girls and chemistry and how cool his new friend was. Amir Abbas, however, laughed all the way back to his hotel and contemplated how foolish and transparent the British were.

(40 min, 646 words)

Knowing nothing of Arabia, I decided to bring in 'xebecs' using another Englishman who knew nothing of Arabia. This is probably very nasty stereotyping but I associate Saudi Arabia with oil and arms dealing.

Day 47 ~ 15th February 2019 Words: Petulant, Petunia, Pew
(written 16th February)

Harsh.

That was the only real way to describe it.

The street was harsh.

Four and five story buildings lined the street on both sides. The buildings were old and run down. They were grimy. The windows were either blocked up with pieces of old blanket or were thick with the industrial grime of decades of neglect. What paint still existed on the frames was discoloured and peeling. Doors sagged. Rubbish piled the tiny front yards and doorways and spilled into the street. The smells were undescrivable and not in any way pleasant. The recent rain had soaked everything and dirty pools of water lay dotted around. Many years ago this street had had an air of decay. The decay was now an air of desolation and advanced rot. I saw a couple of rats feeding from a pile of decomposing food scraps. I saw a sleek well-fed cat watching the rats with desultory interest. Clearly the pickings were good.

I wanted to return to my car but money, as always, won out. “Go get some shots of urban decay” my editor had said. So, here I was, camera in hand and urban decay at the ready. What I particularly wanted was to juxtapose the wealth and vitality of the main street with the decay of this street, which joined it in a T-junction, in a single image but at the moment I couldn't see an easy way to do it. I felt it would be a “significant statement of the chasm between the haves and the have-nots” but that wasn't really as big a deal as it used to be. After all, it's a well worn theme these days. Maybe if I was lucky I'd get a nice gory shot of rats eating the dead body of a child but that would probably be too shocking for my employer's website although I could probably sell it somewhere else. Or maybe not. Some would simply claim that I'd manipulated the image. Photography wasn't as reputable a profession as it used to be.

I set off down the street taking pictures as I went. Most wouldn't ever be used but you need a lot of shots so that one or two can be chosen.

Take one picture and it almost certainly won't get bought. Take a hundred and one will almost certainly be bought. Sime economics really. Maybe it'll be the shots of the general street that catch the editor's attention. Maybe it'll be the portraits of individuals or groups in the street or in doorways or in ratty old cars that'll do it. Maybe the bedraggled hooker wishing she'd brought an umbrella with her or maybe the dead dog in the gutter, no doubt hit by a car. Who knows what catches editors eyes or even what goes on inside their minds. I press on, ignoring the occasional suspicious look but ever mindfull in case that look becomes an action. I'd been assaulted before, a couple of times, while out taking photographs. Not everyone wants their picture taken especially if they're doing something they don't generally want to be known. Hopefully I'll get a saleable picture this afternoon. I really don't want to come back in the middle of the night.

About a third of the way down the street there is a bend. As I go round the bend I see a house thats not in as bad a condition as the others. Its almost habitable. Interestingly the front yard, which is perhaps a metre wide between a low brick wall and the wall of the house, is free of rubbish and broken furniture and rusting car parts. Its a riot of colour, mostly, I think although I'm not an expert, petunias. A mass of purple, white, red and blue flowers that look just plain cheerful. Total incongruous in this area.

There's an elderly woman kneeing on the pavement, leaning over the wall. She is weeding the flower bed. I'm fascinated by this image amongst all the decay and its several seconds before I think to take a picture. I step back a little to frame the woman and her garden so as to include parts of the street around her. At the sound of my camera's clicking she glances up petulantly. Clearly there is nothing wrong with her hearing.

"Hello" I say conversationally. She just looks at me.

"I'm impressed by your beautiful flowers." I say. "Could I have a chat with you about what its like growing flowers like this in this street?"

She slowly gets to her feet, and just gazes at me, like I'm a martian.

"I mean, your garden is such a contrast to the other gardens around

here. It must be a real challenge to keep it like that.” I’m not really sure what to say but feel I have to keep going.

“Aye, it isn’t easy” she says after deciding I’m probably just a simpleton and not a martian after all. “Takes a lot of effort.” She pauses and I wonder how to continue.

She makes it easy for me. “You’d better come inside then and take a pew if you want to chat. I’ll put the kettle on.”

As I follow her inside, it struck me that maybe I’d found my urban decay story.

(36 min, 887 words)

It was 'petunia' that drove this one. I didn't want to describe a summer garden or anything like that so I went for contrast and something gritty. I think it works quite well and the story of the lady could well be a fascinating one, only I doubt I'll be the one to write it.

Day 48 ~ 16th February 2019 Words: Star-anise, Starboard, Starburst (written 17th February)

“Here's a little know fact for you”, I said. “Star anise is one of the spices used in Chinese Five Spice.”

Karen gazed at me for a moment then asked “What are the other four?”

“I was afraid you'd ask that,” I replied. “I have no idea” and laughed.

“I'll look it up” she said, reaching for her phone. Then “There's no signal, bugger”.

She leaned back against the side of the boat and it wobbled slightly. Neither of us were sailors but we'd thought it would be cool to hire a small boat for the evening so we could watch the New Year's Eve fireworks from the lake and have a romantic little picnic together. We clinked wine glasses and gazed into each other's eyes.

“What's that off to starboard?” I said, breaking the moment and looking off to the left.

“Isn't that port?” she said, screwing her face a little in thought.

“I think starboard is to the left.”

“Isn't it based on the boat not you? So it would be the boat's left not yours”

“And I've got my right and left mixed up again. One day I'll get them sorted.”

“Right is this side and left is that side.” said Karen.

“I know that intellectually, but it escapes me when I when I react to things.” I replied. “If I have time to think about it I usually get it right because I'm right handed so I just need to remember which hand I do things with.”

I know a lot of words but I don't always know what they mean, like port and starboard. Karen, on the other hand, knows a lot of things but doesn't know what they're called. We have a lot of conversations like this one. They're usually fun and we enjoy talking with each other and it's rare that tempers flare, although they do occasionally as we are both human.

(19 min, 329 words)

Don't forget that at this point I was still secretly writing these little stories and not even my wife knew. She came back from wherever she'd been while I was in the middle of this so I abandoned it hastily and never got back to it. I don't think Literature lost out. It's a nothing in particular story that was going nowhere. It was also delayed because the previous day was a Saturday and my wife hadn't gone out anywhere or even taken a nap so I couldn't write at all that day.

Day 49 ~ 17th February 2019 Words: Jaundice, Jaunt, Java

“You know, I really think I should see the doctor”, said Purvis. “I woke up this morning feeling decidedly under the weather. I had to have two extra slices of toast with Mrs Adams 'strordinarily good strawberry jam on them as well as an extra cup of tea.”

“Yes”, I agreed. “You do look a little pale.”

Purvis leapt up with surprising agility and marched to the mirror and started inspecting his tongue. “D'you suppose its a touch of the ague?” he asked with his tongue stuck out.

“I'd say you were looking a little liverish old chap”, chimed in Chumley. “Perhaps you've got a touch of jaundice.”

Purvis composed his face into an expression of illness and agreed dejectedly.

I took the opportunity with both hands and said “In my humble opinion Purvis my lad, you should spend the day in bed and see how you feel tomorrow. Our little jaunt to Southend-on-Sea can wait.”

If truth be known, I didn't particularly want to visit Southend-on-Sea. Piers and amusement parks are all very well but Southend-on-Sea is remarkably close to the sea and I've never been overly fond of the outdoors at the best of times and particularly not if it involved picnicing or other such nonsense. I'd only agreed because it seemed a trifle churlish of me when both Purvis and Chumley had been so enthusiastic. I'd also come across an uncommonly good book at Denkins Book Store in the Charing Cross Road yesterday and would welcome the opportunity to get engrossed in it. It was about foreign spies on the Afghan border and promised to be a thumping good read.

“Thats not a bad idea” said Chumley. “Spend the day in bed, skip luncheon and have a really good dinner and a refreshing night's sleep and see how you feel in the morning. Best to delays exercise and the like unless you are really feeling up to it.”

“Has Mrs Adams given any clues about dinner?” said Purvis hopefully.

“I think she's planing stewed steak with onions and potatoes followed by apple tart and custard” said Chumley.

“Ahh, stewed steak and potatoes” said Purvis. “Apple tart and custard. Now that sounds like a fine restorative dinner. Yes, I'm sure that a dinner like that followed by a damned good sleep will set me up beautifully for our jaunt. Capital.”

With that he marched off to bed.

“I think he missed the part about skipping luncheon” I commented to Chumley with a slight smile. “No doubt we'll see him again around lunchtime.”

Chumley laughed and lit a cigarette. We sat in companionable silence for a minute or two.

“I've got to go to Harrods in the next few days” he said, apros pos of nothing.

“Is this for your expedition to Java?” I asked.

“Yes” he said. “The University has approved my trip and has agreed to partially fund it. Jessop is writing to the Royal Society to see if they will contribute as well.”

“Oh I say thats spendid”, I replied as enthusiastically as I could. “What do you need from Harrods?”

“Oh mostly tropical clothing, tents, cooking equipment and so on” he replied. “Also a damned good compass and some rifles. The real problem is finding someone to accompany me. I'll have lots of local bearers and interpreters but I need someone reliable to be my assistant. Someone British.”

“Is there no one from the University who'd like to go? Or perhaps the Royal Society or the Geographical Society?”

“Only Maltravers has come forward so far and I can't say I like the cut of his jib” said Chumley. “I really would prefer someone I could talk to, who has a like mind. The evenings can get rather long under canvas and a good chin wag is a decidedly good way to pass the time.”

He paused while he stubbed out his cigarette, then his face lit up.

“I say, old man, I don't suppose you'd like to go to Java with me? I know how much you love a good outdoor adventure.”

(35 min, 693 words)

Jaunt' and 'Java' brought the idea of a jaunt to java to my mind – I was definitely getting more creative! – and 'jaundiced' brought to mind the opening scene of a movie I'd seen called Three Men In A Boat. In the movie the three men are sitting in a room trying to outdo each other with their various ailments and decide to take a boat up the River Thames. I just modified the idea to go on a jaunt to Java instead.

Day 50 ~ 18th February 2019 Words: Yodel, Yoga, Yogi

I work for an internet data tracking company which thinks of itself as trendy and radical. Always bad news when a company thinks its radical, especially as I am now of an age where I no longer think of myself as trendy or radical. Not that I ever did really. I work in data analysis with very large databases which tends to put me on a trendiness level around that of accountants and actuaries and since most people in the company work in data analysis you get the general idea.

To give you an idea of the trendy and radical thinking that goes on here, management last year introduced the radically trendy idea of unlimited annual leave. Well, you have to admit that the idea of taking as many days off work as you want is pretty radical. But given that most people here never managed to use all the 25 days a year they were entitled to and the caveat that you could have all the time off you wanted provided the work was done meant that it actually made no difference. In the 18 months since it was introduced, the number of days leave taken has actually dropped slightly. The only real benefit has been that you can now take a day off sick without having to worry about certificates. Another thing they tried was free massages at work. A radical attempt at improving staff mental and physical health which also didn't work. Hardly anyone liked the idea of stripping down to their undies and being pummelled when they were trying to deal with their work. Massages are a great way to destress after work but perhaps not so much in the middle of it.

Something that is going to start next week is yoga at work. The idea is that everyone starts their working day with a 20 minute yoga session to increase their mindfulness and focus on the day's tasks. They've even arranged for an Indian yogi to lead the sessions. I'm sure it will be very successful but I don't know how my knees are going to cope with the lotus position given that I'm middle aged, have never been activity orientated and eat too much of the wrong kinds of foods. Oh, I forgot to mention that the yoga sessions will be compulsory. Still, I'm sure the additional mindfulness and focus will mean the day's tasks will be completed 20 minutes faster so no one has to stay later than normal to get their work done. It's unclear whether anyone who finishes their work even faster will be allowed to go earlier but since

we can all take unlimited leave I'm sure it work work out beautifully. Just the thought of yoga sessions is making my outlook more positive. Or is that positive outlook caused by the notification I received in today's email about a job interview with another company? Who can say. Certainly my mindfulness has increased significantly since the announcement was circulated.

About a month ago management requested ideas from staff – trendy and radical ones of course – on how to improve staff welfare and productivity. My own suggestion is, no doubt, still being given the consideration and investigation it deserves. My idea was to have regular breaks throughout the days for group yodelling sessions. The justification being that it would help with breathing, calming stressed nerves and strengthening the vocal chords thereby enabling staff to be more productive at meetings. Rather than sitting in silence, more people would be encouraged to voice their opinions, ideally in a melodic and dramatic way. Also, by carefully choosing the groups staff would be encouraged to cross-communicate and thereby break down traditional departmental barriers. No doubt this will be introduced after I've found a new job. One with firmly traditionalist attitudes such as paying me well for doing a good job.

(34 min, 647 words)

For some reason I focused on 'yoga' for this one and I had read in the newspaper earlier that day that an increasing number of companies were introducing things at work to “enhance the employee experience”. When I was working my view was always along the lines of: I'm here to do the job I'm paid to do so if you want me to do morale-building or whatever, can I go home instead? This story reflects that view. It probably doesn't come as a surprise that I got retrenched (a new word for redundant when redundant became a dirty word) from my last 'proper' job. It was in IT incidentally.

Day 51 ~ 19th February 2019 Words: Curvy, Cushion, Cushy
(written 20th February)

Date: 19.02.2019

Time: 09.45

To: <Darren Hinchcliffe>darrenh@4starfurniture.com.au

From: <Rachel Madding>rachelm@4starfurniture.com.au

Subject: Codeword Krypton - design update 3

Hi Darren

I spoke with Kristen yesterday regarding the Krypton suite designs and attach her sketches based on the two initial design proposals - labelled Blue and Green - selected by KD and VM last week. I also attach preliminary costings for the manufacture of each. Could you get them prettied up into some artwork and start the market research so we can get a preliminary idea of likely market acceptance for each. KD has set a deadline of 15 March for the final decision for production.

Regards

Rachel

Mine is a pretty cushy job. I "liase". Thats all. I don't really do anything other than act as a conduit between other people and aid their communication. It rarely takes much effort although I do have to stay organised. Its only when there is a serious falling out that I need to work hard. Which is, of course, why I was hired in the first place. There had been a major major fight between two designers and the deputy head of production which have expanded to include two or three people in accounts and most of the sales staff and a flat refusal by the designers to ever talk to production again. As the designers were arguably the best designers in the furniture world it was important that they were put back in communication with the rest of the company as quickly as possible, especially before either quit - which they had both threatened to do. Fortunately, I'm told, both did agree to talking to "an independent" which is where I came in.

Having met the two designers I can attest that they are both big-headed and petulant divas but of course I'll never tell anyone that, least of all them. Having met the deputy head of production I can also attest that he is a narrow-minded and boarish technician with the social skills of a, well, a boar. But he's good at his job which is getting furniture produced on time and at minimum cost. Fortunately I am a relaxed, happy sort of person with nothing invested in either design or production so I am generally able to jolly them all along and, so far, after 18 months or so there have been no major ructions and things are rubbing along swimmingly.

It all started when Kristen produced a design for a reclining chair. The chair was intended to be ultra-comfortable and would sell for an appropriately luxurion price. Darren looked at the preliminary designs and declared that the upholstery generally and the back cushion in particular were too curvy and consequently the manufacturing process would be complex and costly. Oh my word did the feathers fly! There were meetings which ended in shouting matches and fairly obscene emails and eventually Leslie the other designer produced a final design where the cushions were so extremely curvy that there was no possibility of any human actually being able to sit in the chair and both of them refused to do any further work on it. Multiple threats of resignations on both sides had emanated and after several weeks the company was in deadlock.

Still, I managed to sooth ruffled feathers and slowly persuaded everyone back into a fairly tense but workable environment.

(36 min, 559 words)

I missed a day because my laptop was having problems and I spent a fair amount of time reinstalling things and generally farting about so I suppose it was inevitable I'd start this story with an email. The dictionary gave me three words that all suggested comfy furniture so I set the story in a furniture making business. I suspect my cynicism of the business world shows through in this one too. It isn't a good story. I'm not entirely convinced it even is a story.

Day 52 ~ 20th February 2019 Words: Pulse, Pulverise, Puma

I don't know why but the word "puma" has taken on several meanings. One is used to refer to a woman in her 30s who likes younger men. I'm guessing that puma is supposed to signify someone who is not yet old enough to be a "cougar" although why an older woman looking for young men is called a cougar I'll never know. Another meaning of puma is a face that's been scrunched up just as a photo is being taken. Why? God knows.

Anyway, the reason I'm ruminating on pumas in my blog today is because I want to talk about my cat which I haven't seen for 3 or 4 days. She's 3 years old and pure black – which means she is nothing like a puma since pumas are brown to grey. She is more like a miniature jaguar.

The essential point here is that it is mid-summer here in Australia and we have been having unusually hot weather. Since it's normally hot in summer in Australia, unusually hot means very hot. So hot that the local creek has dried up and the rats that normally live peacefully by the creek have been moving further afield to find water. My house is something like 200m from the creek but it does have a slightly leaky outdoor tap which drips. And attracts rats.

Suri, my cat, is rather partial to fresh meat. Not fresh meat from the butcher or supermarket though. I mean meat that is so fresh it has a pulse. I've barely seen her for the last few days. In the evenings I sit and mind my own business getting on with updating my blog or planning photo sessions or whatever else has captured my interest that day and, apart from the occasional car passing by there is very little noise. The last few days though I've heard a fair amount of scabbling coming from inside the walls which generally means the rats have arrived.

Suri is spending her time under the house as well. She lies in wait under the house and chases the rats. At least that's what I imagine as I haven't been under the house myself to see what's going on. I do however hear the rustles and scratchings of rats going about their business interspersed every now and then by the sounds of rodent panic and occasionally something falling over such as a tile or piece of

metal. There's a lot of crap under the house too, I ought to mention. Some previous owner dumped a fair amount of building left-overs under the house at some point and no subsequent owner has ever bothers to clean it out. So, I'm guessing that Suri waits patiently for a rat to relax and then pounces, knocking things over in the chase. Certainly things go very quiet after that so I'm guessing that she catches the occasional rat and pulverises it. I have seen her with a freshly caught mouse or rat before and her usual pattern is to carry it around for a while, meowing to let me know how skilled she is then eating only a part of it.

Once, a couple of years ago, I picked up what I thought was a twig on the floor but it turned out to be a rat's tail. All that was left of the thing. Usually I find almost entire victim lying around the house somewhere with just a small part missing, such as its head or hindquarters. To cut a long story short, I've not seen Suri for 3 or 4 days, except very briefly earlier today when she dropped home for a light snack of cat biscuit and a drink. This makes me think that she's on an extended hunt as normally she is always back in the early evening for her dinner and in the early morning for her sleep on my bed – unless its cold in which case she stays on the bed all day.

When she turned up today, she was literally only around for long enough to have a couple of mouthfuls and I could see the cobwebs accumulated on her tail – a sign she'd been under the house.

Anyway, people, thats all for my blog today. I'll get back to photography in my next blog which could well be about how to set up a remote camera for photographing in very low light underneath a house. A cat on the hunt is always a good photo and its good to be reminded every now and then that all those ultra cute little cuddly kittens that litter the net often grow up to be ultra efficient and conscience-free killers. Something we can all aspire to!

(32 min, 789 words)

I wrote this in the late evening and you can probably tell that I had no initial ideas so I focused on puma which led me into my cat because, as I was writing, I could hear scrabbling noises underneath the house. What makes this story significant for me is that the next morning the cat limped

home on three legs having broken one of her back legs. She now has a metal plate holding her leg together. I'm intrigued that I wrote a story about her at roughly the same time she got injured.

Day 53 ~ 21st February 2019 Words: Rich, Richter Scale, Ricin

I've wanted to go to Kenya for a number of years. Since I was a child. I grew up with stories of how my great grandfather (well, one of them anyway) went to Kenya as a young man to seek his fame and fortune and found a small fortune but no fame. He did find time to marry and have a child which led indirectly to me.

I haven't inherited my great grandfather's sense of adventure nor his courage although I also didn't grow up in the poverty he did. If I had then maybe I would have been motivated to risk everything, which by all accounts wasn't much, on a gamble in a far flung and unknown part of the world.

I am an accountant. The archetypal mild mannered, number cruncher although bean counter would be perhaps a more apt simile. I grew up in archetypal middle class security in south London with nothing more to worry about than how to get out of playing football at school – I dislike sports. My parents were comfortably off, never divorced and rarely argued. I was never mistreated, except by the other football players, and got on well with my brother and sister. Nothing dramatic ever happened to me, nothing that would scar my mind for life or leave indelible traces in aberrant behaviour. I was and still am ordinary.

My great grandfather, on the other hand, grew up in a Glasgow slum in poverty. What little money was earned by his father went down his throat and such things as food and rent were obtained by his mother's occasional dalliances with other men. I don't know how many brothers and sisters he had as the number changes depending on who was telling me the story. In any event, my great grandfather decided at the age of 16 to run away from home – not that he was at home much by that stage anyway – and go to Africa. That he got to Africa by ship is fairly obvious as there was no other way of getting there at the time but the accounts of how vary wildly. I've been told he stowed-away and liven on stolen scraps, that he got a lowly job on a ship, that he was the first mate's bum boy for the trip and more tales besides.

Where he landed in Africa also varies with the telling. Some say he trekked alone across the Sahara, others that he sailed down the Nile.

Its probably best to make up your own romantic tale since everyone else has. What is certain is that he arrived in Kenya around 3 years after departing sunny Glasgow in the company of another man who had sufficient funds to buy a property in the foothills and together they decided to grow castor in order to harvest the beans to make castor oil. Why they didn't choose coffee no one knows. Obviously the man with the money was the owner of the plantation and my great grandfather was the plantation manager. Where he acquired the skills for that job is anyone's guess since it is widely held that he was functionally illiterate when he left Glasgow having been to school for perhaps 3 months. A fact he seems not to have acquired is that the husks of the castor bean contains ricin and ricin is apparently one of the most toxic plant based substances in the world. And, somewhat inevitably, having handled the husks of the beans for a number of years he eventually died at the grand old age of 28 leaving a native Kenyan woman as his widow and a half caste boy as his heir.

No one knows what happened to my great grandmother. She remains as a misty sideline in tales of our family ancestry. No one now alive knows her name and it isn't even certain that they married. Their son, my grandfather, was named Nigel. He may have had a Kenyan name as well but that is long lost as well. Nigel did not inherit his father's business as his father did not own the business but his father had acquired some wealth and, while not rich, left that money to his son. When my great grandfather died he was simply replaced as manager. At some point Nigel moved to Egypt where he ran a small export business to France, which failed after a number of years and when he was in his forties he married a French woman and moved to France where he invested in a chicken farm. Their daughter married an Englishman and moved to London where I was born. And, as you can see, where I still am. The adventurous gene in the family having disappeared.

(37 min, 793 words)

Apparently 'ricin' is a highly toxic substance found in the husks of the castor bean – from which castor oil is made. It seemed to me that this would be well known now so a story involving ricin would have to be set some while ago so I wrote about a lad who ran away to make his fortune on an African plantation.

The only noteworthy thing about this story is that I didn't use my three words. I got two of the words in and I had Nigel move to Egypt in order to be involved in an earthquake so I could bring in the Richter Scale but I completely forgot to actually mention it. Does this mean that the words are starting to take a back seat to the story?

Day 54 ~ 22nd February 2019 Words: Rupiah, Rupture, Rural

I remember we met on a spring day and I was annoyed with something and took it out on you and I saw your look of pain and we had coconut milk and laughed for what seemed liked days although it was probably only for a few minutes and you took me to a park and paid a man a few rupiahs for some flowers and spread them on the ground at my feet and we laughed some more and the horse ate my hat and we laughed at that and the blossoms were out and the park was all colour and you said that this place was a land of jungles and the taxi man said we would rupture ourselves if we laughed any more and that made us laugh and we fell in love in a blaze of flowers and laughter and soft kisses and the rural villages that sparkled in the rain and the warmth of the sun and the spicy foods that made me burp and we laughed at that too and splashed in the puddles and swam in the rivers and made love in soft beds and crumpled the sheets and fought over the pillows and laughed at ourselves in the mirror and I remember your mother smiling beautifully at me and your father smoking his pipe and some puppies played at my feet and you braided my hair with blossoms and we made love on the beach and I cried when my hat blew away and you laughed at me crying and you bought me another and made me happy and you took my photograph and we watched the sunset and I tried to drink tuak and you held me in your arms and I felt safe and we laughed for the joy of laughing and we loved for the joy of loving and watched beetles in the sand and ate ice cream and I slept in your arms and your eyes adored me and laughed at your love and loved you laughing and we danced together in the warm evening rain and the shadows and I remember our bicycles and you found an old bookshop and I remember cradling your head in my arms at the end and I remember I haven't laughed since.

(30 min, 381 words)

I have no idea where this story came from but I think it is brilliant. I had decided earlier that day to try to do something experimental without punctuation if the three words allowed it. When the dictionary gave me 'rupiah' it launched me straight into the love affair of a holiday maker in Indonesia but how it turned into a breathless memory I don't know. I apologise for such a brutal ending but my time was up and I had no idea how to end it so I killed him. I cried when I finished writing this as I got

so into the joy of her love story that his death was a nasty shock to me as well even though I did it and I've cried every time I read it. I've written better stories since but nothing remotely as powerful and evocatively emotional as this.

Day 55 ~ 23rd February 2019 Words: Lobby, Lobe, Lobelia

The man stood and gazed at the rack of tourist leaflets on the wall. They were neatly arranged and some were even enticing with their cover photographs of boats on sunny beaches and tasteful local buildings. He scanned them and reached out to touch a couple but didn't pick any up. He was an unremarkable man. Middle aged, plain trousers, a loose but plain shirt and sunglasses resting on top of his balding head. He looked perhaps a little fitter than most middle aged men did but not enough to remark on. He sighed gently, picked up a suitcase and turned and approached the reception desk.

"I have a reservation" he said quietly to the woman who smiled quizzically at him. "The name is Smith, John Smith."

The woman's smile changed slightly. Her smile was no longer quizzical but professionally welcoming. She directed her gaze to the computer screen and her hands flew with practiced skill over the keyboard.

"Ah yes, Mr Smith. You will be with us for three nights?" She looked at him expectantly.

"Yes that's right", Mr Smith replied.

"Can I have a credit card or passport?" the woman asked politely.

Mr Smith pulled a wallet from his hip pocket and fumbled through it to pull out a plastic card and handed it over.

"If I could ask you to fill out a few details on this form." the woman said, taking his card and sliding over a piece of paper and a pen with practiced synchronicity.

Mr Smith complied while the woman's hands flew over the keyboard once again. She then placed the card on the counter, retrieved the form and slid another card inside a cardboard folder. She handed Mr Smith the folder and said authoritatively "Yours is room 419 which is on the fourth floor. The lifts are just to our right. Do you want assistance with your luggage?"

“No”, said Mr Smith. “I’m fine thanks”. He started to turn then turned back. “Do you have any leaflets about the Castle? I plan to visit it tomorrow and I couldn’t see anything in the rack over there.”

The woman thought for a moment then bustled into a back room and returned after a moment with two leaflets about the Castle in her hand which she gave to Mr Smith with a smile. He took them and thanked her.

“Nice flowers” he said, gesturing towards the pot of lobelias further along the counter. He picked up his case and headed towards the lifts.

After a few moments lift descended to the lobby and he got in, pressing the button for the fourth floor. Once in his room, Mr Smith noted the modernist styling and deduced after a few moments of experiment that the right lobe of the strange, triple-partitioned disk above the single bed turned on the main lighting. He opened his case on the bed and withdrew a few items of clothing which he placed in one of the drawers of the small chest of drawers inside the closet. He then retrieved a small pistol and a box of bullets and placed them on the top shelf of the closet, out of sight.

“Yes”, he said to himself. “A pleasant tour of the Castle tomorrow and on Friday I’m working.”

(35 min, 554 words)

A simple story of a professional assassin arriving at his hotel to do a job. 'Lobe' caused me a problem as I didn't want anything as blatantly obvious as "he scratched the lobe of his ear". I wanted to be cleverer than that. Why an assassin? I don't know but perhaps death, and my role in it, was unconsciously on my mind after yesterday's story.

Day 56 ~ 24th February 2019 Words: Swampland, Swan, Swank

“Moribund is a superb word” Captain Hillier said outloud.

“Moribund” he said again, rolling the word richly around his tongue.

“This buggy is moribund”.

“Oh I think there's a little more life in it yet” said Mr Epstein. “I'm sure its good for another two or three trips.

“Hmmm” replied the Captain, “you seriously think we can swan around in it much longer? We need to replace it. Get a new one.”

“How?” asked Mr Epstein. “You're not in the army anymore you know. You can't just commandeer whatever you want. Round here you have to pay for things, with real money, and we don't have anywhere near enough.”

The Captain replapsed into silence. He had been a career soldier and regarded swampland as something the navy was best equipped to deal with.

“I know a chap not too far away who could probably machine the axle for us not too expensively.” said Mr Epstein. “Shall I give him a call?”

The Captain remained silent. He vastly preferred order, ample resources and a clearly defined chain of command. This kind of operation was more the field of special ops and living on the run.

Mr Epstein gazed at him for a few moments then pulled out his mobile phone and left the room.

An hour later the buggy was on the back of a tow truck and on its way to Mr Epstein's friend. Mr Epstein was following on his noisy little 125cc dirt bike. The Captain was still in the room. Sitting at a small table and ruminating on the vissitudes of his life since leaving the army. He'd imagined that this business would be a swanky up-market enterprise that would provide him with a sense of purpose and the respect of the local community. Instead it had become a rather sad and run-down operation and its prospects did not seem to be optimistic. Without the buggy it had no future at all. Who would want

to go on a guided tour of the Florida swamplands if they had to walk? Particularly if they were tracking alligators and crocodiles. Its all very well photographing the beasts but it certainly helped to have a fast getaway if they decided not to cooperate.

“Moribund” he said to himself. “The buggy is moribund, the business is moribund and I am moribund.”

He poured himself a scotch and contemplated its amber colour.

“No, this is not the way” he said aloud. “This is not the military way. Reconoitre the situation, devise a plan and implement the plan, thats how to do it. No sense in getting downhearted. I need to get good intelligence and devise a workable plan to secure the key objective.”

(28 min, 457 words)

I wrote a note at the end of this one. “I couldn’t get into this one today. I’m feeling tired and run down.” Which, I think. pretty much sums it up.

Day 57 ~ 25th February 2019 Words: Category, Catenary, Cater

I was wondering just recently what the shape of a cable strung between the earth and a geosynchronous satellite would be. Generally if you suspend a cable between two fixed points and let it hang its shape would be a catenary – which is actually what the definition of a catenary is. Since a geosynchronous satellite is a fixed point relative to the earth, you would think the cable would form a catenary but that's wrong. It's because gravity is in the wrong place. With a “normal” cable gravity is acting at right angles to the cable whereas with the geosynchronous satellite gravity is acting parallel to the cable so it would be straight. Or would it? In reality there would be air resistance along some part of the cable and inertia would also come into play. So the cable wouldn't be straight. I eventually decided that the cable would form a skewed catenary since the air resistance would be stronger nearer the earth and weaker nearer the satellite although the gravity nearer the satellite would also be weaker making the cable up there less resistant to air resistance. It's a tricky one and I don't have the maths to calculate it which is sad really since I'm a maths teacher.

Of course maths teachers come in a variety of categories. Some of us teach low level maths to low level students whereas others teach high level maths to high level students. I teach at a fairly low level so despite having a Masters in maths I'm very out of practice with the higher realms of the subject although I'm pretty hot at the basics!

I more or less had to become a teacher as the only jobs for mathematicians are for those who work at the highest levels and I was never good enough for that. After my Masters I toyed with doing a Doctorate but frankly I knew that I simply wasn't clever enough. I could have become an accountant or something like that but it didn't appeal. Being young and idealistic I felt teaching had a social relevance. Now I'm old and cynical I just appreciate the long holidays. But here is the good thing – teaching as a profession caters for all types. So long as you have “the stare” you can handle just about any situation in teaching. What is “the stare”? It's the long look of indifferent semi-contempt that shuts up any troublemaker. Once you have developed it you don't even need the student to be looking at you. They can “feel” it. It took me a few years to perfect but it was worth it.

My real interest these days is amateur dramatics. I know I'm a bit stiff and wooden but it amuses me to play different roles on the stage. Recently my drama group put on a performance of *A Streetcar Named Desire* where I played the role of the hapless Harold 'Mitch' Mitchell, Blanche's suitor, who was played by Karl Malden in the movie. I was nowhere near as good as Karl was, of course, but I flatter myself by thinking I gave the role a certain pathos. I'm quite good at playing a pathetic person! Learning my lines helps fills my evenings since my wife died a few years ago. We used to talk a lot but of course that doesn't happen now. Which is rather a shame as when I have my strange ideas – such as the shape of the cable – I have to think it through alone rather than get a different perspective.

(33 min, 598 words)

I had no inspiration for this one. Obviously 'catenary' was the driving word but I couldn't think of how to make it a story so it peters out and I turn it into a story about a maths teacher and couldn't get anywhere with that either so it drifted off into amateur dramatics and ended with a half-hearted attempt at pathos. I'd say the flat feeling of the day before hadn't gone yet.

There was a duck on the mantelpiece. Not a real one of course. It was a carved wooden duck and it looked as though the neck and back of the duck came off like a lid so that smallish things could be stored inside. It was quite cute but somewhat incongruous as the other things on the mantelpiece were brass ornaments and the remote control for the air conditioner. Oh, and something that looked like a polished stone stylised tiger.

Imran noted these things because he was bored. Kelly was droning on as usual about the state of politics in this country and how we absolutely must stake out a revolutionary agenda to counter the propagandists in the name of the people. This was Imran's third group meeting and he suspected it would be his last. He was only there because Jessica said she was a member and he wanted very much to impress Jessica but she hadn't been there for any of the three meetings he'd attended. Imran was beginning to suspect that Jessica had been making fun of him. When he'd asked her out he was expecting dinner or perhaps the cinema not a revolutionary meeting.

Imran reached a decision. Although it was his nature to be excessively polite and to never cause offense he could no longer tolerate being in this meeting. It was an anathema to him as he was fairly content with the state of the political system. He leaned over a little and tapped Lawrence on the knee.

"I'm afraid I have to be going" he whispered. "I have to finish an essay for tomorrow. Would you give my apologies to Kelly?"

Jason nodded and Imran put down his whisky glass. He hadn't drunk any as he was teetotal but it had been forced upon him by one of the others whom he didn't know. He got up and edged his way to the door, giving Kelly a half-smile as he went. Kelly was so engrossed in her exposition that she didn't even glance his way.

Outside the air was cool and there was a light breeze. Imran glanced at his watch and saw it was still quite early. Should he go back to his digs or should he find something to do? Obviously there was no essay

to finish as Imran was a conscientious student and had finished the essay the previous day. Perhaps if he walked back to his room he might bump into Jessica, who lived on the way, assuming he went the long way back, and he could ask her why she hadn't been at any of the meetings. He might even find the courage to ask her to dinner or something that was specifically a date rather than the parody of these meetings. He marched decisively off into the night.

As he passed the Causeway Cafe Restaurant in Hewson Street he heard a familiar voice call out "Oh my ears and whiskers!". He turned and saw Sarah sitting at a table outside the cafe with a group of other students. Sarah was a somewhat eccentric physicist who was a devotee of Alice In Wonderland and could be relied upon to come up with arcane quotes from the book when surprised or excited. Imran found her rather scary and generally tried to avoid her but she was Jessica's roommate and he had to be polite.

(33 min, 566 words)

I tried harder with this one but it was a struggle and I couldn't really see anywhere to go with it. I've never been to a political meeting so I had no idea what goes on there or how people behave. Probably not a good choice for the basis of a story!

Day 59 ~ 27th February 2019 Words: Parsley, Parsnip, Parson
(written 28th February)

Imran realised that Sarah had not noticed him so presumably her exclamation had been about something else. She was sitting with 3 or 4 men who had a “science student” look about them and they were giggling conspiratorially. He stood next to Sarah, unsure quite what to say.

For a few moments no one noticed him then Sarah glanced up and exclaimed “Oh hello Imran, Jessica isn't here.” and burst into laughter.

Imran went red in the face and stammered a hallo.

“Oh don't be such a parsnip” said Sarah, grabbing his arm. “Sit down. We were discussing quantum superposition. How's the revolution coming along? Set a date yet?”

The whole group laughed as Imran found a seat.

“I've left the group”, he said quietly. “I'm not a revolutionary. I like things just the way they are.”

Sarah smiled sympatheticallyish. “Jessica was having you on. She has no more interest in politics than I do in medieval alchemy. She's a bitch and she'll lead you on for as long as you amuse her. Find someone better sunshine and stop pining after her. Have some wedges.”

There were a couple of bowls of wedges on the table which were not looking sad and depleted and the dishes of mayonnaise and spicy tomato sauce were virtually empty, save only their limp garnishes of parsley.

“What you've gotta understand”, continued Sarah, “is that Jessica, despite being a parson's daughter, is actually a racist little tart and you being a paki who has the hots for her hasn't got a chance in hell but she'll make you walk through fire before she's done. I've seen it before. Get yourself a girl who likes you before you get too badly hurt.”

The rest of the group laughed loudly but Imran was vaguely aware that it was about some joke one of them had made and they weren't laughing at him. At least he hoped not.

Imran gazed forlornly at the tomato sauce, feeling his face to be the same colour. He felt lifeless. It was once thing to have these thoughts himself and quite different to have someone else tell him so to his face.

“One of the astro-physics post docs is having a party later tonight, wanna come?” said Sarah, seeing the look on his face. “Let's see if we can get you pissed and laid!”

“Oh Sarah will get you laid alright!” exclaimed one of the physicists. Sarah glared at him and he turned away.

“Take no notice of him, he's a creep” said Sarah quietly. “Come on it'll do you good.” She put her hand on his arm and smiled encouragingly.

“Are you going?” said Imran.

“Of course I am” exclaimed Sarah. “I never pass up a free drink.”

Imran hesitated. He didn't want to go. He wanted to go home and nurse his self-pity alone.

Sarah suddenly stood up and knocked her stool over. It clattered to the ground breaking Imran out of his reverie. As he stood to retrieve the stool, Sarah grabbed his tie and started to march off, forcing Imran to follow her, stumbling and groping for the stool in confusion.

“You're going to the party even if you don't want to. Come on or I'll pull your head off.”

(33 min, 551 words)

Again my wife didn't absent herself so I couldn't do any secret writing. When I came to it the day after I decided to continue with Imran and see if I could make something of that story. On the positive side, this was my first attempt at a continuation so that deserves some credit at least.

Day 60 ~ 28th February 2019 Words: Bosun, Bot, Botanical

At three kilometres she was the longest ship ever built. She carried an official crew of 3, the captain, the bosun and the hand together with an unofficial complement of 2 cats, a dog and a couple of pigeons. Three humans weren't really needed to run the ship. They were mostly there for company. The ship was so highly automated that one person could run it indefinitely but humans had psychological issues with long term isolation. Of course, in an emergency, three crew members were also irrelevant. If it was more serious than one person could handle then they'd all be dead anyway. There was no possible way the ship could function without its automated systems.

It was argued that the ship should be fully automated. After all, if the crew's tasks consisted mainly of pushing buttons then a bot could easily push the buttons for them. However, after a brief debate it was decided that a human would be more likely to be diplomatic should the ship encounter intelligent life than the artificial intelligence systems although the AI would advise the captain.

This story is so dull I've lost interest in it myself so I'm abandoning it. My mind is boring today.

A much better story would be about a 21st century whaling ship – it has to be 21st century so I can get the word “bot” into it – that is hunting the last known whale in a world where climate change is causing major species extinctions. This would also, with a little thought allow the word “botanical” since plant species are going extinct too. The bosun would reflect on his life at sea and how the world has changed since he was a young lad on his first voyage. The story would reflect how mankind's selfishness and stupidity and greed led to a dying world.

It might even be an idea to do a story one day on a race of aliens who come across the Earth and deduce that the life that had once existed on it had destroyed itself through mismanagement. I'm not sure I'm up to writing a story like that. I'm only human and a dying one at that. Both the others were killed in a gas leak in storage hold 436 so I am alone on ISC 4 with, according to the automated life support management system, just under 180 days worth of life support

remaining. It will take about 400 days to return to Earth even if I could figure out how to override the mission management system. So, I spend my days writing stories no one will ever read and slowly going crazy.

(33 min, 444 words)

Another attempt at SciFi. This one is about a chap left alone on a space craft, too far away to be rescued and knowing his life support will fail long before there's any chance of rescue. Looking back on it now I wonder if it was a reflection of an inner voice of despair of my own. My wife didn't understand this story and couldn't see any point to it.

Day 61 ~ 1st March 2019 Words: Monolithic, Monologue, Monomania

“You're home early tonight” said Helga.

“Yes”, replied Gunther. “There were brownshirts congregating outside the factory so many of us decided to leave early. We thought there might be trouble.”

“Ah good. Better to be safe than sorry. Isn't Claus a jew? Maybe they were after him.”

“Mmm. Yes he's the only one left now, apart from the Steins who own the factory but no one has seen them for months. What's for dinner?”

“I found a small piece of pork at the market today so we're having pork and potato stew. With luck there will be enough for tomorrow as well in case you don't get paid again. By the way there is a big statue by the market gate now. A monolith of Der Fuhrer. Its only two blocks from the jewish quarter and it looks like he's looking over the wall at them. Its a little scary.”

“I suppose I'd better go and look at it tomorrow on my way to work. I don't want anyone reporting me. I'd going to wash.”

Gunter headed off to the bathroom unbuttoning his shirt as he went. Helga busied herself with the potatoes for the stew and put it on to boil.

Later, as they were eating, Helga said “We ought to go to the Bierkeller tonight. Elsa told me that Der Fuhrer is giving a monologue on the radio and we should be there to hear it. It will be interesting to see who isn't there. You remember Heinrich Bachmann wasn't at the broadcast last month? I heard he and his wife had the visit the very next night.”

“Don't they have two or three children?” said Gunther. “What happened to them?”

“I heard that they are being looked after by the Youth Corps at the

Town Orphanage. I'm sure they will be fine there. Anna told me the boy reported his parents so they will be well looked after. The Party needs good reliable citizens like that." said Helga. "Soon our own two boys will be old enough to join the Youth Corps and concentrate on the welfare of the State."

"Yes. Its good we have them to ensure we stay focussed" said Gunther. "The school has done a great job organising the juniors' evening Fatherland sports groups."

"It is even better that we have Der Fuhrer's leadership. His monomania is an example to us all and will cleanse the Fatherland so our boys will have a great and decent future. Why don't we go to the Bierkeller when you've finished your dinner? Its always good to be early. We can sit nearer the front and be sure to hear every word and everyone will see how much we support Der Fuhrer."

(29 min, 464 words)

I'd recently been reading a book from the library about the rise of the 3rd Reich so when I got the word 'monomania' I had the idea to explore what it would have been like to be an ordinary German living at the time of the Nazis. There are some elements of George Orwell's 1984 creeping in as well, a bit of 'doublethink'. I tried to get over the message that Helga and Gunther weren't really like that but were simply going along because all around them people were watching and ready to shop them if they didn't conform.

Day 62 ~ 2nd March 2019 Words: Cane, Canine, Cannister

Beneath the dark and thunderous clouds the once bright figure paused to survey the landscape. In the distance some small hills tried to loom menacingly but failed dismally. Closer to hand the grass grew thick and pale yellow with a few scrub purple trees in the middle distance. Sir Richard of Chromium sighed and dismounted. His shining armour was no longer shining due to the dull coating of dewflies, an annoying insect that pervaded these parts. Fortunately they did not taste unpleasant since it was impossible to eat without consuming quantities of the tiny creatures in every mouthful. Sadly however they had no nutritional value and could not be counted as a meal when no food was available. Sir Richard had no food. The cannisters strapped to his saddle were bereft and had been for some days.

Louis XIV had not eaten for the same number of days. It was less of an issue for the dog as he only ate once every three days at the best of times but his stomach still rumbled and his farts, while less copious than usual, were still as pungent.

It was difficult to see where either sun was because of the clouds but Sir Richard estimated that there was still time to reach the hills before dark and, unless much had gone wrong since he'd left Venicener, Randrick should still be in the hills. Randrick was an old town and no longer moved as fast as it used to. Once there, Sir Richard should be able to acquire, either through purchase or theft, food for the both of them. He patted Louis XIV and re-mounted his canine steed.

“Come on old chap, not much further then we can eat and sleep” he said in a tired voice. Being a knight wasn't quite as romantic as he'd hoped. He'd been drawn into the job on the promise of foul monsters to fight and fragile beauties to love but thus far had only encountered, exhaustion, hunger, bad weather and more insects than he thought were possible. Sir Richard clicked a couple of times and Louis XIV moved off in the general direction of the hills.

Sir Richard could see now a dark smudge a little to the left of the rightmost hill.

“That must be Randwick” he thought. “Good, I could murder a

fengburger”

He slightly reorientated Louis XIV towards the smudge and urged him to a slightly faster trot. As the time passed the countryside began to change. The swathe of yellow grass slowly gave way to clumps of light blue cane which in turn gave way to neat fields of pink leaved vegetables. Soon he could hear town noises and smell the untreated sewage of Gridmovian population.

“I wonder where the nearest inn is?” thought Sir Richard.

As he reached the outskirts of the town he met a peasant leaning on a fence.

“What ho my good sir” hailed Sir Richard. “Can you point me in the direction of the nearest inn or hostelry. My dog and I are in great need of food and shelter for the night. There is a storm a-coming.” and he pointed towards the dark and thunderous clouds that hadn't moved or changed shape all day.

“There ain't none” said the peasant without moving his lips. Indeed, there was no discernable movement throughout his entire body.

“What do you mean there isn't one?” exclaimed Sir Richard. “Surely there is some house or dwelling or stable to rest in and somewhere that can provide food of some description?”

“Fraid not” said the peasant, who still hadn't moved a muscle. “This is just the prototype program. The programmers haven't written the code to simulate that stuff yet.”

“Yes” muttered Charlie as he signed the approval for further game development funding. “This is looking good so far.”

(36 min, 645 words)

Looking back over these 100 days worth of stories it seems to me that this is the day where things began to change. Others may disagree and point to other stories (or say nothing changed as they're all trash) but from my side, being the person who wrote them, this story is somehow 'different'. From

this story onward I feel they are noticeably better written and more creative, with the occasional weak one rather than being consistently weak with the occasional gem (such as the one on 22nd February, about the lovers in Indonesia).

I think this story has a fascinating theme, being about the life of a character in a half-written computer game. I've toyed with writing a story about what happens to the characters in a game when no one is playing the game and how they're interrupted in the middle of doing something and forced to do something else when the player starts, although I think that's been done in Star Trek.

Day 63 ~ 3rd March 2019 Words: Paradiddle, Paradigm, Paradise

A haunting paradigm that is no more say the poets adjudicating the rise and fall of civilisations, a climax that reached a crescendo only to fade and die through reverberations into the chasm of nothingness that remarks the absence of space and time, a polyglot of dichotomies that oversee the rise and demise of gods and substance.

Paradise gained and paradise lost. Metaphors for life and death. A paradiddle on the diaphragm of eternity.

Its strange the thoughts that come to you when you lie sleepless on a hot sweaty bed in a hot sweaty night. Largely nonsense but occasionally the profundity of a truth emerges. Mind you, its been a while since I had any profound thoughts. I'm getting too cynical in my old age. The first centuries are filled with excitement and discovery but by the fiftieth or sixtieth century there is little left to discover save only that immortality isn't all its cracked up to be. All the pleasures of one's youth cease to be pleasurable with infinite repetition and become wearisome.

One distinct benefit is that eternity gives one plenty of time to see the beauty in anything, no matter how repellant it seems to be at first. Indeed, all senses have time to become fully developed so that smells and touches can elicit as much beauty as sight or hearing. In time the nuances of the smell of a decomposing rat can enhance the experience or the touch of a snail making its way across your eyeball.

This might well be true if I were sixty centuries old but I'm not. I'm just another mere mortal doomed to live three score years and ten or thereabouts with possible repetitions depending on whether reincarnation is real or just another human fantasy for subjugating mortality. I imagine it depends on how one answers the question 'what is the meaning of life?'. As with all good questions it has an element of ambiguity in that it could be taken in the general sense of any and all life or in the specific sense of an individual's life. There is also ambiguity in the 'what' part as that implies that the meaning of life is a thing that exists and can be defined. Perhaps a better question is 'why is the meaning of life?' or even remove the question mark and leave it as a simple statement: Why is the meaning of life. In other

words, the meaning of life is the very act of questioning. After all, something that is not living cannot question.

It'll be dawn soon. Another day. The forecast is for the weather to break and return to the normal coolness of the season. I, for one, welcome that because a cool night will allow me to sleep and cease the pondering of eternal infernal questions and return to the wonderful world of dreams and fantasies where unicorns toast marshmallows on their horns over the heat of fireflies and herculean heros walk the eath conversing with gods and alarm clocks have yet to be invented.

(32 min, 510 words)

Oh lord, this one is all over the place! It starts of with some pretentious nonsense then tries to get a bit Sci Fi with eternal life and ends up with the weather. The only thing my wife liked about it was the idea of unicorns toasting marshmallows. Maybe it was simply a result of the words I got as a type of drum rhythm, a mental model for something and eternal bliss don't naturally flow together.

Day 64 ~ 4th March 2019 Words: Nimble, Nimbus, Nimby

I wanted to look clever so I sat down to paint a placard to use on the protest march. One that would be picked up by the press and go viral on the net. Trouble is I'm not as clever as I thought. There isn't a word that rhymes with 'nimby' so my great idea won't work. I could say "Him be nimby" but it lacks a certain intellectualness and isn't even funny.

Oh well.

I like to think I have a certain deftness with words, a certain pith with apt phrasing but then we are all good at overrating ourselves. In case you didn't know, nimby is an acronym for 'not in my back yard' and denotes someone who thinks something is a great idea so long as it doesn't involve them. For example, yes we really do need a new mental hospital but not in my neighbourhood. That sort of thing.

In this particular instance the council has a proposal to build 22 houses for ex-prisoners to be rehabilitated into the community only the community where the houses are to go don't want them there. It will bring down house prices and no doubt increase the risk of petty crime and nuisance in the area. I was going to go along to the counter-protest outside the council offices as I truly believe we need to rehabilitate former criminals so that they can integrate into society in a useful and productive way. The fact that I live in a different suburb is, of course, wholly irrelevant.

Anyway, because I can't think up a sufficiently damning (and potentially viral) slogan, I don't think I'll bother to go. Frankly I'm not that fussed one way or another and I enjoy watching the Olympics on the telly. And judging by the nimbus clouds that are building it looks like it will be a very wet demo with a low turnout. And very unlikely that any of the talent spotters will be out looking for "people who can make a significant contribution".

Like I said, I'm pretty nimble generally when it comes to words and slogans and my aim was to get noticed by the people who organise left-wing protests and demonstrations but I've been trying for over 3 years now and no one has approached me or even bothered to reply

to my enquiries so it probably isn't going to happen now. I'm known in the fringes but I'll never become an inner circle member. Maybe I should switch to the right? "Nimble Nimby Switches Sides" - that would make a good placard!

I've just checked the TV guide and the finals of the Men's Individual Apparatus competition will be on at the same time so its definite then. Gymnastics trumps soggy wet protests any day.

(29 min, 464 words)

I can remember making a decision with this one to write about people who protest but lack commitment – because of 'nimby'. Even though the hero of this story wants to be part of the inner circle of "the movement" he's not prepared to get wet or miss any TV to do it. So inevitably he doesn't get invited to join but he can't see the connection. Don't be upset if you see yourself in this story, it's really about me and my lack of commitment to things I think I care about. The fact that after 60 or so days of doing this writing I'm still doing it is out of character for me so perhaps my subconscious wrote this story to remind me that I'm changing.

Day 65 ~ 5th March 2019 Words: Cowlick, Cowling, Cow Parsley
(written 6th March)

The wife and I decided we'd go for a picnic as it was a nice day so we loaded some food and a thermos into the car and set off in pursuit of some countryside. South London is OK to live in but its a fair hike to get past the houses and small business parks but after half an hour or so the buildinds thinned out and not too long after we were in rural surroundings. The sun was warm and not too hot and the drive was nice and relaxing. We chatted about nothing in particular.

In time we drove through a small village where there was not a soul in sight and a minute or two later came to a small bridge over what could be charitably called a river but was more likely a largeish stream and we decided to pull over and have our picnic. I found a place to park – obviously others had decided to do the same over the years as there was a definite parking-space sized area only 20 or 30 yards further up the road. We grabbed our stuff and headed back to the stream. After looking up and down stream several times we spotted what looked like it might be a small clearing on the bank a little upstream and made our way to it. It was not so much a clearing as a gap in the bushes that seperated a meadow from the stream but it was fairly secluded and there was virtually no traffic on the road anyway. My wife spread a blanket and we sat down and just enjoyed the solitude for a while. There were some birds singing and the occasional fly. I nudged my wife at one point and said “there's fish here” pointing to some flashing movements in the water. She smiled but said nothing.

We ate our leftover chicken and bread and butter and cheese and drank our tea and lay back gazing at the sky.

“Did you notice those plants by the side of the road?” I said. “Those tallish ones with the clusters of tiny white flowers?”

“Yes” she said, “do you know what they are?”

“I think so. I seem to remember years ago someone told me they are cow parsley and you need to be careful around them.

“How come?”

“Apparently there's nothing wrong with cow parsley but they look just like hemlock which is very poisonous.” I said. “I wouldn't have a clue how to tell them apart.”

“Ohh” she said. “Better not pick any then. Do you want some more tea?”

We stayed there for a while, contentedly relaxing until the sound of a small aeroplane disturbed us. The engine didn't sound too healthy. It kept sputtering and racing, much like a bike I'd once had shortly before it ceased working forever. The sound got closer and then suddenly a small plane flashed over the trees on the other bank and disappeared behind us. We both stood to watch, fearing it was going to crash but it didn't. It turned and made a landing in the meadow and headed for the road until, with a smoky bang, it went silent.

A middle-aged brawny looking chap in jeans and a leather jacket jumped out and pulled some cigarettes from his pocket as he surveyed the plane. I thought I'd wander over and see if he needed any help, not that I was a plane mechanic and my wife decided to come too. Being a resourceful sort of woman she brought the thermos with her.

“Having problems?” I called as we approached. The man turned and smiled.

“Yes” he said. “Damned engine's given up on me.”

The cow lick over his forehead gave him a rakish, cheeky look and despite his mechanical difficulties he still seemed cheerful. He turned back to the plane and lifted the engine cowling. After studying the insides for a minute or so he turned back to us and said “Yes, I can see what the problem is.”

He paused for effect. “Definitely a lack of maintenance and ignorance by its owner.”

He smiled and looked a little sheepish. “Said owner being yours truly.”

“Would you like some tea?” said my wife, waggling the thermos

invitingly at him.

“That would be perfect” he said. “The name's John. You wouldn't happen to know where we are would you?”

(36 min, 743 words)

I didn't sleep well the night before and I had to walk into town to do some errands so I was too tired to write anything on Day 65. The next day I was rested and relaxed and 'cow parsley' and 'cowlick' made me a little nostalgic for the lush greenness of the England of my youth so I took the story for a picnic in the countryside. I had to get a 'cowling' in there somewhere so a passing light airplane helped out. Maybe the Biggles books I read when I was very young (early 1960s) was an influence.

Day 66 ~ 6th March 2019 Words: Scope, Scorbutic, Scorch
(written 7th March)

A white ute, followed by a black 4WD then a silver hatchback and a zippy little motorcycle buzzing like a fly. One by one the people drive down the road – or is it up the road, I never know the difference. Must be just after 5 cos that's when everyone goes home and drives past my place. The rest of the day is pretty quiet, except of course just before 9 when the all drive away from home. Anyway I'm just rambling. Saw the cars out the window and just said that without thinking. Dum de diddle de dum. I do that you know, say things without thinking sometimes. Don't know why but then if I did know I'd have been thinking so it's a bit of a conundrum.

Scorbutic's an interesting word isn't it. It means you've got scurvy as in “I am scorbutic”. I wonder why they invented such a word rather than simply saying “I've got scurvy”, which has fewer letters so it seems more efficient. Probably an American word as the damned yankees like to confuse the English language. Like when someone breaks in and steals something. The Brits say “I've been burgled” and the yanks say “I've been burglarized”.

Anyway, what's scurvy got to do with traffic going by? Absolutely nothing really. It's just that I've got scurvy and I happened to look out the window and saw the traffic. Bit of a tenuous connection but then so is life. I suppose there's another connection because I walked from Perth in Western Australia to Melbourne in Victoria and lived on what food I could find and it took about 6 months to do it which is why I'm now scorbutic. If I'd had a car I'd have done it a lot quicker and wouldn't be scorbutic. I guess if I'd thought about it I'd have scoped out some fruit or something but I didn't. Not that I actually walked into Melbourne. No. I was found by the roadside somewhere to the west of Melbourne and some kind soul drove me the rest of the way and dumped me at a hospital in Geelong. Dehydrated and scorbutic. Not a pretty sight. Not a pretty site either, Geelong. But each to their own.

Getting across WA was fun but I started feeling a bit iffy past Eucla. It was summer, see. Scorching hot, dusty. If I'd had any sense I'd have followed the road and maybe gotten a lift but being “of an

independent mind” aka mad I'd decided to follow the train tracks. And the trains only stop at stations. Seems they don't stop to pick up hitchhikers. Which makes sense really as they going at something like 150km an hour and stopping takes a long time. Thinking about it now I guess you'd also need a ticket. One day I'll write a book about it – something along the lines of it being a consciousness-raising experience, a metaphore of mindfulness with a touch of eccentricity and humour. Should sell half a dozen copies or more. The only thing is I'll need to be able to say why I did it in the book and to tell the truth the only reason I did it was because I couldn't think of anything else to do. I wanted to go east so it was either get a job or walk and I chose the easier option.

(31 min, 570 words)

Perhaps it's just my contrary nature but I followed up the story of a picnic in the lush green English countryside with a story about someone getting scurvy from the harsh Australian outback. It's pretty obvious from the opening I had no ideas for a story so I was using my technique of writing down what's happening and seeing what develops from that.

Day 67 ~ 7th March 2019 Words: Leprous, Lepton, Lesbian

I was as smartly dressed as my wardrobe allowed. Fairly clean jeans, an elderly sports jacket with the inevitable elbow patches and a brand new pair of trainers courtesy of my mum. Looking around I was in the better-dressed half of the guests. Jeans were almost de-rigueur but many were dirtier than mine and few had a jacket, preferring the comfort and convenience of a chunky jumper to keep out the autumn chills. As far as I could tell I was the only one with new trainers which made me feel quite superior.

I spotted a girl standing alone beside the drinks table so I thought I'd casually make conversation with her and subtly call attention to my trainers so she'd know I was really a classy guy. Not someone to trifle with, not your typical nerd. I'd barely taken two paces in her general direction when I was collared by my supervisor.

"Hello Tom", he said. "Enjoying the party?"

"Oh hello Professor Wiseman, I've only just arrived but it seems to be going swimmingly." I replied, thinking 'swimmingly' would be the kind of phrasing someone of his ilk would appreciate.

"Good, good" he said, then paused, seemingly at a loss as to what to say next. This I was to find was a common situation amongst post-grad students and academic staff. We could all talk at great length about our specific areas of research but small talk and casual chat continually eluded us. Although, on reflection, its quite likely that being skilled in small talk would probably be a barrier to the higher levels of academia. It would be interesting to talk to a psychologist about that one day.

"Excellent", he continued, brightening as he thought of something. "Don't forget to see me tomorrow to discuss how we're going to resource your thesis needs."

"I won't Professor. 11 o'clock sharp." I smiled and looked pointedly towards the drinks table. The girl was still there but some sad looking chap was talking to her. She was only giving him casual attention but you never know how these things can develop.

“Well I must mingle” he said “and so should you. It's never too early to start networking.” and he drifted away with a mildly bemused and, it has to be said, relieved expression.

I looked back at the girl. She was alone again. No time like the present. Admittedly she wasn't the most attractive girl at the university. In fact she wasn't even the most attractive in the room. She did, however, have one thing going for her. She was alone and seemingly uncomfortable. As chance would have it she also had an empty glass in her hand.

“Hello”, I said. “I'm Tom. Can I get you another drink?” Unoriginal I know but also uncontroversial.

She looked at me in surprise then through for a couple of moments. “Umm, no thanks. I don't drink much. One was enough for me.”

She looked away and then back at me as though she realised she ought to give her name.

“Thank you though. I'm Deanna. Physicist”

“Nice to meet you Deanna. I'm into astro-physics. Whats your area of research?”

“I'll be studying the interactions of supercooled leptons”. She smiled ironically. “Umm, are you trying to pick me up?”

I mention earlier that people like us have very limited skills with small talk but this was certainly an unexpected response.

“Only I ought to mention” she continued, “that there are very few women physicists and being a lesbian it makes me rather leprous. It seems only fair to let you know that before you start wasting your time.” She smiled disarmingly and looked away again.

(36 min, 623 words)

Back to nerds again – my natural habitat. This one was totally driven by the words. Unless I went for something set in a leper colony, I had to use

'leprosy' as something to be avoided rather than the actual disease and 'lepton' was the physics lab and it seemed to me that a lesbian nerd physicist could easily be treated like a leper. Maybe that's my own stereotyping coming through. Either way, this is the result.

Day 68 ~ 8th March 2019 Words: Trough, Trounce, Troupe

Virgil gazed at the sky through the window.

“There’s a storm coming, I think” he said. “We’re experiencing a trough.”

No one took much notice of him. Virgil was well known for his prophecysing of bad weather and the infrequency with which they came true.

Madeline, the troupe’s director, appeared in the doorway, coffee mug in hand and cigarette between her lips.

“OK everyone, let’s get started”

They all, at their own speeds, gathered round and occupied whatever seats they could find. Virgil, as always, took the hard folding wooden seat because it helped his back. Madeline slumped in a threadbare and once over-stuffed armchair. Mandy, the newest member and still a little backward in being forward, ended up on the floor as there weren’t enough seats.

“I hope you all enjoyed the break” said Madeline. “I know I needed it. Where’s Kelly? Anyone seen her?”

There was a brief interlude as eyes darted everywhere as if expecting Kelly to be hidden behind something but no one spoke. Kelly was rarely late but when she was she was spectacularly late. Often by several days.

“As you may remember we were resoundingly trounced in the finals by that mob from Queensland.” said Madeline. “We’ve had a few weeks off to rest and relax and get the creative juices flowing. On the positive side we’ve had a good year with the punters who’ve enjoyed our performances and attendances have been good but if we want to win the Interstates next year I think we need to revamp what we do and how we do it.”

There was silence for a minute or two. Then Adrian piped up.

“Do you really think that's necessary? After all, our income comes from our audiences and the Interstates competition isn't going to affect that. Win or lose.”

“I think we'd get bigger audiences if we could say we'd won. We may even be able to charge a little more.” replied Madeline. “What do the rest of you think?”

“I don;t know” said Ben. “We put a lot of effort into creating the performance and rehearsing it and finding out what the audiences liked and didn't like. Is it really worth redoing the whole thing just for some pointless competition. I know I joined the troupe because I wanted to entertain an audience not to win a competition.”

“Me too”, said Brenda. “There are any number of music competitions I could enter but its a lot more fun to play for an audience who likes what I play.”

There was a general nod of agreement from the others.

“There is some merit in coming up with new routines” said Virgil “but I think we should be focussed on our audience and let them guide us. By all means lets add some new material and drop whats getting stale but don't lets be dictated too by some outfit in Queensland.”

“So are you all basically saying let's forget the Interstates? said Madeline. “Not even bother to enter next year?”

“Yes” said Ben. “Who cares what a bunch of decrepid old farts think? I think we should introduce a little political satire.”

(23 min, 534 words)

This story was strongly driven by the words. 'Troupe' led to a theatre company, 'trounce' meant some sort of competition and I threw in a comment about the weather to deal with 'trough'. It's an OK story.

Day 69 ~ 9th March 2019 Words: Gleeeful, Glen, Glib

No story.

I did write a story for these words - about a man staying in a little Scottish inn on a walking holiday in a glen talking politics with two locals in the breakfast room one morning - but my notebook computer suffered a breakdown and decided it had no storage space and saved the document with nothing in it. I paid the money and bought another cheap notebook. The old one still works but I use it now solely as a glorified mp3 player.

Shit happens to everyone but the key point is that I did not use it as an excuse to stop. I dealt with the problem and continued writing stories, although I couldn't be bothered to try to rewrite this one or another from the same words. After all, my objective was to write a story, which I had done. I don't need to prove that to anyone except myself.

Speaking of continuing, I downloaded an updated copy of OpenOffice for the new laptop which had a spell checker so there should be fewer spelling mistakes in my stories after this point.

Day 70 ~ 10th March 2019 Words: Outback, Outbid, Outboard

Ray opened the front door and wandered into the house. There didn't seem to be anyone around which was unusual as seven people shared the house and most of them were usually around most of the time. Not that it really mattered but Ray was going to go outback for a few weeks or months and it would have been nice if someone was around to say goodbye. He wandered up to his room - he wandered most of the time, never really having any sense of purpose or urgency - and shoved his few clothes and other odds and ends into the backpack he'd just picked up for \$5 from an op-shop. He wandered back down to the kitchen and checked the fridge. There was some milk there which he drank and some leftovers from last night's communal meal which he polished off and that was about it. He couldn't think of any particular reason to stay any longer and still no one was back so he wandered off out the front door and down the street.

Cheryl was the first to get back and she checked Ray's old room. Yes, he'd definitely gone. Her spirits lightened a little. He was an OK guy but could be a real downer a lot of the time. She went into the kitchen and put the kettle on. Karen turned up a few minutes later and Cheryl made her some tea.

"He's gone has he?" said Cheryl.

"Yes it looks like it. All his stuff has gone anyway." replied Karen

"When's the meeting to get someone else in?" asked Cheryl

"I think Brad's planned it for tomorrow night. Not that there's much to decide. There's only Robbie who wants to move in so its pretty much a done deal unless someone else turns up at the last minute and outbids him." replied Karen.

Cheryl didn't look too happy at this. "Robbie's that guy who fixes outboard motors isn't he?"

"Yup". Karen didn't look too happy about it either. "I heard from Rachael that he leaves oily bits of machinery all over the place. I'm going to vote against him but I'm pretty sure the guys will vote for him

and we may end up with a deadlock."

"Hmm, yeah, I'll vote against him too but it'll probably end up 4-2 since Rick and Molly always vote together. Surely there's someone else who wants that room?"

"Well there's Chrissy but she's got a baby and none of us want the hassels of a baby in the house. Problem is most people don't want to live in a commune anymore. The only ones who will are pretty desperate and not the types we want here."

They both relapsed into silence while they pondered the dilemma.

The front door slammed and Bryce bounced into the kitchen.

"Hiya girls, how it going?" he said affably heading for the kettle.

"We were just talking about who's going to get Ray's room." said Cheryl.

"Oh yeah? So he's finally gone has he? About frigging time!" said Bryce. "Who's in the running?"

"Robbie the outboard guy and we think maybe Chrissy with the baby." said Karen. "Have you any thoughts?"

"Oh god, I'm not sure I can face either of them." Bryce's mood changed and he visibly sagged.

"Surely there's someone else?"

"Thats what we were talking about" said Karen. "Trouble is we can't think of anyone else."

"What does Brad think?" asked Bryce.

"We're pretty sure he's going for Robbie since they're mates." said Karen.

"Ive just had an idea!" said Bryce. "Why do we have to have anyone?"

The days of a commune are over so why don't we just keep the room spare or use it as a meditation room or something?"

(30 min, 626 words)

Sometimes the story I write is obviously dictated by the words I've been given. This was one of the ones where it wasn't. Why did 'outback', 'outbid' and 'outboard' lead me to write about a commune looking to replace someone who'd left? Your guess is as good as mine. Probably better.

Day 71 ~ 11th March 2019 Words: Etching, Eternal, Ethane

I find chemistry both fascinating and irritating. On the one hand it allows chemists to produce wonderful materials for industry, medicine, agriculture and so forth and on the other hand its just so damned messy. Whenever I work on any chemical experiments, which is quite rare these days, I always end up with filthy hands and clothes, dirty tables and equipment and more often than not an unpleasant odour that lingers for days. My last project was to try to separate ethane from domestic gas. I did find a method but its wasn't cost effective. It remained cheaper to simply buy bottled ethane. Thats another irritation – when the damned thing doesn't work!

Something that did work and is quietly earning me some pocket money is a process I discovered, and patented, for etching on to smooth surfaces without the use of acid which can be dangerous and damaging. My method is entirely safe and can be used on a number of materials and is now being marketed in many countries with quite reasonable sales. And, of course, a small licencing fee to myself. Not enough to retire on but certainly a useful addition to my income.

My housekeeper came up with a novel use for the etching product which was to impregnate a small pad in the substance and have a die made with words or a design that could be repeatedly used. Much like a rubber stamp. The only drawback is that the dies have to be made of a copper-silicone compound which is resistant to the etching substance otherwise it would be eaten away. This copper-silicone compound is expensive so the technique has not become popular as there are any number of processes and techniques for printing or otherwise marking commercial items which are vastly cheaper. Still, as a gift to show my appreciation I took out a patent for it in my housekeeper's name so she can always be proud of her idea.

These days my time is taken up mainly with teaching at the university and local politics. I got involved in local politics by accident when I got involved in an argument a colleague over whether or not the Council should build a new theatre. In my opinion we had enough theatres already in the area and another was merely elitist. After all, few of the locals ever go to any of the theatres. I felt the money could be better used within the community or, at the very least, reduce the

Council rates. My colleague lost his temper and shouted something along the lines of “If you feel that way then you should run for councillor”. It festered for a while and in due course I did run for the Council and to my great surprise I was elected. It seems quite a few people weren't overly supportive of the new theatre proposal either. My stances on other local issues seems to have garnered me sufficient support in the community to have been re-elected twice since.

In the way of these things word has filtered down to me that perhaps it might be a good idea to run for the State elections. These things are never clearly stated merely “suggested” by various people but it does raise that eternal question that all politicians have to answer at some point. Do you stay where you are with known support and important but localised issues or do you step out into the unknown to tackle bigger issues but with unknown support. I've never been politically ambitious and really only drifted into politics through provocation in an argument but I have to confess that I am sorely tempted. Its probably just vanity and I do admit to being afraid of losing at a higher level. Local politics is fairly anonymous and I'm not sure I like the idea of being in the state and national news. Still I have a year or so before I need to make a decision and I confess I do enjoy being the first Lady Mayoress this town has had.

(35 min, 679 words)

Well, ethane led me into chemistry, although I suppose it could have led to a camping trip with bottled gas cooking, and chemistry led me into some new process for etching but it didn't get me that far so I once again had to resort to politics to keep it going.

Day 72 ~ 12th March 2019 Words: North-westward, Norwegian, Nose

Back on the road again. Sounds pretty good but I don't quite know what the “again” means.

Some clever person once said “If the path before you is clear then you are probably following someone else's.”. The path before me was as clear as a dense fog so it looks like it's my own destiny. Like many before me I had decided to abandon the life I knew so well and set off in search of myself, to find out what I wanted from life and how to achieve that. It seemed to me that the best way to do this was to follow my nose but an inner voice kept wondering if I was cutting off my nose to spite my face. Inner voices are wonderful when they're right and a nuisance when they're wrong. The trick is knowing which was which.

I bought myself an old Kawasaki, quit my dead-end job at a slowly failing convenience store and vacated my apartment. I put my most important belongings – a couple of special books, some photographs, odds and ends that had meaning to me – in a cardboard box and left it with my mother. I put a few clothes, toiletries and some basic tools into an old rucksack and threw everything else into a rubbish skip. I snapped my phone in half as if to emphasise the importance of what I was doing or perhaps to avoid the possibility of being talked out of it. I took all my savings out of my bank account – just about enough to last a week or so I estimated.

Well, I was wrong. The money lasted nearly three weeks because I ate frugally, slept in the open instead of motels and drove economically. I wasn't in a tearing rush to get anywhere. I was more interested in how the spirit moved me than where. But all good things must come to an end and I ran out of money and fuel on a country road in southern Italy. It was quite warm and I was sitting beside the road, leaning my back against the bike. After a while a small, blue Fiat came along and pulled up. The driver wound down the side window and shouted something unintelligible at me. I just smiled and shrugged my shoulders. He gazed at me for a few moments then called out in English “Do you speak English?”. I replied “yes” and we had a brief exchange about whether I needed help and so on.

The upshot was that he offered me a lift to somewhere I couldn't quite decipher and since I had nothing better to do I accepted his generosity and got in the car. As he pulled away I heard a snarly hissing from the back seat and, turning my head in surprise, I saw a large, well fed cat on the back seat. The man laughed and told me not to worry. North-westward didn't like strangers but he would warm to me soon enough. I remarked that North-westward was a strange name for a cat and the man told me that a while back he had been camped in a field when the cat turned up to share the warmth of his fire and they had had a long conversation which went through most of the night during which the cat had told him the equivalent to its name in human language was North-westward.

I asked what the cat's real name was and the man – I still hadn't found out what his name was – made a strange purr-growl sound in the back of his throat. I said I thought that North-westward was easier to say. Now I think back to that day I can see that it was perhaps a strange conversation but at the time it seemed quite reasonable. I asked what breed of cat North-westward was and the man said he thought it was a Norwegian Grey but he wasn't sure. The only thing he was sure of was that the cat was in some way related to the Scandinavian gods as it had magical powers. I confess I scoffed a little at this but the man was most insistent. He told me that, as an example, as long as North-westward was in the car it never needed refuelling and that the wicker picnic basket beside the cat on the rear seat never became empty no matter how much food the two of them ate. And all the food was fresh as well. Nothing went bad or moldy if it didn't get eaten.

We drove on for a while while my mind ticked over with ideas of experiments I could perform to determine the truth of these claims but frankly my heart wasn't in it. I had gone in search of mystery and meaning and just maybe I had stumbled upon some. After all, there are worse things in life than to travel with a magical cat.

to be continued

(45 min, 829 words)

You'll notice something with this one. I enjoyed writing this one and

wanted to keep going with it so after 45 min I put 'to be continued' because I wanted to continue the story the next day with some new words. I never did continue it but the intent was there. This is probably the first sign that my time limit is beginning to feel constraining rather than an empty space I have to fill somehow.

It's also worth noting that I was (I think) very creative. I thought something along the lines of 'he travelled north-westward' was just too damned boring and uninspired so I came up with a magical cat named North-westward. I still think its a pretty cool idea. Maybe one day I'll take it further.

Day 73 ~ 13th March 2019 Words: Magnum Opus, Magpie, Magus

It was a comfortable life, Henry admitted to himself. The house in the London mews with a small but well tended garden frequented by the occasional magpie. The antique but comfortable furniture. The superbly equipped kitchen with the superbly skilled Mrs Allsop who came in to cook the evening meals. The walls lined with books, many collectibles. Yes, it was a comfortable life.

And yet it was superficial. It was all derived from his magnum opus. His great “work of literature” that had brought some fame and a small fortune. The house, the cars, the admiring young women. But it was based on a falsehood. His book had been a one-off, never to be repeated. Oh yes there had been other books, quite a few in the last 30 years, but none had achieved the level of “that book”. And the critical accord had declined with each subsequent one with recent critics wondering if perchance Henry had “lost it” although none ever speculated whether he had “had it” in the first place.

Henry sat in his favourite wing-back chair near the window overlooking the mews, sipping a cheap cognac and wishing he'd not given up smoking. He was trying to work on the story outline of his latest book but with little success. The story involved a zoroastrian magus from the time of Darius the Great transported magically into 19th century Iran. It was convoluted, imaginative and quite scholastic but utterly utterly boring. Henry had tried to enliven it with the antics of a cat with magic powers named North-westward but even that device had failed. So on he sat, pretending to rethink the outline but in reality bemoaning his lack of talent, lack of critical and popular acclaim and, if truth be known, lack of loving companionship.

What Henry did not appreciate that evening was that his life was about to change. Dramatically. Catastrophically Henry would think, but that was only in the short term. Earlier that week lawyers had been hired by a historian Henry had met a few times over 30 years ago. Even as Henry sipped his cognac a letter was winging its way to Henry's mews address that would cause Henry much distress. The letter claimed plagiarism, alleging that the bulk of his magnum opus was in fact derived from a draft manuscript written by the historian and shown to Henry for critical appraisal. The manuscript had not

been published on Henry's advice and had somehow, magically even, come to be published in a slightly rewritten form two years later with Henry's name on it. In the months to come Henry would become deeply depressed as the court case continued and, despite his own lawyers' optimism, the evidence mounted against him and the newspapers had a field day. The literary press in particular.

As he sat in his wing-back chair Henry didn't appreciate that he would be stripped of his wealth, his house, his garden, his kitchen and his cook. He didn't realise that he would no longer be the recipient of admiration from young ladies and that the only magpies he would see would be those in the London parks where he dozed each night as a homeless, destitute, middle aged man. Indeed, Henry, even had he foreseen this, he would not have appreciated that out of such dismaying circumstance he would be born again. His magnum opus was not the misappropriated book of 30 years previously. How could it be since he didn't write it? His true magnum opus was the story of how he fell from the heights and lost everything only to write his magnum opus while living on the streets. Scribbling under the pale light of street lamps on scraps of paper found in rubbish bins with broken old pens and pencils retrieved from gutters and begged from passersby.

And yes there was a cat in his magnum opus. A ragged stray who befriended him in his darkest hours and gave him the will to live and write again. That gave him loving companionship. A cat whose name was not North-westward but "Cat". A truly magical cat.

(36 min, 687 words)

I suppose in a sense I did continue the story of the magical cat but it's really incidental in this one. The driver was 'magnum opus' and I thought it would be dull to write about someone writing their magnum opus and it occurred to me it would be more fun to write about someone writing their magnum opus about how they had written a fake magnum opus. Yes, sometimes my mind moves in mysterious ways and I blame this creative writing lark.

I think this is a good story.

Day 74 ~ 14th March 2019 Words: Umpteen, UN, Unabashed

A large truck drove past the house, rattling the windows in their frames.

“I swear the traffic’s got a lot worse over the last few years” commented Leon. “There are certainly a lot more trucks than there used to be.”

Mina considered for a few moments. She always considered things before speaking. “There’s a lot of new houses a couple of miles down the road. I think its going to be a new suburb.”

“Oh joy” replied Leon and returned his attention to his breakfast. Not that it was much of a breakfast as he was on a diet. Five days was enough to break his early enthusiasm and replace it with temptation. One boiled egg and two ryvita were not enough to start the day with and he didn’t particularly like black coffee.

“I’d ask what’s for dinner but I know I’m not going to like it” he grumbled. “Well I’d better be off to work.” He put on his jacket, grabbed his briefcase and kissed Mina before leaving the house.

Mina heard the car start and it reversing down the drive. She didn’t need to leave for work for another hour or so so she made another coffee and glanced at the news on her phone. There was nothing much of interest at the moment. Just updates about some reality TV show that neither of them watched although she did briefly skim an item about the UN moving a peace-keeping force into some small African country which was one of umpteen little former colonies who couldn’t stop fighting over one thing or another. Mina felt that this was more indicative of human nature – a need to fight and kill and rape – rather than a political statement.

“I wonder how Leon’s diet is going?” she thought to herself. “Not that I mind him being a little chubby but he is so vain.” She smiled gently.

Leon pulled out of the McDonald’s drive-thru with two Big Macs and two large fries and turned into a deserted pub car park a little further down the road to eat them. He felt a little guilty about breaking his

diet but still scoffed them with unabashed pleasure. At last his belly had stopped groaning!

“OK it won't last long and then I'll be hungry again” he thought “but god it worth good to eat solid food again”. He turned on the radio for some music to accompany his drive. It was going to be a light day. He only had a couple of client meetings to attend so maybe he could skip out early and hit the gym to counter the fast food.

Mina finished her shower and dressed and applied her makeup. She frowned angrily at the crows feet beginning to appear around her eyes then relaxed her face deliberately when she remembered that frowning was causing the crows feet. “Why can't we all accept each other as we are” she thought. “It would save all this nonsense with makeup and diets.”

As she started her car it occurred to her that she didn't really know who or what she really was. “I know I can be defined in terms of labels” she thought “wife, employee, daughter, consumer but if I want people to accept me for what I am surely I need to know what I am in order to be accepted for that?”.

Pondering this she accelerated up the road heading for the industrial estate where she worked.

“Perhaps I should go on a retreat to find myself? Or take up meditation so I can work out who or what I really am? Maybe we should both quit our jobs and sell the house and head for an Ashram. Surely there is more to life than simply being defined by other people's labels?”

She hung her coat on a clothes peg and sat at her desk. She leaned back and gazed at Janine at the next desk thinking about life-changing experiences and quests for inner meanings.

“Janine, you went to an Ashram for a while didn't you?”

“Yes I was with one for a year 4 or 5 years ago. Out in India.”

“I was thinking about my life driving to work. I couldn't see myself

except in terms of labels like wife. Do you think spending some time at an ashram would help me find out who I really am?"

"Maybe" said Janine. "But it doesn't matter how well you know yourself you'll always be defined in terms of labels because we think through language and language is by its nature a set of labels. That's all words are, labels for things and ideas. No matter how you see and understand yourself you'll always think and say it using label words, even if you make up new words they're still labels."

"So you don't think going to an ashram will help?" asked Mina

"Oh it will definitely help" said Janine. "Just not in the way you think. Since you're worrying about labels at the moment all you'll do is change one set of labels for another. The secret is to open your chakra and embrace your spiritual nature and never ever try to put the outcome into words."

(38 min, 883 words)

No immediate ideas for this one so I wrote about a truck going past because one just had and it did rattle the windows. Half an hour later I'm going on about ashrams in India and the emptiness of labels. I'm intrigued how the mind goes off on its own when you let it.

Day 75 ~ 15th March 2019 Words: Gnaw, Gneiss, Gnocchi (written 17th March)

"You want to be careful this time of year y'know" the barman said.

"Oh, why's that?" I said politely because I already knew what he was going to say.

"When its hot like it's gong to be today" he continued, "the mountains heat up and you can get rock falls. If you hear craking sounds or a rumble then its time to run."

"Run where?" I said, knowing that in truth if you hear the runble then its too late to try to run.

"Your best bet is to run towards somewhere with plants or trees, trying to stay at the same level. If there's plants around the rocks won't be cracking and you're wasting time if you run up hill or down hill."

"Thanks for the warning, I'll remember that and pay careful attention". Its always best to keep on the good side of barmen no matter how wrong they are because you never know what they'll do to your drinks later. "If I don't see you tonight send out a rescue party". I laughed. He didn't.

I left and drove my dirt bike a few kilometres up the road and turned off onto a dirt track heading straight up the mountain to where I had planned to get some rock samples. Needless to say there were no rock falls that day.

When I got back to the hotel in the early evening I unloaded my bags of samples and humped them to my room. Its surprising how heavy small samples can get when you've amassed quite a few. I probably had 30kg or so. At least they felt like that. I was quite breathless then I reached the top of the stairs and beginning to sweat. I added them to the pile of other samples I'd collected over the past few days and decided I wasn't looking forward to having to take them all back down when the truck arrived to collect them at the end of the week.

I poured a shot of whiskey from the bottle I kept (illicitly) in my bag.

Hotels don't like you bringing your own alcohol as they want to you spend more in the downstairs bar. After downing it I stepped into the shower to wash away the dirt of the day. Once reasonable presentable again I wandered down to the dining room for dinner. It was a decent sized room with an assortment of tables of different sizes and chair of different styles but it was clean and reasonably comfortable and had a magnificent view through the picture windows of the valley and there was a veranda to one side where, incredibly, smoking was still permitted.

Being the middle of summer the dining room was quite full but there were a few seats at tables and I chose one that had just one person sitting alone. I've found over the years that having to join couples or groups can be awkward but someone on their own usually welcomes another person if only to make them seem less alone. There is something of a stigma about eating alone even though plenty of people travel on business. Women on their own have real issues since they are perceived by many as being available and, of course, they in turn perceive any man joining them as predatory but fortunately this particular table had a single, solitary male at it. I joined him, checking he was accepting of my presence and he gestured to one of the chairs.

I ordered the gnocchi tonight, with the chef's own special sauce, hoping it would be better than the chef's own special sauce that came with the steak the previous night. I noticed my companion's meal had arrived and he was beginning to gnaw at his steak much the same way I had. Gnocchi is basically balls of mashed potato and its difficult to get it wrong.

He swallowed his mouthful and grimaced slightly. The he glanced at me and said "The name's John" with a slight query in his voice.

I gave him my name and we chatted in a desultory way for a few moments. He tried another mouthful and after some concerted chewing he asked the question I've come to dread.

"So what brings you to this part of the world?"

I don't like this question because the truth generally sparks uncomprehending silence or inane questions as geology is rarely

studied by anyone as a hobby but some like to think they are knowledgeable when they are in fact clueless.

So, I gave my standard reply which while true is designed to cut them off detailed discussion.

"I'm here collecting rock samples to determine the age, composition and likely development of rocks in this area. Generally, in this area they are gneiss, which is a high grade metamorphic rock and has been subjected to higher temperatures and pressures than the more common schist found further south."

"Ahh" he replied, looking a little nonplussed. "So I suppose you'll be having gneiss-cream for dessert then or will it have melted?"

(39 min, 844 words)

I had a few personal issues which prevented me from writing for a couple of days. This a simple, straightforward story driven by the geological term 'gneiss'. It's probably the best I could do under the circumstances.

Day 76 ~ 16th March 2019 Words: Exonerate, Exorbitant, Exorcize
(written 18th March)

I've never surfed in my life. In fact I lived in London most of my life and even though I now live in Australia I'm several hundred kilometers from a beach and more than a thousand from a surf beach. In fact I don't really like the beach anyway. They're too exposed and sand gets everywhere.

Anyway, one evening I was walking my dog and as he was sniffing a particularly juicy tree a car pulled up and a man asked directions to a street near by. I told him and he drove away. Coincidentally the next day I was at the local library and went to get a hot chocolate (with marshmallow) before I walked home. I walked everywhere at that time because I'd lost my driver's licence 'cos I'd been driving a little too fast. The fact I lost it for a year gives an idea of my speed. To cut a long story short, a man came up behind me at the counter and after I'd ordered and got my numbered flagpole and moved vaguely in the general direction of a vacant table I heard him order a coffee.

Moments later he sat down at the same table and said "Aren't you the dude who gave me directions last night? With the dog?"

"Could be", I replied, "I gave someone directions and it could easily have been you. Did you find the house OK?"

We made idle chat for a few minutes then our drinks came. As he stirred a sugar into his coffee he asked what I did to pass my time.

"I'm a fault finder" I said. "People pay me to find faults in things to make them better."

"Wow" he said and looked quizzically at me. "How do you do that?"

"I honestly don't know" I said with a laugh. "Someone explains to me what something is and what it does and I look at it and after a while I sense a 'badness' in it. Something that's wrong or not quite right. I've no idea how it works but I've always been able to do it since I was a child."

"When you see somethnig bad do you also see how to make it better?" he asked.

"Oh yes. If its not right I can "see" what it would be like if it was right. Its like an image of the perfect whatever appears on top of the bad whatever and I can see how they don't match."

"How do you know you're right?"

"My dad was a mechanic and he sometimes listened when I said things were wrong and sometimes he'd try out what I thought and most of the time they worked."

Jan, for that was his name, kept questioning me about this and I kept answering because this wasn't the first time someone had reacted like this and I could sense a new job coming my way. I figured he had something which he'd eventually ask me to look at to see if I could make it better. I suppose its a form of selling myself. Certainly I do need to get some income now and then.

We parted company after an hour or so but fortunately I always kept a few business cards in my wallet and sure enough nearly three weeks later I got a phone call offering to fly me to Surfer's Paradise in Queensland to look at something. Given it was Surfer's Paradise it turned out to be no surprise that Jan wanted me to look at a surfboard. What did come as a surprise is that Jan was the current world number 2 in competitive surfing and used a board of his own design for competitions. He wanted me to improve his design so that he would not only become the world number 1 but hold that position for a long time and in the process use his success to sell the surfboard. He felt it would exonerate him for the sacrifices his mother had made when he was young so that he could hone his surfing skills.

Not being stupid, I agreed and to not charge him anything on condition that I be a partner in his surfboard business. He agreed after much negotiation about the split of profits and control and all the usual stuff. And I looked at his surfboard. And it seemed to me that it was too flat and it would be better if it was 20cm or so longer with a deeper upward curve at the front and a slight downward curve at the tail. Jan got his lads to knock up a few prototypes as we refined

the design – it necessitated a slight thinning of the thickness of the board and a slightly more rigid material but it didn't take long to perfect. And, needless to say, Jan won all three of the next competitions and moved up into the number one slot.

So we filed worldwide patents and went into production. Since the best boards – until then – were found in Malibu in California we named our new board The Malibu Exorcizor and, with Jan's name and titles as credibility we were able to charge exorbitant amounts for the board. And because it all started from me walking my dog one evening we had a cute logo on every board which showed a dog pissing against an upright surfboard. OK that got us into a little trouble with the people who get outraged about things but frankly surfies are a hardy breed and found the logo cute.

(41 min, 932 words)

This was the first of two I wrote that day to try to catch up with my missed days. The opening sentence is absolutely true so why I wrote a surfing story is one of (my) life's mysteries. I think it turned out quite well and I was particularly pleased to have written a story with the word "exorcise" without mentioning demons or possession. Looking back I can see the beginnings of a theme that started to recur later on in my stories. Here the hero is able to 'feel' badness in designs.

Day 77 ~ 17th March 2019 Words: Rhubarb, Rhumba, Rhyme
(written 18th March)

My bus stopped across the road from it on my home journey after work. The route was slightly different in the mornings so I never saw it in the cold light of early day when the streets and buildings always had that cold, depressed, empty look no matter what the season. But in the early evenings, with the people rushing home and doing last minute shopping, with the restaurants opening for their evening diners and in the winter when the sun sets early the street lights casting a warm glow over everything, the place looked romantic and inviting. Even the name, so dark and drab in the morning was lit up and inviting and shadows flitted behind the large windows.

Miss Jane's Ballroom Dance Academy.

Can you get any more old world and romantic than that?

A little over two years ago my wife of 18 years and I were divorced. In the aftermath it turned out that all our friends were, in fact, her friends so other than my various colleagues at work and checkout girls at the supermarket I had had no social interaction since. And frankly, nice as my colleagues are, its difficult to get a rewarding social exchange over a creditors ledger. And they are all either married or too young. For a 47 year old man a pretty 18 year old office clerk may be an endearing fantasy but the reality is way off the mark. I haven't been to a disco for nigh on 30 years. I don't even know if they still exist.

So that night in early winter I was on the bus, sitting in my usual seat. Isn't that so incredibly sad? Having a 'usual seat' on a crappy commuter bus? Rain had been falling intermittently and everything felt sodden. Even my usual seat. The heaters were on in the bus and the warm air and the moisture that pervaded everything were causing the windows to mist up. But still I sat, in my usual seat, gazing out of my usual window at the usual unchanging panorama of dull inner city drabness. My eyes were drawn to the neon lights of Miss Jane's Ballroom Dance Academy and what seemed to be a new sign. Certainly I had never noticed it before. A large dayglo yellow sign that said quite simply "Beginners Welcomed".

It was the pedantry of the 'Welcomed' rather than the more usual 'Welcome' that appealed to me. 'Welcomed' implies an actual process of welcoming whereas 'Welcome' is more impersonal and implies really just a forced politeness. It was more of a knee-jerk reaction than a considered action that led me to get off at the next stop and walk back to Miss Jane's Ballroom Dance Academy and push open the glass panelled swing door.

Some hours later as my supermarket own-brand Beef and Mushroom Tortellini and Aunt Beth's Rhubarb Crumble and Custard (with added vitamin C and devoid of any gluten but possibly with traces of peanuts) were warming in the oven I started to shake gently with the remembrance of being welcomed and my stumbling explanation of wanting to learn to dance to a generously endowed and jewellery bedecked lady of years somewhere around my own. And how, embarrassingly, that explanation turned into a tale of not talking to anyone and loneliness and emptiness and sadness and despair and a nagging sense of desperation that never really goes away. And the feeling of deep embarrassment that overcame me when I started to hear what I was saying and found I couldn't stop. There was no rhyme or reason to it.

But the sign in the window was absolutely correct. I wasn't 'welcome' I was 'welcomed'. Miss Jane – for it was she who welcomed me – welcomed me with open arms. Literally. And soothed my aching heart and malnourished ego and in the process signed me up to a 12 week course in Beginners' Rhumba, twice a week, on Tuesday and Thursday evenings from 6.30pm until 9pm, Refreshments Provided, Smart Dress Required. A lifeline to the socially bereft. A soothing balm of Latin American gyration and close body dancing.

Halfway through my Rhubarb and Custard I turned off the TV and went into YouTube to see if it had any videos on the rhumba. After all, it was something to do and Miss Jane might be impressed with my Beginners skills. Hope hadn't died after all.

(47 min, 738 words)

I loved writing this story. The word 'rhumba' reminded me of a movie I'd enjoyed watching called "Shall We Dance" with Richard Gere and

Jennifer Lopez so I put Richard Gere's shoes on and took a bus instead of the train he used in the movie. I don't care what you think, I think this story is great.

Also, because I was now enjoying writing these stories – as opposed to them being an 'assignment' – I increased my time limit again, to 45 minutes.

Day 78 ~ 18th March 2019 Words: Resort, Resound, Resource
(written 19th March)

Heinrich had a silver pocket watch which had been a gift from his wife which he kept on the shelf of the bookcase beside his chair. He also had a glass coffee jar on the table between the bookcase and the chair which he used as an ashtray. It was a large jar which was why he used it since he smoked quite heavily and small ashtrays needed constant emptying. On this day of all days the inevitable happened. Heinrich reached from his chair and pulled a book from the bookcase which knocked the pocket watch off the shelf and into the ashtray. Which, incidentally, hadn't been emptied for a while. As well as cigarette butts and ash, Heinrich used the jar to hold discarded fruit stones, nail clippings and anything fairly small and non-flammable that was being discarded.

“Gott im himmel”¹, exclaimed Heinrich as he rapidly thrust his hand into the jar to retrieve the watch.

Not being heavy the watch was on top of the contents of the jar and his fingers found it easily. Unfortunately Heinrich had fairly large hands and although his hand just fitted the top of the jar going in, the moment he grasped the watch his hand was too wide to come out of the jar.

“Oh verdammt noch mal!”² he said loudly. He realised he had inadvertently caught himself in an Indonesian Monkey Trap. In Indonesia, a hollowed out coconut shell is attached to a stake with string. The nut has a hole in it which is just big enough for a monkey's hand to slip inside. Something tasty such as a piece of banana is left inside the coconut so when the monkey comes along it reaches inside the nut for the banana but can't get it's clasped hand out. Since the monkey is unable to realise that to be free it needs to abandon the banana it is effectively trapped and uninjured.

Fortunately Heinrich was more intelligent than his ancestor and he released the watch and withdrew his hand. He tried tipping the jar to get the watch nearer to the top but ash started to fall into his lap

1 “God in heaven”

2 “Oh for fuck's sake!”

before the watch was in reach.

“Ach” he thought to himself. “darüber muss nachgedacht werden”³.

Clearly he was going to have to resort to a resource other than his own hand. He gazed round the room scanning for something which could be used to extract the watch from the jar. There was a poker beside the fireplace but Heinrich felt that might damage the watch. Some ash wouldn't hurt but the iron poker could easily scratch it. There was a carved wooden duck on the mantelpiece over the fireplace but it looked like the curvature of its neck wouldn't let the beak get as far as the watch. He got up out of his chair and stepped over to the duck to check and caught the end of the iron poker with his foot. It crashed resoundingly onto the stone hearth. He picked it up and replaced it in its rack.

His eyes swept further around the room. Obviously the TV was of no use nor the collection of DVDs. On past the curtains and over another bookcase. Nothing useful there. Perhaps there was something in the glass-fronted cabinet beside the door? Heinrich stood in front of the cabinet but he could see only crystal and glassware. He tried all the drawers in the lower section and found assorted things such as string, felt protectors to go under chair legs, a tube of dried glue and something that looked like a dead mouse but probably wasn't although he wasn't going to touch it just in case.

He wandered into the kitchen and looked around. He opened the fridge and saw some cold roast beef so he made himself a sandwich and wandered out into the hallway through the other kitchen door.

“Ich hätte etwas Senf dazugeben sollen”⁴ he thought. “Warum bin ich im Schlafzimmer?”⁵

Just as he remembered the watch in the ashtray jar the front door opened and his wife Mary came in. She was back from the community centre where she taught Conversational English two evenings a week to the local Germans. Being English herself it was an easy job and her conversational German wasn't quite good enough to get her a German

3 “Hmm, this needs thinking about”

4 “I should have put some mustard in”

5 “Why am I in the bedroom?”

speaking job.

“How was class?” asked Heinrich.

“It went quite well tonight” she replied. “Some of them are getting quite good. ”

She went into the lounge as Heinrich made them both some coffee.

“What have you been up to?” she asked when he brought the coffee in.

“I knocked my watch into the ashtray and I can't get it out.” he said shamefacedly. “My hand is too big and I can't find anything to use to pull it out. And if I upend it the ash will make a mess.”

Mary reached for the jar and deftly slipped her hand in and pulled out the watch. She handed it to Heinrich and he started wiping it clean with his handkerchief.

“Why didn't you empty the jar into the fireplace?” she said. “That's full of ash already.”

(47 minutes, 878 words)

My wife gave me a pocket watch for my birthday two or three years ago and I keep it on the bookcase beside my chair. When I reached for the dictionary for this night's words I knocked the watch into a glass coffee jar which I use as an ashtray. As I had no immediate inspiration from the words I started writing about knocking the watch into the ashtray and I thought it was time I wrote about a non-English person so I made the hero a German. When it came time for him to exclaim I thought he'd probably do it in German so I wrote it in German.

I could probably stay quiet here and let you think I speak German but I don't. I put the things I would have exclaimed into Google Translate, which is why, in case any Germans ever read this and wonder, Heinrich doesn't use German exclamations. He uses English exclamations translated into German.

I also thought it would be good for the sensible wife to solve the problem

rather than the moderately incompetent husband. This is no reflection on Germans vs English, it's more about women vs men.

Another good story I think, although my wife didn't like the German words as she thought they made it difficult to read.

Day 79 ~ 19th March 2019 Words: Caliper, Caliph, Calisthenics
(written 20th March)

ibn Abd al-Wahhab ibn Sulayman ibn Ali ibn Muhammad ibn Ahmad ibn Rashid ibn al-Waziraman, or Wasabi as he was known to us locally or the Caliph of Camden as he was known mainly to himself and his handful of devotees, was a fairly nice chap. A little prone to ranting when the mood was upon him but on the whole, fairly nice.

Wasabi frequented an area of London known as Camden. Basically Camden is the suburb between Regent's Park and Hampstead Heath and, despite being bounded by two delightful parks was a run down area packed with terraced houses and beginning to be infiltrated by yuppies. In the years to come it became a 'desirable area' but in those days it was a bit seedy and one of the cheaper housing areas of London. The other place of interest in Camden is the British Library which is how I came to know of him. I spent a fair amount of time there as I worked as a researcher for the Middle Eastern History Department of London University. It was my job to aid the professors, lecturers and doctoral students with their researches in the Middle East.

When one works in the same place frequently one gets familiar with others who are also frequently there and so it was that I had frequently seen a slight gentleman with a long greying beard in a dirty turban and robes that may once have been white. He generally sat in the same seat in the Middle East reading room and as far as I could tell devoted his time to political materials. We never spoke although after a couple of years we had begun to acknowledge each other's existence with almost imperceptible nods of the head.

As I lived on the outskirts of Camden – in Holloway, in a small flat not far from Holloway Women's Prison – my interests and social life and affiliation with the University mean that I periodically attended events for the Arabs who lived in London and knew many Arabs socially. Wasabi was someone I knew of as he often came up in conversations and had addressed a number of Arabic political rallies. What I didn't know was that he was the man I saw in the Library. This may seem a little strange as I have said I had seen him at rallies so surely I would have recognised him. The sad truth is that when you're

not an Arab but you are attending an Arabic political rally you tend to stay at the back so whenever I'd seen him address a rally I'd only ever seen a generic Arab at some distance. I suppose if I had been searching for similarities I might have recognised him but I wasn't and didn't.

And so it was that one fine summer day – yes we do sometimes get them in England – I walked out of the Library building intending to go to my weekly calisthenics class. I have a sweet tooth and I'm inclined to plumpness so I try to make an effort to stay in trim. It wasn't working but at least I was able to say with absolute sincerity that I did 'regularly work out' although, sadly, very few were sufficiently interested to enquire. The Arabic gentleman from the Library had left some minutes before but as I walked down the steps I noticed him just ahead of me on the pavement. He stood on the edge of the pavement looking in both directions at the traffic and then stepped off in order to cross Euston Road. Seemingly from out of nowhere, although admittedly I wasn't paying too much attention, a cyclist appeared and there was a tangle of two men and a bicycle lying in the gutter. It later transpired that the caliper brake on one of the bicycle's wheels had failed but I'm not technically minded.

Liking to think I am a man of action it took me no more than 2 or 3 minutes to appreciate the situation and render assistance. No harm was done but a small crowd had appeared as so often happens in a city where anything can become a few moments entertainment. As I helped my gentleman to his feet – he had suffered no injuries, other than to his pride perhaps – I heard someone in the group say “Aya Allah its the Caliph of Camden” and I instantly recognised him as the political agitator from the rallies I'd attended.

The cyclist was annoyed and rode off in a huff. I took Wasabi to a nearby cafe for a refreshing cup of tea and it was there that I began to get to know him. He was fairly well known in the Arab community but was otherwise alone and in time, over frequent cups of tea when we were both working at the Library, we slowly became friends.

Which explains why, at his funeral many years later, I was the only westerner to farewell him and I was privileged to be asked to write his obituary for The Times newspaper.

(50 min, 854 words)

This was fairly obviously driven by 'caliph' and I didn't fancy trying to write something set in Arabia so I set it in London instead, since I know London much better. I thought the 'Caliph of Camden' had a nice ring to it.

Mind you, once I'd got started it was quite difficult to figure out how to bring 'caliper' and 'callisthenics' into the story. Still, I think this works quite nicely.

Day 80 ~ 20th March 2019 Words: Tendon, Tendril, Tenebrous

My tendons were popping as I staggered through the gate for the last time. Fifty seven sacks doesn't seem that much but they were surprisingly heavy and had taken us some time to load.

“Right, all done. Let's go.” I called to Bill.

We both climbed into the van and he started the engine while I sat back, glad of a chance to rest. Bill was 20 years younger than me and fitter and I didn't want to seem pathetic even though he was no friend of mine. We pulled away from the gate and I called for him to stop. I needed to make sure the gate was properly secured.

We moved off again and once we had some speed up Bill glanced at me and said

“Fancy getting a coffee and something to eat at the cafe in town? It should still be open.”

“Sure”, I said. “We've a long drive and I'm hungry”

We drove in silence for a while.

“When do you reckon we'll get there?” I asked. I figured we'd probably arrive around 10ish.

“If there's no problems on the road, then probably after 10” Bill replied. “Maybe pushing 11”

“Yeah I was afraid of that. I was hoping we'd be able to finish before dark. That place gives me the creeps.”

Bill laughed in a way that suggested he got the creeps too but didn't want to admit it.

I put on the radio but the only stations were a couple of classic rock stations and a Talk Radio station that was in the process of getting thoroughly worked up about people trying to block live cattle exports. I turned off the radio.

“We’ll be in town in a few minutes” said Bill. “Do we need to do anything about that lot while we’re in the caf?”. He gestured to the back of the van with his head.

I thought for a moment. “I don’t think so. They’re in sacks and the van seems pretty sturdy. So long as the doors are locked we should be ok.”

Houses started to appear as we reached the outskirts of the town. As is so often the case with small country towns we were in the centre almost immediately. The shops were all grouped around a cross-road. I spotted a cafe and gestured off to the left. “Up there”

Bill did a left turn and pulled up opposite the cafe. The town seemed fairly deserted even though it was a while before it would get dark. The cafe had a couple of tables and rickety looking chairs outside. The windows could do with a wash. We locked the van and headed inside. It didn’t look too bad inside and was deserted apart from a couple of giggling teenage girls over by the ice-cream cabinet. It looked like they were comparing notes on some undeserving local teenage boy but who can tell to be honest.

We both studied the sign above the counter which listed an assortment of burgers.

“I’ll have a cheese burger with the lot and fries and a latte” said Bill to the lad behind the counter. He looked like he might have been the boy the teenage girls were giggling over.

“Same” I said.

The boy waved his fingers over the register and said “27 50” in a dull monotone. He glanced quickly at the girls then back at the register. Bill fished \$30 out of his wallet and waited for his change. I wandered off to the table nearest the window and sat down. Bill asked where there was a toilet and went outside to find it. The light was beginning to fade outside. The sun would have set by the time we’d finished eating. I glanced back into the cafe. The boy had disappeared, presumably to cook the food, and the girls had stopped giggling and were sombrely thumbing their mobile phones. I sighed. I wished I was

back in Sydney.

Bill returned just after the burgers had been delivered and we ate in silence. Mine had a faint whiff of fish as though the burger had been cooked in the same oil they did the battered fish in. I hoped for my heart's sake that the burger wasn't deep fried. Still, the tomato sauce that came with the chips was nice and tangy. And the coffee was hot and with several little tubes of sugar was quite palatable. It was definitely twilight when we walked out of the cafe and the town's four street lights had come on.

Bill farted copiously as we crossed the road and I was still trying to get the grease off my chin with a couple of paper napkins.

“Open up the van and I'll check in the back” I said.

He thumbed the key fob and I heard the clack as the locks disengaged. Moving round to the back of the van I was aware of the deep shadows cast by the solitary street light a little in front of the van. I pulled the handle and the van door lifted up with a wheeze. It scraped my chest as it went and I took half a step backwards.

The darkening day and shadow from the street light made the interior of the van tenebrous and eerie. It felt macabre as a dank musty smell oozed out. I stepped forward to take a closer look at the sack and froze as the loudness of Bill slamming his door echoed and resonated through to the back. I could feel the hair on the back of my neck start to stand up. A faint breeze ruffle the neck of my t-shirt and I felt a chill run down my spine.

“Jesus you're a wimp” I said to myself. “Get a friggin grip”.

I stepped forward to look at the nearest of the sacks. They were piled ominously and seemed to have shifted around since we'd put them in. The one nearest the wheel arch had a tendril which had made a hole in the sack and had extended itself part way around the sack next to it. As I stood there looking, the end of it twitched and twisted to face my direction. I stepped back again and slammed the door back down.

“Yeah everything's fine back here.” I called to Bill. “Let's go.”

(50 min, 1069)

This was the second story I wrote that day as I was still trying to catch up from my couple of days off. It is notable for being my first story to go over 1000 words and for being my first attempt at horror. It was driven by 'tendril' and 'tenebrous', which means "dark or obscure" and fails dismally as a horror story. It wasn't that fun to write either but then I'm not a big fan of horror stories so it was probably a bad decision on my part to go for horror.

Still, 1000 words! I impressed myself!

Day 81 ~ 21st March 2019 Words: NYC, Nylon, Nymph

I don't like cheese. I never have. But that's what was in the sandwiches so I ate them. You can't be that fussy when you rely on what's in the garbage. The good news was they weren't soggy.

"Hey honey. spare a buck or 2 for a disabled vet?" I called out to a passerby who studiously ignored me as she gave me a wide berth. I grinned. Women like that never gave to the homeless.

I carefully folder the sandwich wrapper and stuffed it in an inside pocket. Never know when it might come in handy. I went back to my patch in the doorway. Things were quiet at the moment. The big rush would come when the lunch breaks started and all the office workers went mad trying to get food to eat at their desks. I know. I used to be one of them.

Time was when NYC was a great place. It was always busy, always hustling but these days its got a lot quieter. Well, there's only maybe a quarter of the people there used to be. Vacant shops and office blocks everywhere. I remember when the streets were crowded with cars, honking and spewing noxious fumes everywhere. Now the few cars on the roads glide silently past. If you ask me they're a damned sight more dangerous now. You can't hear them coming.

I sat back against the door of what had once been a 30 story block of offices occupied mostly by finance companies and property developers. Now there was only one office still in use and they used the other entrance round the corner. TJL Lawyers Inc. Just goes to show you can't exterminate vermin.

I was half asleep when I heard the click-clack up the street. I couldn't place the sound at first. It was vaguely familiar but I hadn't heard it for some years. I looked up and yes, that was it. High heels on a sidewalk. Oh baby, a sight for sore eyes! Open toed, 4 inch heels, a smooth glossy black with an ankle strap. Smart. Sophisticated. As she approached I called out

"Shine your shoes for a dollar missy" and grinned. I always grin when I'm panhandling as it reassures the johns. No one gives money to

angry evil looking people. She totally ignored me as I expected but I did get a chance to take a good look at her legs. Oh boy she must have some great contacts. Nylons stopped being available, ohh, 8, 9 years ago but her pins were sexily wrapped in the sheerest nylons I ever did see. I was just checking out the length of her hem when the click-clacking stopped. Then she turned and click-clacked back towards me but stayed out of arms reach. Sensible girl. You never can be too sure of who you meet on the street these days.

“How can you shine my shoes?” she said. Written down like that you get no appreciation of how broad her Bronx accent was. OK she was no classy lady but ..., well, just but. “You ain’t got no shoe shining stuff.”

I looked up at her face. She was no nymph but hey who needs nymphs. Real women are hard to come by. Her make-up was a bit thick but I figured that was to protect her skin against the pollution. No one wants acid roughened skin at, mmm, maybe 30 I guessed. Old bums like me, it doesn’t matter. No one cares how soft and baby-smooth my skin might be under the wear and tear of years on the streets.

“Honey for you I’ll improvise” I drawled. “I got plenty of spit and who needs a cloth when you’ve got one of these.” I rummaged in my pocket and pulled out the sandwich wrapper. “And for a chair you can use my knees.” I grinned again. She was probably going to aim a kick at me but its fun to hold a conversation now and then. I hadn’t had such a long conversation with anyone for several days.

She grimaced and withdrew a half step. Then, and this was an interesting thing to see, she visibly pulled herself together. Like she was acting a part and had missed her cue.

“Now just why do you think I’d let a dirty old man like you touch my sweet shiny shoes?” she replied. “You’ll just make them messy.”

“Sweetie, I know you ain’t never gonna let a bum like me near your shoes. I just like looking at you. You make an old bum very happy.” Damn, was I a smooth talker or what!

She laughed. No, it was more of a high pitched giggle. Personally I kinda like deep-throated, husky giggles but when you don't talk to a sweet little lady from one year to the next you become very tolerant. She pulled out a pack of cigarettes, the no-nicotine, healthy kind, and said

“Want one?”

I leaned forward and stretched out my arm but she was still a little too far away for me to reach the proffered cigarette. She raised an eyebrow and lit one herself and tossed it to me. I picked it up and inhaled deeply. She lit one herself and looked around.

“Nice doorway” she said. “Looks like it'll stay dry when it rains.” She paused for a moment.

“See ya round bud”

She turned and click-clacked off down the street. Fleeting I thought I saw a half wave but most likely she was just throwing her butt into the roadway.

(51 min, 936 words)

I've never been to New York and, although I've probably seen loads of TV shows and movies set in New York, I didn't feel up to writing anything that involved the place directly. Having said that I read an excellent book a few years ago by a guy who was homeless in New York and escaped by writing so I used that as the basis of an encounter between a homeless man and a woman. Just to beef it up a little I set it in the future when pollution and climate change had significantly reduced the population and the cars were electric. To spice it up a little there's also an implied reference to silicon sex dolls which I'd read about in the news. The American slang I used is from old movies so I'd doubt anyone talks like that nowadays.*

Sitting on the toilet the following morning I realised there is a logic error in this story. If there is so much empty property around, why is he homeless? If I edited, I would change him from homeless to a beggar, perhaps living rough in one of the ground floor offices because the elevators don't run anymore. Aside from that I was very happy with this story and

my wife quite liked it too.

* Grand Central Winter by Lee Stringer, Washington Square Press,
1999

Day 82 ~ 22nd March 2019 Words: Lissom, List, Listeria

I woke up gradually. I pushed back the covers a little so I could see and screamed. There was a tiger staring at me. After a panic attempt to leap out of bed my primitive amygdala began to release its grip on my brain and some element of logic began to emerge. Why would there be a tiger in a bedroom in Melbourne and why wasn't I already dead? Something didn't add up here. From my cowering huddle in a corner of the room I carried out a survey with one eye. There it was. Up on the wall. A giant poster of a tiger staring at me in glorious technicolour, at least 2 metres wide. My pulse dropped slightly below 200 and my hyperventilation slowed. Fortunately I hadn't wet the bed. Or had I? I pulled back the bed clothes and everything looked nice and dry. That was a relief. I really didn't want to have to explain to Julie? Judy? Jenny? ... about, well, about anything really. It slowly dawned on me that I couldn't have wet the bed anyway as I now needed to do my wake-up routine. There had to be a toilet nearby. There was only one door to this bedroom so I headed towards it, grabbing my jeans and shirt on the way. As I was putting one leg into the jeans I noticed an extremely large spider in a glass frame labelled Tarantula. Just as well I didn't see that first or wetting the bed would have been minor.

The door opened onto a small hallway and there was a partly open door a little way along it through which I thought I could see tiles. I pushed it open and it was indeed a bathroom. With nothing scary on the walls although the piles of discarded underwear and the cabinet overflowing with half used makeup accessories was a little worrying. I live alone and wasn't used to females and their bathrooms. Anyway, more pressing matters need to be dealt with and were, promptly. I took the opportunity afterwards of washing my face and hands and combing my hair with my fingers so I would be reasonably presentable when I found Julie/Judy/Jenny. Or was it Sandy? OK there is some potential for embarrassment to come.

The hallway seemed to open up at one end so I made my way in that direction. Sure enough it opened onto a smallish lounge with a couch which I remembered quite well from last night and which seemed to have suffered no damage although there were a couple of cushions on the floor and some empty cans. Beyond the lounge was a kitchen

which was separated from the lounge by a counter-top. There was no one there either. Maybe Julie/Judy/Jenny/Sandy had run away? Maybe this wasn't her place and she'd gone home? No doubt I will find out sooner or later. The most pressing need was fluids, ideally caffeinated. I scanned the kitchen and sure enough there was a kettle. There seemed to be enough water in it so after experimenting a little I turned it on. A few moments opening cupboards found a mug and a jar of coffee, not a reputable brand but needs must. Another cupboard revealed some sugar and there were some spoons as well as other assorted cutlery beside the sink. I couldn't find an intravenous drip anywhere so this would have to be the old fashioned way.

The refrigerator had a large whiteboardy thing on it headed in fat happy letters "LIST" but there was nothing on it. After staring at the chaos inside the fridge I spotted a carton of what looked like milk and managed to extract it without causing an avalanche. I plonked myself down on the couch – what memories it brought back! - and wondered where I had left my phone. A few minutes later the calming goodness of hot coffee was spreading its way through my body. I considered picking up the cushions and binning the empty cans but figured that if there was a chance of this developing into a relationship I didn't want to set a precedent.

A key turned in the front door lock and it opened to reveal the lissom figure of the uncertain name and delightful and energetic charms with a hessian bag.

"Oh hi Bill, you're up" she said. Relief flooded through me. My name was Phil not Bill so when I got her name wrong it wouldn't be all one sided.

"Hi gorgeous" I said, playing it safe for the moment. After all, a lady who keeps tigers and tarantulas in her bedroom is likely to be unpredictable. Then I stopped as I couldn't think of anything to say. After all, we hadn't done a whole lot of talking the night before and the morning after is always a little tense.

"I was hoping to be back before you got up. I hope you haven't had any of the milk. I got a tweet saying that there was an outbreak of listeria from milk at my local store so I went out to get some fresh

from another store.” said Julie/Judy/Jenny/Sandy or was it Jessie?

“Why didn't you throw out the old milk before you went?” I asked. “By the way, my name's Phil, not Bill.”

She smiled that crazy little smile that had driven me wild last night. A kind of shy, knowing, uncertain but oh so incredibly sexy smile. “It never crossed my mind. I was rushing to get you some breakfast in bed before you woke up.” She grinned. “I'm Karen, in case you'd forgotten.”

(52 min, 944 words)

What prompted me to write about the morning after a one night stand I've no idea. Certainly it was all from imagination as I've never had a one night stand. I guess the driving word here was 'lissom' as it's invariably used to refer to a woman rather than a man. The trouble with the girl's name was from experience as, many years before I met my wife, I met a girl in a nightclub and because of the noise I wasn't quite sure what her name was after we'd introduced ourselves. I was too embarrassed to ask her name again the next time we met so it was two or three weeks before I found out who I was dating. I also liked the idea that even though it was a one nighter, both Phil and Karen were sort of hoping it would last longer.

I had two problems towards the end of this one – why was the apartment empty when Phil woke up and how on earth do I bring in 'listeria'? I managed to combine the two – perhaps implausibly – but I think how I managed was pretty creative.

Day 83 ~ 23rd March 2019 Words: Lintel, Lion, Lip (written 24th March)

Street lights were coming on. Twilight lent a sense of tranquillity to the city despite the roar of traffic. The chill early mist promised a cold night. Misha shivered in her thin overcoat as she walked quickly but aimlessly along the river path towards the steps up to the bridge. It was too chilly to walk slowly and she had an hour to kill.

Keith had left the underground station and was crossing the bridge. He was in a bad mood because he was always in a bad mood. Work was a constant source of irritation and this particular job was more irritating than most. What irritated him most of all was that being in a bad mood made it difficult to paint and painting was the only thing that put him in a good mood. The problem was that no one liked his style of painting. He was, he felt, ahead of his generation and severely underappreciated. No matter how much his teachers at art college raved about his unusual creativity it had failed to translate into good reviews let alone sales.

Ian and Brad didn't have the same problems as Keith. Neither had ever even had a good word from their teacher on the odd occasions when they'd bothered to turn up at school. They had no great passions in life and no particular likelihood of finding employment once they were old enough. They did enjoy each other's company which was unusual for brothers separated only by a year. They had been kicking a beer can back and forth but lost it when they started to go down the steps to the river walk. That was annoying. Still, it looked like there was a new toy at the bottom of the steps.

Misha had reached the steps up to the bridge when she spotted the two lads coming down. Knowing it was bad luck to cross on the stairs and given that the steps weren't overly wide she waited for them to come down.

Brad elbowed Ian in the ribs and nodded his head at Misha. "Tasty" he said. "Very tasty" Ian agreed. "Looks like the bitch has some money too."

As they neared the bottom of the steps Ian speeded up slightly and

grinned broadly at Misha as he stepped past. Brad stopped in front of her. Misha felt a faint sense of alarm as he stood there and looked her over.

“Nice night for it, innit” he said. Misha glanced around but the area was deserted and the mist and darkness obscured the street lights from above. The bridge loomed menacingly overhead and beneath the bridge the water lapped quietly in almost complete darkness. She felt a touch on her bottom and half screamed and jumped back. She stumbled into Ian who casually put an arm around her.

“Sweet, she wants me” he said to Brad. “Look how she jumped on me” He laughed. Brad stepped forward so he was almost touching Misha and she could feel his breath on her face, his eyes level with hers. She tried to step away but Ian tightened his grip. She was trembling and her vision had shrunk to only his face. She tried to break away but Ian was too strong.

“So what's ya name cutie?”

Misha jerked back violently as Brad stroked the hair that hung loose at the side of her face and Ian swore. “Fuckin' bitch's right jumpy.” This time he sniggered. Misha's heart was pounding and despite the chill evening air she had started sweating.

“Love ya hair babe” said Brad.

He undid the top button of Misha's overcoat. “Let's see what the rest of ya looks like. Could be ya lucky night sweetheart. Just the three of us and no fuckers to interrupt.”

He undid the second button and Misha felt the panic rising. She struggled in Ian's grip but couldn't break free.

Brad undid the third button and slipped his hand inside.

“Sweet tits baby” he said cupping her breast inside the thin sweater. “Oh are we gonna have some fun with you”. He tipped his head forward and tried to kiss her. Misha tried to scream but his lips were in the way. She desperately tried to remember anything from the self

defence classes she'd taken but her mind was blank with panic. Desperately she lashed out with her knee but only succeeded in hitting Brad on the side of his hip.

A knife appeared in his hand. "So the fucking bitch likes it rough huh." The knife shone dully in the gloom. "we'll make it as rough as she wants." He pulled her sweater away from her body and neatly slit it all the way to the neck. Misha felt herself beginning to faint with fear. Her eyes were wide and her heart was pounding. Brad pulled the cut sides of the sweater apart and looked appreciatively at her breasts firmly encased in her bra.

He nodded his head to the area under the bridge. "Get her in there mate" he said to Ian. "I ain't waiting no longer then you can have a go."

Ian had started to drag Misha under the lintel of the bridge when a dark shadow flew across the side of his vision and crashed into Brad, sending him sprawling on the concrete path. A dark shape rose up and viciously kicked Brad's head then turned toward Misha. Ian let go of Misha and she slumped to the ground, the unexpected release and her heightened panic deprived her muscles of any strength.

Ian launched himself at the shadow and stumbled as something hard hit him on the nose and he felt it crack. The blood tasted salty in his mouth. He lurched over to Brad who was groaning and trying to get up. Ian grabbed Brad under his arm and together they disappeared into the night. The shadow bent over Misha. She was half sitting half kneeling. The adrenaline coursed through her as she faced another attacker.

"Be calm, be calm, you're safe now. They've gone." said Keith. "Did they hurt you?"

Misha couldn't make out the words but heard the tone of his voice and its softness reassured her. She slowly stopped gasping for air as her heart began to slow down.

"Be calm now. You're safe. Its all over" Keith said again. He helped her to her feet. "Are you hurt?"

This time Misha heard the words and tried to say she was unhurt but her voice wouldn't work. She tried again. "No I'm not hurt."

She gulped a couple of breaths and "Oh thank god thank god". She started sobbing and fell against Keith. He put his arms around her, very conscious of her sweater falling open. She collapsed into his arms. He tried to sooth her but his arms were full of a terrified girl. He just kept repeating "You're safe now, everything's ok. You're safe now".

Later that evening, after he'd fed her tea and muffins at a nearby cafe and she'd calmed down enough for her to decide not to go to the police he took her to her mother's in a taxi. He gave Misha's mother his name and phone number in case Misha changed her mind about the police. Back in the sanctuary of his studio apartment shock set in and he sat in an overstuffed armchair shaking uncontrollably with tears streaming down his face. Much later still he was lying in bed, sleeplessly going over the events, unable to rid his mind of the memory of her body against his. "Oh yes, I was like a lion" he thought proudly to himself. "A lion."

Then, "I wonder if she'll ring me?"

(70 min, 1292 words)

This story is unusual in that I had a vague idea of what I wanted to write about before I even got the words. I'd picked up a book at the library two or three days earlier and had been absolutely fascinated. It was about how the body and the brain reacts to fear and I wanted to explore that in a story. Being male I know the man's perspective on rape (up to a point since I've never raped anyone) so I decided to try to incorporate the book on fear with the woman's perspective but since I didn't want to write porn I needed a saviour – which also helped with 'lion'. 'Lintel' was a real pain though so I set it under a bridge – which would, I imagine, be a good place to try to rape someone in a chance encounter – although I have no idea if bridges have lintels.*

My wife thought I had covered Misha's reactions quite well.

My 45 minute time limit didn't last long, barely a week, before I upped it

again. This time to an hour.

My wife had started reading my stories and was working through them at around eight per day, so by this point she was probably up to the end of February. She suggested that we rearrange the furniture so that the smallest bedroom, which we used as a general dumping area, be tidied up so it was a nice environment for me to write in. We spent this day shifting stuff around which is why I didn't write that evening.

** Extreme Fear: the science of your mind in danger by Jeff Wise, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.*

Day 84 ~ 24th March 2019 Words: Gall Bladder, Galleon, Gallery
(written 25th March)

I arrived at the shop at the usual time, around 11am. We didn't open until 1pm but I had some work to do and wanted to get rid of it early. We stayed open until 9pm, sometimes later if a client made an appointment and often I'd spend the evening dining a prospective client. I say 'we', really there was only me although I had a student who came in on Wednesdays and Fridays to help out. I parked my Porsche in the small yard behind the shop, locked it and entered through the back door into the small kitchenette. Adjoining the kitchenette was my small office where I dumped the letters I'd picked up from the Post Office Box on my way in. I didn't need a large office as it was mostly just a place to store the paperwork and there wasn't a great deal of that. This is the great benefit of working with luxury goods. You don't have many sales but the ones you do are highly profitable. In the first 6 months of this year, for example, I'd only sold 19 art works which is fewer than one a week but they had sold for substantially over 3 million and netted a very tidy profit. Life was pretty good. Even though there was a recession looming, these economic problems didn't seriously affect the extremely wealthy. If they did cut back it was on staff, not those items they purchase to reflect their status. And, of course, the few genuine art lovers will pay any price and make any sacrifice for special paintings.

With a coffee beside me I sat at my table and checked the mail. A couple of invoices, some enquires from clients, some junk circulars and two catalogues for forthcoming auctions. I put those aside to peruse later. Auctions were very useful as many of the minor artists' work could be bought relatively cheaply and the auction houses, at least the reputable ones, had already done the hard work of checking the provenances saving me the effort. I put the invoices in a folder for the bookkeeper to deal with on her monthly visit and forgot about them. Booting my computer I started to write personal letters to a number of clients informing them of new works the gallery had to offer and inviting them for private inspections. These things take time as you don't send standard letters to such people. Each has to be crafted and refer specifically to their tastes and casually make mention of particular things about them such as a new grandchild or whatever. This makes them feel a little special and, god knows, the filthy rich

have an insatiable need to feel special.

At 12.30 the cafe across the road delivered my lunch as usual. Today it was a wagyu beef with roast beetroot and eggplant sandwich. It wasn't too bad for a fancy sandwich. After washing my hands and face I flicked on the multitude of light switches that controlled the array of spotlights places to show of each art work to best advantage and started the sound system which played soft Indian flute music to create a suitable ambience. Opening the front security grill to show we were now open I collected the auction catalogues and took up position in an armchair strategically placed so as to be visible to anyone entering whilst being unobtrusive. Typically we had half a dozen or so casual visitors who dropped in just to look at some pretty pictures. Once or twice a week we'd get a visitor who might turn into a potential client. Unfortunately there was no way of telling the difference. One of my better clients was basically a scruffy out-of-date hippy who looked like he needed to beg on the street but in fact owned a renovated castle and spent more on art each year than my little shop turned over in ten years. He had a special fondness for surrealism and I had personally seen several Dali's in his private collection.

It was mid afternoon when an elderly lady walked in. She was fairly short and conservatively dressed and bore a slight resemblance to Queen Elizabeth. The second, not the first. She glanced in my direction but made no other acknowledgement and turned her gaze to the selection of Post-Impressionists in the front gallery. I left her to it. People need time to absorb art and interfering salesmen are a nuisance. She'll talk to me when the need arises. I resumed contemplation of The Mary Rose, a painting of a galleon on fire at sea by Richard Willis, a minor but established painter of the early 20th century. It certainly had potential but I feared that the auction price could end up rather high compared with the price I'd be able to charge. Certainly it was worth visiting the auction but I probably wouldn't bid unless it looked as though there wasn't much interest.

The old lady moved through to the Modern Surrealists gallery and disappeared from sight. My phone rang and I answered it. It was Jerome Cavanaugh ringing to ask if I had heard of Neville Zartok. I assured him I had and briefly described a couple of his paintings I

could remember seeing while quickly looking through my card index for Jerome Cavanaugh's details. I kept this index scrupulously up to date with every little titbit of information I came across about clients as you can never tell when an isolated remark can make a sale. It seems Jerome had recently been in the business news as the architect of a major deal to finance a large scale wind farm on the Welsh border. Jerome asked if I had any Zartok's and before answering that I congratulated him on his deal. He was, as I expected, delighted that the news of his importance had spread and audibly relaxed. I then told him that I didn't have any Zartok's personally but that I knew of one that the present owner was thinking of selling. It was quite apparent that Jerome had no idea about Zartok so I mentally estimated a figure that I knew the present owner would be delighted to receive and doubled it. Jerome seemed quite happy with that figure and I agreed to liase with the owner to make an appointment to view. Depending on Jerome's reaction at that viewing the final price could well be triple rather than double.

As I hung up, the old lady appeared. She seemed rather frail so I offered her my chair and retrieved another from behind a curtain for myself. She didn't thank me.

"I saw a painting in that back room of yours which looked like it was of the royal Greenwich Navel Hospital. Is that correct?"

"Indeed, Mrs?", I prompted.

"Gloria Swanford" she replied, not correcting the 'Mrs'.

I introduced myself. She couldn't have cared less.

"You are quite correct" I said, "its a painting by Joshua Reynolds of the north side of the Royal Greenwich Hospital, painted in 1834 for the retiring Director of the Hospital. After his death the painting was acquired by his son in law, the Marquis of Chelmsford. I have its full provenance".

"Quite, quite" she said with a hint of exasperation in her voice. "My late husband, Admiral Sir Charles Swanford, was a patient there some years before he died. Gall stones y'know. Had to have his gall bladder

removed. Dreadful business but the Hospital looked after him well.”

I nodded sympathetically. There didn't seem to be any appropriate reply I could make and Gloria Swanford did not seem the type to require sympathy.

“What price are you asking for that painting? She asked. I gave her a figure.

She looked at me with contempt. “Come, come, young man. I wish to buy the painting, not the Hospital”.

I laughed pleasantly. The painting had not attracted any attention before and I had regretted buying it some time ago even though I'd got it cheaply. I also had a feeling that Gloria Swanford was not an art lover nor someone trying to impress others by owning art. Almost certainly she wanted the picture as a memento of the late Admiral. I took 25% off the original figure.

She just stared at me. Clearly she was a woman who knew what she wanted and how to make others acquiesce. I offered her a drink.

“Can I offer you a coffee or perhaps something a little stronger?”.

She condescended to accept a sherry.

“Perhaps you'd like to have another viewing of the painting while I organise the refreshments?”

“Yes I will.” She rose to her feet and strode off to the rear gallery, her walking stick was clearly an affectation rather than a necessity. Normally I suggest another viewing so the client can revisit the picture and reinforce their desire for it. Somehow I suspected that Gloria Swanford was reconsidering rather than reinforcing. I kept a selection of good quality alcohols in the kitchenette. The wealthy cannot abide cheap booze.

I took her sherry to the rear gallery where she was studying a painting of a minor stately home in Berkshire.

“Looks far better in the picture than it does in real life. The Gervaises' never could afford to maintain it properly.”

She turned her steel blue eyes on me. Despite her age and apparent infirmity she definitely had presence.

“Now, about my painting. Have you reconsidered the asking price?”

My' painting?

I smiled. It was all over bar the shouting. I had a sale.

(1hr 36 min, 1609 words)

The thing to notice here is that my 1 hour time limit didn't last long! This is the last story where I've given the time it took to write as I thereafter abandoned any time limit and just went for writing a complete story.

A 'galleon' is an old Spanish warship and I really didn't want to write a story set on board an old Spanish warship. Fortunately 'gallery' suggested an art gallery and so the galleon could be a painting and the setting could be modern. The character of Gloria Swanford was based on my mother. I have no idea how art galleries work so I just made it all up.

Day 85 ~ 25th March 2019 Words: Laundry, Laureate, Laurel
(written 26th March)

Every Sunday morning I thank God. Not that I am a believer, by the way, it's just an expression that has become entrenched in our culture. I don't kneel and worship some deity every Sunday, I simply give my thanks to some nameless engineer at Hoover or somewhere like that for washing machines. More specifically I am simply appreciating the fact that I do not have to carry all the laundry to a river bank and beat it on stones for ages. No wonder disease was rampant in those days when basic cleanliness was such hard work. Now you just throw the clothes into a large box, push a couple of buttons and come back in an hour or so.

Having offered up my soulless prayer and loaded the machine and pushed its buttons I am then free to go to my music lesson each Sunday morning. I've been going every week for ohh, 18 months or so and I'm becoming fairly proficient. I'm learning to play the piano. A fiendishly difficult instrument made worse by the seeming lack of logic in the way music is written on paper. I'm sure there is a better way but since a lot of clever people over the last few centuries have been involved with music they would probably have come up with a better way by now if there was a better way. My piano teacher, Georges, seems happy with my progress although he keeps saying I should spend more time on the theory. The problem is that I enjoy playing more than I enjoy the theory. Anyway, his wife makes a lovely cup of coffee which we have after the lesson and before I come home to empty the washing machine.

It probably seems that I lead a highly structured life but in fact Sunday morning is the only part of my life with any structure. The rest of the time anything can happen. This is because I'm a medium and I receive, for want of a better word, communications and signs from the afterlife. Generally I leave myself open to these communications but because I need to get my washing done and take my music lesson I shut that part of my mind off on Sunday mornings. I hope that if any spirit has some important message to give that he, she or it will try again later. What makes life chaotic is that sometimes, without warning, I may be required to do something or find someone and often I have to drop whatever I'm doing to comply. For example, only

last week I “heard” a phone number I had to ring and tell whoever answered to under no circumstances get into their car until it had been checked by a mechanic. This took a fair amount of explaining. After all, getting a phone call from a stranger who doesn't even know your name about a fault in your car needs a lot taken on trust. Anyway, as it turned out, there was a fault in the anti-skid system and since the roads were wet and greasy that day there was a chance that the car may have skidded. Getting the messages isn't the time consuming part, its acting on them.

Back in my laundry room that day I noticed that the laurel tree outside the window was looking sad. After unloading the washing and hanging it to dry I went and inspected the tree. I couldn't see anything particularly wrong. Certainly there were no deep gouges or obvious pests and since it had been raining recently its unlikely that it needed water. Perhaps it was just getting old. There tree had been there when I bought the house 10 or 11 years ago and I had no idea how long laurel trees lived. While I was there, old Mrs Bunting from next door stuck her head out of her side window to ask if there was a problem. I explained about the tree and she came out to inspect it. She agreed it was looking sad but admitted she knew nothing about trees as her hobby was roses. Her garden demonstrated the truth of this as it was filled with a variety of magnificent roses and had no trees whatsoever. I seem to remember that she's won a laureate or two at local flower shows but I didn't like to mention that in case she hadn't and felt bad about it.

She suggested I had a chat with the appropriately named Michael Woods at number 37 as he worked as a gardener with the Council. This seemed to be a good idea and after chatting about her roses for a few minutes and ummimng and erring about whether or not to disturb him I ambled up the road to number 37. I have to say, looking at his front garden, that it didn't seem to be in as good condition as you'd expect from a professional gardener but I daresay being a gardener all day at work would probably disincline you from gardening at home at the weekends. After all, the weekend is supposed to be time off. Anyway, he wasn't in but his daughter said she'd pass on a message oor if I'd prefer I could find him at the Red Lion around the corner.

I thanked her and went back down the path past the overgrown grass

and dying daffodils – no rose bushes in sight so I wondered how Mrs Bunting had got to know him – fully intending to go home and forget about it. It was unlikely that Mr Woods would bother to come round even if he did get the message. His daughter had seemed charming but she also left me with the impression she was unreliable and had probably gone straight back to working on her hair or nails and had forgotten about me before the door shut. Anyway, just as I reached my own front gate I 'heard' a message telling me I needed to go to the Red Lion although there were no details. So I closed the gate and walked back towards the Red Lion. After a few paces I went back home again as I had no money on me and it was unlikely that I'd know anyone at the pub who'd buy me a drink. I've only been there a couple of times and none of my usual acquaintances went to pubs very often. Even if I met Michael Woods there, and I had no real idea what he looked like, its unlikely he'd buy me a drink either.

At the Red Lion I paused for a moment wondering whether to go into the Public Bar or the Saloon Bar. The message hadn't been that specific. I opted for the Saloon Bar because I can be a bit snobbish at times and regard the Public Bar as a little down market. Certainly it was noisier and more crowded with men drinking heavily whereas the Saloon Bar had people sitting at tables eating bar meals and talking relatively quietly. I got myself a gin and tonic from one of the bar staff who barely glanced at me and retired to a vacant seat to wait for another message which would clarify why I was there. There was a darts game going on at the far end of the bar. I'm no expert but it looked as though neither of the players were experts either. I saw both of them miss the board entirely a couple of times.

Beside me was a youngish couple who looked at though they were on a first or second date. They were far too interested in each other to be married and they talked with a curious delicacy as though still afraid of annoying or offending the other by accident. I smiled. Its nice to see people getting to know each other. It fills be with hope for some strange reason. On the other side of me were three youngish men and a girl animatedly discussing a football match. I know less about football than I do about darts so much of their conversation was beyond me but I was interested to see that not only did the girl have much to say about the match but the three men listened and took her seriously. That too was encouraging. In the age of #MeToo its easy to

think that women are still dismissed as inconsequential by men generally.

I lingered over my gin and tonic as no more messages had come through and I didn't want to get drunk while waiting. I'd looked around the bar but hadn't seen anyone I knew although there was a gentleman who bore a resemblance to my doctor. After staring at him for a while I decided he wasn't my doctor and, frankly, I was a little uncertain about how I felt about my doctor drinking. After all, there is no reason why he shouldn't enjoy a drink just like anyone else but the idea of him possibly being drunk when I went to see him for some reason seemed a little unpalatable. It also seemed unfair as most people who have a social drink on a Sunday don't end up being drunk at work but I can be as irrational and prejudiced as the next person. Anyway, as he wasn't my doctor it wasn't an issue at all. As I thought about it I realised that if he were my doctor I'd rather he was in the pub on a Sunday afternoon than drinking alone at home as that would indicate a bigger problem but I squashed that line of thinking when I realised I was just being stupid. The football fanatics had by this time moved on to another match and the first daters were still talking about inconsequential things. The darts players had given up and no one was using the dartboard. It had been forty minutes since I'd had the message and I still had no clue why I was there. This does happen occasionally. Just as with normal human messages sometimes things are misunderstood or miscommunicated or simply wrong. I swallowed the last of the gin and tonic and headed for the toilet.

Outside the pub there was a very cute little dog tied to a railing who desperately wanted to make my acquaintance so we spent a few minutes telling each other how wonderful we were then I headed for home. My Woods front yard was the same as before so clearly he hadn't found the urge to do anything about it while in the Red Lion. His daughter was just getting into a car with a young man in the driving seat so it was a safe bet that with her boyfriend about to arrive I would have left her mind instantly. I opened my gate and walked up the path, vaguely aware that something had changed. I wasn't sure what it was but something looked different. I paused and looked around. No, I couldn't identify anything. It was more of a general awareness than anything specific. I opened the front door and walked inside. The feeling was still there but still I could see nothing wrong.

Unusually my cat wasn't in her usual spot on the sofa but she did occasionally move so I couldn't deduce anything from that. I walked into the kitchen to put the kettle on and noticed the laundry door was askew, which was strange as it had been fine when I closed it earlier. I tried to open it but it only moved a couple of inches before coming up against something that was stopping it opening.

“How strange” I thought. “I wonder if the cat went in and knocked something over?” Although I couldn't think of anything she could knock over that close to the door. I went back out the front door and walked around the side of the house as the back door opened off the laundry. The laurel tree had given way and crashed through the roof of my laundry and, as far as I could tell by peering through the window and the mass of branches and leaves, totally wrecked my washing machine and the laundry sink. It was fortunate that I had finished the washing before I went out.

(2052 words)

As so often is the case I have no idea how I came up with the idea of a medium being kept away from her house because a tree was about to fall on it. Still, my wife and I both thought this was a great story and I relished the freedom of not having a time limit. It meant I could ramble and flesh the story out with a bit of character.

Day 86 ~ 26th March 2019 Words: Cruelty, Cruet, Cruise

It begins with fresh words
And all ends with pain
The cruelty of life
A constant refrain

A cruet of salt
In an open sore
Love is the balm
To even the score

A wound of the flesh
A long tale of woe
A marching of time
The deadliest foe

True love brings joy
Yet love can bring pain
But still when its lost
We can all love again

A journey of hope
A cruise into glory
Love still remains
The heart's pressing story

Three words I must use
In this brief endeavour
The fact that its done
Means that I'm clever!

The love of ones self
Must always be brief
For such a love
Can only bring grief

So clever or not, I
Relinquish the prize
For the love of another

True happiness buys

My limit is near
No poet am I
Just a word hacking
Wastrel, doomed to die

But in my defence
I've lived a life long
And though out of tune
I've sung my love's song

The problem with having no time limit is that you tend to spend longer on something. The last story would have taken 2½ to 3 hours and I was behind and needed to catch up so I cheated. I deliberately chose to knock out a quick little poem to save time. I think this took maybe 20 or 25 minutes. It has no pretence at poetic merit, I don't even like poetry as I find it rather pointless. If you have something to say then say it and don't waste time trying to fit it in to some sort of rhythmic structure. Anyway, this was my first and undoubtedly my last poem and you can ignore it. It's only here so I can safely say I did write something.

Day 87 ~ 27th March 2019 Words: Affray, Affront, Afghan

“Back in the day.”

I seem to say that a lot nowadays. As a retired soldier turned businessman I spend a fair amount of time reminiscing about things that happened 'back in the day'. Meaning, of course, back in the days before the Cyber Wars brought powerful economies to their knees without a single shot being fired. When I was an Army officer, back in the day, we fought real wars. Wars where you risked being killed or worse and in turn killed the enemy. Now wars are fought on computer, pitting one economy against another. Inevitably people still die. Its impossible to crash an economy and not cause hardships that lead to deaths but they're not honourable deaths. They are 'collateral damage', incidental deaths, deaths of people who had no opportunity to pit their bravery against the odds.

I remember, for example, being a newly promoted captain in Afghanistan not long after terrorists attacked the USA. My CO called me in to his office one day and said

“Hillier, Intelligence has it that is a cell operating from some buildings in Al Harat. The details are in the paperwork. Get a squad together and take them out for me.” and pushed a slim file across his desk.

Expectations were high and we knew our enemy. I formed a squad and we took out the cell. We lost four comrades in the process and I killed my first Afghan. It shames me to say that I killed him with no more qualm than I would a mosquito but back in the day that was my job. We met and fought on equal terms and each knew who was the enemy. One skill pitted against the other and may the best man win. Now you have no idea who has attacked, very little idea of how and not much chance of even finding out when. Your death could well happen months after the event and because some service or other had ceased to function. You are defenceless and no amount of skill can save you. Not even advanced computer training. Your only hope is that someone on our side had launched a preemptive viral attack on their computer systems before they launched one against ours.

What I do miss most of all is the comradeship of army life. The

endless training and exercises that built trust and shared responsibility between the troops and their officers. The death of a comrade is worst than the death of a colleague. There is almost a bond of love between comrades that I've not found in civilian life. Nothing sexual of course, nothing queer about the lads in my regiment although I have heard of those things happening in other regiments. My lads were decent, honest and respectable. Trained to a peak of fitness and craftsmanship. Rarely even a case of STD although the local women were to blame for that. Intelligence even claimed to have some evidence that some women were deliberately infected with diseases in order to spread those diseases among our troops. Personally I don't believe that. The Afghans were honourable fighters, proud and worthy. They wouldn't stoop to such depths I'm sure.

Unlike some of the people I met in Civvy street after I left the Army. Back in the day, I had plans to build a tourism empire starting in the swamplands of Florida. I had thought I was a good judge of character but as it turned out I could only judge military character. The man I went into partnership turned out to be very undesirable. Very undesirable indeed. Clive Epstein was his name. Seems he spun me a pack of lies about his background and disappeared with most of the money I'd sunk into the enterprise, leaving me with a few worthless pieces of equipment and a small mountain of debts. Damned bad sort. Wouldn't have lasted five minutes in the Regiment.

I heard some time after the end of the Cyber Wars that Epstein had died in a private nursing home that failed to provide adequate care due to funding cuts due, in a fairly circuitous way, to an Asian attack via the London Stock Exchange. Wouldn't surprise me if he'd collaborated. No that is unjust of me. He was dishonourable and disreputable but I can honestly say I have no reason to think he was a traitor. But, of course, all services are at risk and disaster could strike my retirement home at any time. An attack on a stock exchange or a tax department and months later an unknown bureaucratic hand slashes a budget and hundreds if not thousands die or suffer unnecessarily.

Afghanistan wasn't the only affray I was involved with. I joined the army back in '97 and got my first taste of battle in Kosovo in '98 as a Second Lieutenant. Met my future wife there as a matter of fact. My

troop had been sent to a border town to police the frontier. On my second day there, a sunny day as I recall, I met a young Macedonian woman trying to get through the checkpoint. The Duty Sargent had spotted a problem with her papers and sent her to me for questioning as a possible agent. It was clear after a few minutes that she was not an agent of the rebels but just a young woman hoping to sell her fruit to the locals. She crossed the boarder twice a day for several weeks and we slowly got to know each other. After I was posted we stayed in touch by letter, in a confusing mix of English and Greek that we could barely understand ourselves and I'm sure confused the military censors no end. We married when I was on extended leave in '00. This is the point I'm trying to make. Back in the day people could make long term plans like marriage. Now there's no telling how the local economy is going to behave even next week let alone in years to come. Marriage, I read, has become increasingly rare as people become opportunists rather than planners. The birth rate is plummeting or so I've heard.

I'm sitting by the window of my room writing this. Outside I can see, in the middle distance, the road which passes the home and heads into the nearby town. On the other side is a semi-derelict building which was never finished. The owners lost their money, according to the local paper, before it went out of business in one of the first economic attacks. They were bankrupted and simply abandoned their construction projects. The early attacks were against specific companies. It was only later the Asians targeted governments and entire economies. A number of children have taken up residence in the unfinished building. Fortunately it has a roof but god alone knows what they live on. The food here is bad enough but at least the home still can afford to buy food despite the inflation. Back in the day those children, whom I presume to be orphans but they could simply have been abandoned, would have been cared for by various government services. Not any more. Society is collapsing. Maria would have been horrified and found some way to help them. She was always generous of heart. Which was her undoing of course.

I don't know why the food here is so bad. Admittedly we can't afford the best food anymore despite the fees going up dramatically every year but back in the day the army cooks could dole out palatable meals from whatever food was available. I suspect the so called chef

here sells the better food on the black market. I doubt he's a real chef anyway. He doesn't seem to be able to cook properly. Last night's rice was unspeakable. I ate it of course. Old army habit – eat whatever you can find when you find it. You need to keep your energy up. Useful skill to have when I was in Florida as well. Had to eat the occasional alligator when times were hard. Nasty tasting creatures alligators. Superb teeth though. I gave my wife an anniversary present of a necklace I'd made from the teeth of one. Wasn't much of a gift but she wore it for a long time, bless her heart. Good army wife Maria was. Stoic and resilient. Best type of woman in my opinion. Women have to put up with a lot and complainers don't impress me. Same with the troops. Lads who complain don't stay the course.

She died in hospital you know. She suffered a broken leg when a train ran out of control and failed to stop at the end of the line and ploughed through the people waiting at the station. I was in Alaska at the time trying to set up another business. She was taken to hospital but died from infection. This was during the 2nd Cyber War when public transport and hospitals were targeted. Back in the day she'd have survived a simple broken leg but the targeting had left the hospital without enough antibiotics so gangrene set in and spread. She was stoic about it of course. Wrote to me in our private language and maintained her cheerful attitude. Damned fine woman. I miss her tremendously. Damned fool me too for not taking her to Alaska. Too cold I thought, she'd catch her death. My mistake. One of many I'm afraid to say. Probably why I never rose above Captain.

I'm sure there are more children in the building across the road than there used to be. Back in the day we tried to have children. Maria wanted desperately to be a mother but I wasn't up for it. Didn't produce enough sperm or some such reason. We looked into adopting but the timing was bad as I'd just left the army and the adoption agency disapproved of my business plans. "You must have a stable family life" they kept saying. Hah. If only they'd know what was about to happen to stable family lives. Maria was so disappointed but she never blamed me. Damned fine trooper that woman. Could have done with her type in Afghanistan. Of course when she died I brought charges against the doctors who'd let her die but the judge took affront and dismissed the case. He was probably related to one of the doctors. These things happen in civilian life of course. Didn't seem to

care that my business in Alaska failed while I was in London after she died. Epstein would have hated it in Alaska. He always liked the heat and humidity of Florida. Not like the dry heat of Afghanistan. He'd have hated the calls to worship as well. Epstein wasn't one for religion, not even Islam. Maria was a Catholic. She tolerated muslims but never trusted them. Of course the army had no religious sectarianism. All religions were tolerated, back in the day. Not like now. Muslims everywhere. Those children over the road are probably muslims too. They have that look about them and they're all boys. You know what muslims are like with girls. Not in the army of course. The Afghan soldiers were always respectful of women. I mean the civilians. Maria hated that, and the children. The way they treated women and children. I could see it through the window. I miss Maria. She'd make everything better the way she always did back in the day. She could cook like a dream. Teach this chef a thing or two. She wouldn't sell the food on the black market either the children would make her cry though even though theyre muslims the chefs probably a muslim too trying to poison us all back in the day it wouldn't have been allowed but you just can't get the staff anymore any old riff raff will do not like the army where every recruit was hand picked selected and honed to a fighting perfection there are no good soldiers or bad soldiers only trained and untrained back in the day when things were done properly the way maria would have done things epstein was probably a muslim any damned fool can make money it takes a real man to fight a war i never made much money but i was a damned good soldier retired a captain back in the day when money was worth something damned fine woman maria god i miss her she wouldn't have let the children go hungry across the road back in the dayallpresentandcorrectsir

“Oh good. Tapioca and honey. My favourite. Have you seen my teeth Nurse Bukhari? I seem to have misplaced them.”

(2127 words)

You can blame my wife for this one. She'd caught up with reading my stories and suggested I write about someone in an old people's home reminiscing about the past.

'Affray' is a kind of fight and 'Afghan' suggested Osama Bin Laden so I thought I'd have a go at her idea with an old soldier reminiscing. I decided

to use Captain Hillier from an earlier story (24th February) and for some reason, which I don't remember, I decided to extend the terrorism idea to have computers fighting economic wars to try to bring down entire countries. I was struggling to find a way to bring this story to an end so I made Captain Hillier start to ramble as he fell asleep – which is why the words start to run together and he becomes inconsistent and it ends when he's woken up for his dinner. My wife didn't like this story at all and thought the rambling part was just my bad typing.

Day 88 ~ 28th March 2019 Words: Hint, Hinterland, Hip

I'm tired. Not just tired but so soul-crushingly tired that there is no word to describe it. Tired beyond tiredness. My awareness – mindfulness as we used to call it back in the days when we were hip and had leisure time and money to burn – has receded down to just my aching hands and the dead and deformed chicks I fed into the muncher. And when the buzzer sounds the end of my shift in an hour or so my exhausted, aching body will heave itself to my third job of the day. With luck in 5 hours or so I'd be able to sleep. A dreamless uninigorating 4 hours of sleep before the next day's work begins. How much longer can I keep it up?

My first job after leaving school was a teller in a bank. This was in 1998. I'd been good with numbers and the bank had spotted some potential in me and groomed me for a life in trading stocks. The money was good and I was young free and single and the early 2000's sped by in a haze of high flying deals and low down parties in expensive dives. My car was fast and my women were faster and the money disappeared fastest of all. I was a disciple of the god of hedonism.

In 2008 my bosses at the bank started making cryptic comments about my performance. Things like “You're not generating the returns you used to. Perhaps you're burning out?” Subtle things like that. I took the hints. As a dedicated follower of fashion, fashion was on my side once again. The era of mindfulness fell upon the Western world, fascinated as always by Eastern mysticism. The craze was to achieve spiritual awareness through meditation to assorted gongs and whistles in clouds of pungently sweet aromatic incense. To become one with the environment – presumably in Nirvana the environment is thickly polluted with dense clouds of jasmine and ylang ylang and resounds with endless crashing of gongs. I'm sorry, forgive my cynicism. At the time it seemed a wonderful way of getting off the hedonist track and turning my life back into the go-getting money-grabbing intolerance of my early years. How could I have known it was a prelude to the collapse of everything the West held dear?

Anyway, as I was saying, this craze appeared just when I needed it. I embraced it with both hands. Well, more with both feet as I needed

my hands to grab the lucrative commissions from ever riskier financial trading. The point is it worked. After a few weeks of mindfulness development – and I have to admit many of the girls who eeked a living as instructors – were almost as fast and certainly more supple than the hangers-on around the edge of the trading world. I was thoroughly engrossed in healthy eating and mindful appreciation of very generous bonuses and commissions and the approbation of my peers and bosses. Yes life had become good again and I was of an age – 30 or thereabouts – to appreciate the simple fact that a return to my earlier vices would not be beneficial.

In 2011 I met and soon married a delightful creature who had survived being a meditation and Tai Chi Master (or should that be Mistress?) relatively unscathed and introduced me to a new world of cryptic asides, such as “You mean you're really going to eat that crap?”. As if burgers and fries weren't healthy! Protein, carbohydrate and fat, the three essentials of a balanced diet. Anyway I digress. Despite her unhealthy opinions on my eating habits – and smoking and drinking and occasional purely recreational you understand drugs and my sports car and, well lets just say the list was unnecessarily and I think unreasonably extensive – she somehow saw something worth trying to save in me and settled down to write a series of books on how to convert the unconvertible, using yours truly under an assumed name as the long running theme. These books would have best sellers in the Self-Help department had any publisher taken up the option of helping themselves. I know she didn't marry me for the money because when the money ran out she didn't.

From a cosmological perspective, when a male and a female merge their individualities into a common union the population increases. In complete and mindful accord with the cosmos, Akai Gloria, as she liked to be known and I became parents. The first in 2013 and two more in each of the following years. My income from the bank had dropped as I had been promoted to a managerial position and no longer got commission. Not because I was any good as a manager but simply because I was now too old to cut it with the next generation of high performance operative. There was still plenty of money coming in and Akai's censorship of my lifestyle had reduced my expenditure by an impressive amount. Sometimes when I reminisce I wished I'd saved the money in my early years for when I really needed it but ita

silly thinking as when I really needed the money any savings I had had been wiped out. Had I saved more I would simply have lost more.

The year 2019 was an interesting year. If you add its digits, $2+0+1+9$ you get 12 and $1+2$ is 3. Told you I was good with numbers. The thing is, 3 is a mystical number of good fortune in Eastern philosophies and we in the West had been avidly absorbing those philosophies since the early 1960s. So when the crash began we were confused.

“How can there be an economic crash when the year adds up to 3?” we asked ourselves. “This should be a year of good fortune!”

What we failed to understand was that Eastern philosophies are Eastern, not Western, no matter how cool and hip we thought they were or how avidly we took them on board. The year 2019, being 3, was the year the Asians had decided to create some good fortune for themselves at the expense of the West. At first we thought it was an economic downturn. Then an economic crash. Only slowly did it dawn on us that this was not simply a matter of cycles in the financial markets but active war. Economic war. What we later came to call the Cyber Wars. Wars plural because it wasn't just one war. Western banks, superannuation funds, large conglomerates and later governments and the various social institutions such as railways and hospitals came under attack. Not a shot was fired but who knows how many viruses and worms, nesting in computers systems sometimes for years, received tiny little signals like the first drops of rain and germinated and grew and blossomed and bred and replicated and infected, one by one at first but gently snowballing, our computer systems that controlled our economies.

It took well over a year to trace things back and to discover that the “troubles”, as cute a euphemism as ever there was, coined I've heard by a religious fanatic who had managed to suppress the Word of God long enough to become Prime Minister of Australia, were in fact computer viruses that they had been deliberately and systematically fed into our systems and that the dirty deeds had been done by our oh-so-inscrutable Asian colleagues. It was another few months before sufficiently powerful counter viruses were developed to clear our systems and nasty convoluted viruses to attack their systems in return. That was the start of the 2nd Cyber War and there began, as is so often

the way with the Cosmological Collective Consciousness, an arms race and a succession of numbered wars. Ironical really as the wars were all number based to begin with. More realistically, the arms race was an evolutionary race between competing viruses feeding of the economic systems we humans deemed essential to life itself. This was not helped by artificial intelligence as the AI systems learned very quickly how to spot viral attacks and develop counter measures but failed totally to notice any human consequences. The attention of any life, real or artificial, is bound by its own species. Humans are not the same species as AI, just as Frankenstein's monster was not the same as Frankenstein. And so it was that Eastern and Western AI systems happily fought each other using computer viruses as weapons and computers as the battleground while their human creators stood on the sidelines weeping as their creations brought about their incidental destruction. Collateral damage indeed.

I wasn't involved with any of the initial investigations as I was in the first wave of sackings at the bank which had been hit by the early viruses. We thought it was "just another computer problem" that had wiped US\$14.3 billion from our system and even when we discovered that every available backup was also missing \$14.3 billion we still figured we could work out where the money was by following the paper trail. Except we couldn't. It turned out that the senior management of the bank had been so enamoured of computer systems that in an efficiency drive they had removed the paper. So when the computer backups failed there were no paper records. None. Nothing. Just 14.3 billion missing dollars. "Well" said the financial management gurus, "let's just go to all our trading partners and ask them for copies of their transactions with us." Good thinking. Time consuming but not impossible. Except for one tiny weeny little virus sized problem. We weren't the only bank hit.

What do I care about someone else's \$14.3 billion? I was 39, with a 29 year old gorgeous, creative and mindful wife who was psychologically incapable of holding any kind of realistic work and three starving children aged between 4 and 6. Not even old enough for a paper round, if there had been any printed newspapers left by then. \$14.3 billion could go hang. All I wanted was to get enough money to buy food the next day. Unemployment helped at first while I looked for another job but it took a while. Former stock market trading managers

have few practical skills. Fortunately I was able to find work on a farm that grew potatoes before the 7th, or was it the 8th?, Cyber War took out the unemployment benefits system. There was a certain irony in the fact that as a lowly potato farmer's assistant I was earning more than I'd ever made on the stock markets but inflation is simply God laughing his head off. Oh isn't that a lot of money! Yes but it's worthless! Ha Ha Ha.

Our lifestyle slid quite badly. We weren't the only ones of course. It was a kind of inverted "Keeping up with the Joneses". We went without and the neighbours went without so we went without more and they went without more and we went without more than them so they went you get the idea. It was sometime during the 4th Cyber War that Akai Gloria changed her name back to Elaine. The whole Eastern philosophy trip had taken its toll on her. Raising three kids is bad enough but doing it in a level of poverty that made the Jewish ghettos of 1930s Germany look opulent does take a toll on your body and mind as well as psyche, soul and even humanity.

Its now 2025 and I recently heard from a friend who heard from a friend who heard from one of the few still left working in the Government that we are currently in the middle of Cyber War 84. Interestingly, if I had sufficient energy left to be interested in anything, 84 adds up to 12 which adds up to 3. Good fortune for the Cyber Wars. I'm sure the little viruses are scurrying around the few systems that are left cheering and holding parties to celebrate. I'm not cheering and I haven't been to a party since the sewage system failed. Bit of a crap shoot really. Sorry, bad joke. I still work on the potato farm. The farmer used his connections to get me a job at a chicken factory as well and when they're both done for the day I work for the Government on a disposal team which burns the bodies of those thousands who die of starvation, disease, exposure and violence each day. After all we can't just leave them where they lie, the food shortages are too severe. Elaine wanders the streets begging and stealing food and other necessities where she can. I don't ask what else she has to do. A lot of what we need isn't for sale any more and my three jobs aren't enough to buy what is available. Our house is long gone. Literally. Everything in it that we hadn't burned to keep warm during the winter has been stripped by thieves and looters. The last I saw of it half the bricks had gone too. We're quite lucky though. The

potato farmer let us pitch an old tent we found on his land for free and Elaine was able to patch the holes. Other people have to pay for that privilege. The kids do what they can but frankly what practical use is a 4 year old? Beyond scavenging, which they all do since schools died out after Cyber War 34, there isn't the time or energy to do anything else. Some people I know have given up and headed for the hinterlands to try and live rough. I'd discuss it with Elaine but I'm just too tired. Another hour with the bodies of dead chickens and then its off to the bodies of dead people. Feeding them into the Artificial Intelligence Muncher of our own creation, fuelled by philosophy and greed.

Working 18 to 20 hours a day 7 days a week is taking its toll. Thank God (yeah right) for the white powders. Elaine always said they'd be the death of me but she was wrong. They're all that's keeping me alive.

(2367 words)

The only thing my wife did like about the previous story was the idea of "cyber wars" between computer systems so I set out with this one to talk about how the wars started and the effect of them. I think this is a good story, particularly with the element of the hero's life at the end being somewhat self-induced. He takes drugs to be able to keep working and works to be able to buy the drugs. A vicious cycle he can't see and can't get out of.

I thought this was a great story too but my wife hated it. "Too depressing" she said, although she conceded it was well written. I find I much easier to make up stories as I go along than I do writing to a pre-formed idea so this was the last time I did that.

Day 89 ~ 29th March 2019 Words: Transpire, Transplant, Transponder

There is a common misconception that the Flight Traffic Control people at airports use radar to track aircraft. They don't. Every aircraft carries a device called a transponder which sends out a signal identifying itself and the Flight Traffic Control people monitor the location of the transponder. So presumably if a plane didn't have a transponder no one would know its there.

Bret often speculated about things like that. He was by nature a bit of a worrier and not knowing how things worked worried him. Mind you, knowing how things worked also worried him because he could then see how things could go wrong. It was a toss-up as to which worried him more, and that was worrying in itself. However, Bret was reassured to know that airplanes in distress changed their transponder codes so that everyone knew they were in distress and could prepare for action. This was in case they could not use their radios for some reason. On the other hand, and this was worrying, plane hijackings sometimes occurred but reassuringly the authorities had allowed for this and there was a special transponder code which meant the plane had been hijacked. If the transponder was emitting that code then any radio messages from the airplane would be assumed to have been made under duress and discounted appropriately. Which was reassuring.

What really worried Bret was that he had no access to any of this information regarding flight BA083 from New York JFK to London Heathrow which had departed at 9.55am Eastern Standard Time and was due to arrive in cold, wet London at around 8.45pm. In the dark. On a wet runway. By tired pilots. No wonder Bret needed a cigarette. He checked his watch and found it was not even 8 o'clock yet so he ventured out of the Airport Observation Lounge where he had been studying various departures and landings for the past half hour to see what problems they were having and trying to extrapolate them to what may happen with BA083 when it did arrive. So far nothing out of the ordinary had occurred despite the darkness and the wetness but you never know. The unexpected is, by its very nature, not expected and that was worrisome.

Taking the escalator down to the Departure Level he gazed around the large bustling concourse to orientate himself. Sure enough, in the distance, there seemed to be large glass doors that opened onto the chill evening. He headed in that direction keeping an eye open for distracted tourists and their luggage who might crash into him as they looked in every direction to find out where they should be going. The problem wasn't a lack of signage, it was the sublime surfeit of signage. Everywhere you looked there were signs that pointed to none of the things you wanted. There were even signs that pointed to signs. Fortunately he didn't need a toilet at the moment despite there being three separate signs for the toilets visible from where he stood. He noted where they pointed since when he needed to go he wouldn't be able to find a sign. Reassuringly not one single person walked into him although an old lady dragging a suitcase on wheels large enough to hold her husband inadvertently looked the other way just as one of the suitcase wheels rolled across Bret's left big toe. It didn't really hurt and Bret decided not to classify it as a 'crash'. Judging by the weight her husband was not inside. Bret wondered where he was.

Bret reached out to push open the large glass door to the outside world and nearly fell as the door disappeared. He'd forgotten that the doors opened and closed automatically even though the door had opened automatically when he'd arrived and presumably closed just as automatically behind him. He had had a lot on his mind. He worried that he wouldn't be able to find the shuttle bus to get back to the short-term car park after flight BA083 had arrived. They may even have stopped running the shuttles by that time. He was also worried that he wouldn't be able to find his car in the car park once they got there. He'd noted the Car Park Number and the Area and Sector on the parking ticket (CP4, Area G, Sector G5) and he was worried that he might lose the ticket somewhere which would mean he not only wouldn't be able to find his car but that he would have to pay long-term parking charges plus a supplement in the unlikely event that he did find the car.

Fortunately there was a smoking area 5 metres to the left of the missing glass door. Gratefully he pulled out a packet of cigarettes and lit one, making sure he was the correct side of the yellow demarcation line. The smoke inhalation calmed his nerves. There was a middle aged man also in the smoking area who discarded his stub and lit another. The man glanced over at Bret.

“Nice night for it” he said casually.

Bret smiled uncertainly. Casual chat disorientated him as he had a tendency towards the literal. He worried about what it was a nice night for then decided the man was being slightly sarcastic and was actually commenting on the unpleasantness of the weather.

“Are you coming or going?” said the man.

“Umm” said Bret. Then he realised what the man meant. “Both”, he answered with a rueful grin. “I’ve come to meet someone then we’re going home.”

“Nice” said the man. “The name’s Todd. Anyone important?”

Bret thought for a moment. “No”, he said. “I can’t think of anyone important called Todd.”

Todd laughed. “I meant my name’s Todd. Are you meeting anyone important?”

“No” said Bret. “Just my fiancée.”

He worried over this titbit for a moment or two.

“I don’t meant that she isn’t important. She’s the most important person in my life. I thought you meant a politician or a rock star or someone like that.”

Bret realised he was being stupid. Politicians and rock stars don’t get met by a slightly dishevelled bespectacled man having a smoke outside the Departure Lounge. They get met by entourages of smartly dressed secretaries and aides and bodyguards and the press outside the First Class Arrivals area.

“Don’t worry, I won’t tell her you don’t think she’s important.” Todd teased.

Bret started to worry that Todd might want to meet Elaine. This was turning into a nightmare. Why would a stranger want to meet his

fiancee? Was he a drug dealer needing to pick up the packet of illegal drugs someone had hidden in her baggage? Was he a policeman or customs agent?

Todd watched Bret's face and sighed. He butted his cigarette and nodded towards Bret and strode off towards the door which opened automatically to let him through. Bret breathed a sigh of relief. He didn't like unexpected encounters in strange places. He never knew what to say.

The phone in his pocket chimed and vibrated against his leg. He pulled it out and swore softly as he dropped his cigarette on the ground because it had burnt the side of his thumb. He sucked his thumb to relieve the pain and saw a message had arrived. He opened it to see that BA was notifying him that the expected arrival of BA083 had been delayed and was now expected at 9.05pm.

"Aren't you a bit old to be sucking your thumb?" someone called as he brushed past Bret on his way to the Departure Lounge and laughed loudly at his own brilliant witticism. Bret flushed with embarrassment and pulled his thumb out of his mouth. It didn't hurt much now anyway. He checked his pocket to make sure the parking ticket was still there. It was. He checked his watch to make sure he wasn't late. He wasn't. He couldn't be since he'd only just had the message saying the plane was late but it was a nervous habit of his. When in doubt, check your watch. He noticed his cigarette butt on the ground and stamped on it even though there was no danger of it causing a fire. He bent to pick it up to bin it properly and a soft, gentle voice said "Excuse me, have you got a light?"

Startled, Bret straightened up and twisted awkwardly to see who had spoken and lost his balance. It was only a minor stumble but on top of being embarrassed about his thumb and realising the rather cute lady had actually addressed his sticking up backside and then seen him stumble like a drunk made his face glow so much it threatened the runway landing lights.

"What, sorry, you start..., sorry, come again?" he said.

"I asked if you had a light. For my cigarette. This thing. I've lost my

lighter.” she said, thrusting her cigarette at him like a syringe and looking at him with a strange expression.

“Oh what fresh hell is this?” Bret thought to himself.

“Ohhh you want a light for your cigarette.” he said. Embarrassed at how stupid he sounded

“Yes” she said. “I want to light my cigarette”. She paused. “This is a smoking zone you know.” She looked at him for several seconds then “Are you ill? You’re very red in the face.”

“I’m waiting for my fiancée” said Bret, then cursed himself for saying that.

“How nice” said the woman. “I guess you’re red with excitement then.”

Bret cursed yet again. On top of worrying that his fiancée’s flight had crashed or been hijacked he now worried that this attractive but very irritating woman thought he was stupid or worse, disabled.

She wagged her cigarette at him questioningly. Bret was reaching for his lighter in his pocket when she spotted someone else entering the Smoking Zone and turned to her to enquire about a light.

Bret sighed as he fumbled in his pocket under his phone for his lighter then remembered it was in his jacket pocket with his cigarette packet. He pulled both out and checked his parking ticket, just to be sure. He lit another cigarette and went to lean against the wall of the Departure Lounge. He checked the time. Only 10 minutes to go and no more messages from BA. Surely that was a good thing. Or did it mean they didn’t know what had happened to the plane and were scared to put out another update? Or was it simply that their update SMS system had failed or was overloaded? He noticed the woman who wanted a light say something to the other woman and they both looked at him then looked away. Contemptuously he was certain. The other woman laughed softly and said something in reply. Bret turned and leaned his shoulder against the wall with his back to them.

If only he could monitor the transponders, he thought. He’d have a

better idea of what was going on. He really hated having to wait and see what transpired from events outside his control. He heard the rumble of suitcase wheels on concrete and saw out of the corner of his eye another woman had joined the two already laughing at him. He started his breathing exercises and choked as he'd forgotten he was still smoking a cigarette. A large, well-fed and pinkly-scrubbed looking man in a suit with a newish looking trilby hat stared at him through the glass door of the Departure Lounge. The lady who'd asked for a light called out "Smoking is bad for you, maybe you should give it up" as she walked away. Bret pulled himself together and looked at his watch. 9 o'clock exactly and no more messages. It worried him that they hadn't confirmed the new arrival time. He binned his cigarette and in the process knocked over a cardboard cup which had been balanced precariously on the edge of the bin. Cold coffee soaked the bottom of his right leg and discoloured his new and expensive white trainer which he'd bought because Elaine said he needed new shoes. Resignedly Bret headed back into the Departure Lounge, remembering just in time that the door opened automatically.

He stared up at the huge timetable board that hung from the immensely high ceiling. There was no mention of flight BA803. Nothing at all. Not even a "flight delayed". Oh god. Has the plane disappeared? Has it crashed? Are there at this moment incident teams setting off to investigate? There'd been a couple of crashes of a new design of Boeing airplane just recently. Was her plane one of those Boeings? He couldn't hear the sirens of emergency vehicles but the airport building was probably soundproofed. They wouldn't want a general panic after all. He spotted someone in a BA uniform and went over.

"Excuse me" he said. "I'm meeting flight BA803 which is due to arrive any minute but it's not listed on the board." He gestured vaguely in the direction of the board. The man didn't even bother to look at him. "This is Departures", he said. "Arrivals are upstairs. Check the board up there."

Bret sighed. How stupid can he be? It was so obvious. He felt drained. This evening was supposed to be exciting as he was meeting his fiancée, the love of his life. She was coming in from New York to spend the rest of her life with him. Transplanting herself into a strange

new world. An American in London, just like in all the romantic comedies he'd seen starring Hugh Grant. Instead it was turning into a nightmare. He looked around and to his surprise spotted a sign pointing to an escalator saying "Arrivals". He went towards it, all the time keeping an eye open for a sign pointing to "Lost Luggage" since that would be inevitably where they'd have to go after she arrived. If she arrived. He remembered an old song from the 50s by the Bee Gees about a guy waiting at an airport for a girl but the plane crashed and she died. It was a very sad song. He couldn't remember what it was called. Then he remembered it was the Everly Brothers not the Bee Gees. You wouldn't have a disco hit from a song about a dead girl would you. He tried to remember a disco hit about a girl dying in a plane crash but he couldn't think of one. Although there was a smash hit called "I Will Survive" which he hoped was a good omen.

Bret arrived at the escalator to "Arrivals" with "At first I was afraid, I was petrified, kept thinking I could never live without you by my side" playing in his head. He hadn't spotted a "Lost Luggage" sign but at least he knew where the toilets were. Typical he thought. A sign for everything except what you need. At the top of the escalator he saw a large board that looked identical to the one down below, except it had "Arrivals" in large letters across the top. The 7th line from the top said "BA803 New York Gate 34 landed". Oh no! Where was gate 34? She'd come off the plane before he found gate 34 and decide he'd abandoned her and get the next flight home and he'd never see her again no matter how much he phoned and pleaded. Where was gate 34???

"Excuse me" he said to a random person just standing and gazing vacantly into space. "Where's gate 34?" The man looked around and pointed to a sign that said "Gates 31-40" and said "That way" and resumed staring back into space.

"Thank you" said Bret and took off in a half-run. Surely he wouldn't be late to meet his beloved when she arrived after giving everything up to be with him?

Another sign pointing to the right told him gates 31-40 were off to the right. He started to jog. The concourse narrowed down to a wide corridor. People saw him running and got out of his way. He saw a

sign pointing to the left that said “Gate 31”, further on another pointed to the right that said “Gate 32”. He speeded up slightly and nearly ran into a group of boy scouts. “Gate 33” and oh thank god almighty “Gate 34” off to the right. There was a small crowd of people standing behind a rope barrier. Two people walked out of a doorway and were screamed at by a child in the crowd. Panting slightly, Bret joined the crowd at one end, trying to be as close to the rope barrier as possible. There was no sign of Elaine. Perhaps she'd already come off the plane and left, seeing as he wasn't there. Bret wondered where the “Public Announcements” area was. He hadn't seen a sign for that nor had he yet seen a sign for “Lost Luggage” although the “Baggage Collection” sign had been further back down the corridor pointing away from the “Gates 31-40” sign. Bit of a waste of time going there since the luggage will have been lost. Inevitably.

His heart nearly exploded. There she was !! Looking as gorgeous as ever and wearing a t-shirt that read “Don't Talk To Me I'm Taken”. Excitedly dancing her way through the door and looking everywhere in the crowd for him. Then she spotted Bret bouncing up and down and waving both arms at her with a gigantic grin on his face. Her face lit up and she rushed around the end of the rope barrier and into his arms. Her cute little red beret fell off as Bret continued bouncing with excitement. He stammered a greeting as they hugged and kissed passionately. Who cares about the lost luggage? The only important thing had arrived safely even though his thumb still throbbed a little and he'd surely lost his parking ticket by now as well as his car keys.

(3020 words)

This was great fun to write!

The word 'transponder' was the difficult one so I wrote a paragraph about transponders and then the whole thing took off and I just envisaged the kind of things that an anxious person might fret about at an airport and just followed Bret as he waited for his fiancée.

My wife loved it.

Day 90 ~ 30th March 2019 Words: Dominion, Domino, Don

A few years ago I bought a car from the main dealer in town. It's a nice car and suits me perfectly being compact and conservative. I get it serviced at a place in the next town though because of the mechanics at the local dealer. Whenever I brought it in for its service I could see their eyes undressing me and half overheard sexual comments about me. I felt very uncomfortable and after the first three services I looked around for somewhere else. I don't see why I should pay a lot of money to be treated like an object. I suppose I could have complained to the management but I doubt I'd have been taken seriously and even if I had it would be easy enough for the mechanics to not service my car properly. There's something about men and cars that's very sexist. It's not an issue I normally have a problem with. I dress fairly conservatively and I'm usually respected so I'm not going to dwell on it.

I work in a library you see. It's all very quiet and respectable there and very little happens. I'm a widow and childless so my job has more or less become my life. Berat, my husband, and I had met at university. I was an undergraduate studying English Literature and he was a Turkish doctoral student in International Politics. We married after he graduated and I got a job at the library. We were quite happy for a few years until he contracted pneumonia and complications set in and he died. It was all very painful. I couldn't sleep in our bed after that so I'd bought a new one. A double bed I admit but that was just so I had plenty of space on those sleepless, restless nights.

Four years later, Veronica, the Chief Librarian, asked me to collect the books that had been placed on hold via the computer system and put them on the Reserves shelf ready for collection. I printed out the sheet and found a trolley and started finding the books on the shelves and putting in the name slips ready. I was in the 110-119 Metaphysics section, which is near the main entrance when the door was pushed open rather strongly. I turned to see what had happened and a man was standing in the doorway, looking around himself with curiosity. He wasn't an impressive man, being fairly short and dark with a bit of a belly and he needed a shave. He wore jeans and a checked shirt with a dirty leather jacket on top.

“Wotcha gorgeous” he said to me, noticing me looking at him. “You work here?”

“Yes” I said, seeing no reason to deny it. “Can I help you?”

“Ya” he replied. “Wanna book on law.”

I put down my list and pushed the trolley against the wall so the aisles between the bookcases remained clear.

“We have quite a number of law books” I said. “They’re further down if you’ll follow me”.

“I’d follow you anywhere darlin’” and he leered at me, his eyes dropping below my face momentarily.

I sighed inwardly. We don’t usually get men like this in the Library. Generally they are elderly and wear spectacles and old worn cardigans with holes at the elbows and they try to avoid looking at anyone. This man looked to be in his early 40s and had a raffish quality about him. I moved off towards the Law section and he followed, staying a couple of paces behind. I refused to contemplate what he was looking at although I was glad I had worn a full length dress today.

“What area of law are you interested in?” I asked over my shoulder.

“Small businesses” he said.

“That’ll be in the 343s” I said. Then I wondered why I had said that. Surely I wasn’t trying to show off my knowledge?

“Oh right” he said disinterestedly.

I showed him the section on Company Law and left him to browse. I went back to my list of Reserved Items and wondered why he smelt so familiar.

Twenty minutes later he found me in the 385-388 Transportation section. He held two books in his hand.

“Wanna take these” he said with a grin.

With him back close to me I realised what he smelt of. Engine oil. Just like a car mechanic.

“Do you have your membership card?” I asked.

“What membership card?” he replied.

I groaned inwardly. Obviously this man had never been inside a library before. I pushed my trolley against a wall again and took him over to the Enquiries Desk and got him to fill out a membership form. While he was doing that I got one of the prepared cards out and filled in his name. Matteo Angelini. He told me to call him Teo but I never call library members by the first names so I just smiled politely. He didn't ask my name. Clearly he was Italian which explained his swarthy look. I laminated the card and swapped it for the form which I put in the In Tray. I took him over to one of the self-service computers and showed him how to use it to borrow a book. I became aware that there was another, fainter smell underneath the smell of oil. It was quite interesting. After he'd got the books recorded in his name I explained when they had to be back and how many he could borrow at a time. Throughout all this he kept his eyes locked on mine and smiled continuously. When I finished the explanation I nodded a little dismissively and half turned away, ready to get back to my trolley.

“Cheers for that then lovely” he said and slapped me across my left buttock. “See ya next time” and he headed off towards the door whistling quite loudly.

I went bright red in the face and clapped a hand to my mouth in shock and stared at him walking away, unable to say anything. The smack hadn't hurt but I stood there rubbing the spot for several seconds. Veronica came over.

“I saw that! What a nasty man. Do you want to report him?”

We had an internal system for reporting incidents and there was a procedure whereby a member's membership could be revoked.

“No”, I said. “I didn't mind.” and walked back to my trolley.

I stood next to the trolley, reading my list of Reserved Items unseeingly. Why did I say I didn't mind? That was a strange thing to say. “I'm fine” would have been more appropriate. Strangely enough I hadn't minded. That was perplexing. Given my experience with the mechanics I should have minded. The more I thought about it the more I realised it had been a little exciting. No one had ever slapped me on the bottom before, certainly not a man and it was vaguely naughty and thrilling. Though why that uncouth little man slapping me should be exciting I have no idea. I pushed the incident from my mind and focused on my job.

At home that evening the incident came back to me but I resolutely pushed it from my mind. Nasty little man.

The next morning as I was getting ready for work, I was dissatisfied with my usual skirts and wore one a little shorter than normal. After all, the day promised to be quite warm and I didn't want to overheat. My chosen top fitted a little more tightly than some of the others but that was just coincidence. Anyway, no one at the library would notice and it might liven up some of the elder male browsers. For some reason I felt a little flat as the afternoon progressed but you get days like that.

A week or so later I was staffing the Enquiries Desk when he came back. As the Desk was directly across from the glass main door I happened to notice he pulled up outside in a taxi. That explained the smell of engine oil I thought to myself.

He strode in confidently. His lack of experience with libraries clearly bothered him not in the least.

“Allo darlin’” he said with a big smile when he saw me. “Member me?”.

“Yes I do Mr Angelini” I said, realising I was smiling at him for some reason. I stopped the smile and composed my face. It bothered me that I felt a little flustered.

“What do I do with these?” he asked waving the law books in his hand.

“There is a Returns Slot beside the main door” I replied. “I’ll show you” and I got up and headed for the main door. Just like the last time he was here he stayed a couple of paces behind me. I wondered if he was looking at my legs. Because of the warmer weather recently I’d been wearing shorter skirts and the new high heels shoes I’d bought the previous Saturday as a change from my usual ‘sensible’ flat shoes. Standing beside me at the Returns Slot I could smell his engine oil and something else smell. I leaned slightly towards him to show him where the handle was for the Slot cover.

He grinned that cheeky grin again and I braced myself for another slap on my backside. It didn’t come. Instead he looked over to his taxi and said

“I’m parked on a yellor line so I gotta rush. When’s yer lunchbreak?”

“From 1 till 2” I replied without thinking.

“Great” he said. “I’ll meet ya at the Seven Sisters caf in the High Street at 1. Don’t worry, my treat.”

Before I could say no he had got in his taxi and was driving off.

“Oh well”, I thought to myself. “It would be very rude of me to just not turn up. I’ll meet him at the cafe and explain I have another engagement and leave him to it.”

It was quiet in the library that morning and the time dragged. About ten to one I went to the toilet and checked my hair and put my hand up my skirt to tweak my blouse down smoothly. Just before one I left and headed for the “caf”.

There was a taxi parked nearby which I assumed to be his. I went inside and he was sitting at a small table with two chairs studying the menu. I went over and stood next to him.

“I’m sorry Mr Angelini, I’m afraid I have another engagement so I

can't stay" I said.

He looked up at me.

"Allo babe, so whats that then? I'll give yer a lift. No charge."

I froze and I'm sure there was a slight look of panic in my eyes. Stupidly it hadn't occurred to me to invent some plausible engagement that would occupy me and my brain was seemingly incapable of making one up on the spur of the moment. I stayed silent, motionless.

He gazed at me for a few moments as if enjoying my discomfort. Then he grinned that maddeningly cheeky grin and said

"New shoes? Luv 'em. Show off ya legs a treat. Sit down and 'ave a cuppa tea."

For want of anything better to do I sat down, feeling stupid and more than a trifle girlish. Which was absurd. I was a widow of 36 and a respectable, educated librarian.

Without asking he ordered two cups of tea and he started telling me a convoluted story about a passenger who'd ordered a taxi the day before to go to the airport but had left half their luggage behind so when they arrived at the airport they'd had to go back and fetch the baggage. Put like that it sounds uninteresting but Teo, I mean Mr Angelini, told it in such a way that I was laughing when the tea arrived.

He suggested we eat and I said I had sandwiches back at the library and he scoffed and made me order an Italian sounding dish that wasn't on the menu. Apparently the owner of the "caf" was a cousin or something. He then launched into a long and complicated story about the history of his family and how they'd come over to England from Italy when he was a boy. I couldn't follow a lot of it but he made it sound very funny and I laughed as I hadn't laughed for some time. Since my husband had died actually. In between bursts of Italian history he prompted me for some of my own history and was very sympathetic when he heard I was a widow but had me laughing again within seconds as he told a very off-colour joke about a Turk in Italy

getting involved with a Mafia Don in San Domino in Italy which would normally have offended me. At some point the food arrived and disappeared although I was very conscious of the amount of cream and pasta in it and was sure my waistline had visibly expanded.

At 2.40 I noticed the time and started to make my apologies. He asked if I was busy that evening and when I admitted I wasn't he told me he'd pick me up at 8 without bothering to ask if I was willing. I was about to protest when I realised that I really had nothing to do other than cook myself a dull little meal and watch the television and an evening out would be actually quite nice. For all his apparent uncouthness he was really quite fun to be with and I suspected he was quite likely to be a gentleman at heart. So I said OK and gave him my address. I asked if he wanted to know my name since he hadn't asked what it was and I knew his. For the first time his confidence dropped and slightly shamefacedly he admitted that he'd phoned the library the day after he'd borrowed the books and asked Brendon, another librarian, my name. I was quite taken aback and didn't know what to say.

"I haven't called you Rebecca yet", he said. "I was too shy."

I confess I burst out into loud laughter at that. The one thing I was sure of was that he wasn't the least bit shy. But then, he had known my name and hadn't used it. How strange. And he'd taken the trouble to find out what it was.

I reached over and patted his hand. "Its OK" I said. "I think that's rather sweet."

His confidence returned with a vengeance and he took my hand and kissed it. "Until tonight Rebecca" he said in a sing-song voice, his eyes flirting wildly.

This time it was I who walked away, wondering what to say to Veronica about my lateness. As I walked I realised that the "prior engagement" had never been mentioned again. I apologised to Veronica. She didn't mind. "I knew you were with a man" she said. "I've seen the signs all week. About bloody time!" and I laughed. It felt good to admit I'd been lunching with a man. If truth be known it felt good to be lunching with a man whether I admitted it or not. She

looked at me with a slightly startled expression. "I don't think I've ever heard you laugh before. You've been here what, 5 or 6 years? Your face lights up when you laugh. It makes you look a different person"

I went bright red again and she hugged me, "Its wonderful to see" she whispered in my ear. "I'm so so very happy for you."

I remained embarrassed all afternoon and devised countless ways to get rid of Teo, I mean Mr Angelini, when he turned up at 8. Rather pointlessly as when 8 o'clock came and the doorbell rang I was dressed in my shortest skirt, still below the knee of course, and freshly bathed and made up and my hair was as perfect as it could be without a visit to the hairdresser as there hadn't been time.

"Wowwee" Teo said when I opened the door. "You're a stunner all right Rebecca. I don't deserve you" and he grabbed my hand again and kissed it. Which was all very nice but I realised I'd rather been hoping to have been kissed on the lips.

"Where are we going?" I asked when we were in his taxi, pulling away. "To a restaurant?"

"I'm taking you to visit my mother", he said nonchalantly.

How did this man manage to make me constantly flustered, panicked, red faced, repelled and completely fascinated all the time? This was only the fourth time I'd met him, twice at work in the library, and he was already sending my emotions all over the place. How did he have such dominion over my feelings? He smelled nice but that was no compensation for the burning issue. His *mother*? Were we at that stage already? It had been months before I'd met Berat's mother.

"She's a lovely lady. You'll like her. She's been wanting to meet you since I told her about you."

I sat in silence while I came to terms with this piece of information. "Well", I thought to myself after we'd gone a mile or two. "Veronica was right. Its been a long time, too long."

He glanced over at me. "Alright Beccy? Yer very quiet."

"I'm sorry," I said. "I was just a little surprised to meet your mother so soon".

The moment I said that I realised what I'd done. By adding "so soon" I was accepting that he was becoming the man in my life. Well, why the hell not. There hadn't been anyone since Berat and God knows I'm only human.

"My sister Maria will be there too. She's younger than me and married but Ronaldo her husband can't make it. He's got to work late."

"That's a shame", I said. "It'll be nice to meet your family." and I rested my hand on his knee. Everything started to feel very natural.

He was right of course, I did like his mother. And his sister. They were very polite and very charming and very excitable and obviously doted on Teo but Italian mothers are like that I'm told. Sisters are too it seems. That night my bed lost its lonely virginity. It had been a long time.

Too long.

(3108 words)

I had no idea how to write a story with these three words in so I just sat there looking at the screen and fretting. For some reason I remembered a lady many years ago who had a problem with some car mechanics and so I wrote that down and then I wondered about what would happen if that lady got romantically involved with a car mechanic and then the story was done.

Interestingly I completely forgot about the three words and didn't remember until I was just about finished. I had to go back and find ways of bringing them in.

Day 91 ~ 31st March 2019 Words: Giraffe, Grid, Girder

Matty was standing beside the burger stall getting a couple of burgers when he saw it happen. A young boy, perhaps 5 or 6 years old, was skipping around excitedly. Matty guessed it was his first trip to the zoo. The boy's parents were only a few paces away looking contentedly happy and watching the young lad. He was dressed in a windcheater with those little gloves that are attached to the sleeves so they don't get lost and a striped woolly bobble hat. He rushed up to the iron railings and grabbed hold and peered through but could see nothing. With a mixture of excitement and puzzlement the boy turned to his parents. The mother smiled and gestured upwards with her hand. The boy turned back to peer through the railings, bouncing in anticipation and then glanced upwards like his mother had suggested. He froze. His expression turned to awe and you could almost hear his mind shouting "Whoaaaaaaaaah". Fully fifteen feet above his head was the first giraffe he'd ever seen. He tilted his body backwards and further backwards, hanging onto the railings with both hands, his head craning back as far as it would go. He let go of the railing with one hand and pointed, jabbing at the gentle head way, way above him. He twisted his body to yell something at his parents and let go with other hand. He crashed to the ground and the instantaneous transition from awed excitement to pain made him red faced and screaming within, ohhh, 30 milliseconds Matty estimated. As the boy's parents rushed to console him, Matty laughed. Turning back to the burger stall, he handed over some money and reflected that the boy would probably now be scared of giraffes for the rest of his life.

Carrying the neatly wrapped burgers he walked over to the girl sitting on a low wall gazing at an Indian elephant. She glanced towards him as he handed over a burger and he said

"Did you see that kiddie fall over over there, by the giraffes?"

Abi grimaced. "I saw you laugh at him. That wasn't very nice. Poor kid." She watched the boy's mother dabbing his face with a hankie with spit on it. "I think he grazed his face."

"Oh they're tough at that age" said Matty, sitting beside her and peeling his burger. "Always scraping and bruising themselves. I did, all

the time.”

He bit into his burger and grimaced. “I think they made this out of a baboon that died of leprosy”. He chewed a little resentfully. “You'd think for that price they'd be extra nice”.

Abi balled her wrapper and put it in her pocket. She prised off the top bun off hers and strands of melted gooey cheese made a little cage around the contents. She peered closely at it and daintily speared the sliver of gherkin with a carefully manicured fingernail and flicked it towards a circling pigeon who darted towards it. In a flurry of wings another pigeon arrived first and snatched the gherkin mid-flight. The pigeon on the ground showed no emotion as it looked around for another discard. There were rich pickings to be had around the burger stall.

“Mine's delicious”, pronounced Abi.

Despite what he'd said, Matty had already finished his burger and was wiping his hands on a paper towel. He offered one to Abi who took it and wiped pickled gherkin vinegar off her fingernail. She studied it to see if the nail polish had been affected.

“I like giraffes” said Matty. “They have a certain elegance about them. I'd love to see one for real in Africa.”

Abi sniffed. She was more of a cat person. “I wouldn't want to clean up after an elephant” she said and nodded towards the elephant enclosure. A lone keeper had appeared carrying a large bucket and a shovel.

Matty laughed. “Come on” he said, “Let's go see the lions and tigers”.

Abi finished her burger and wiped her hands carefully. She stood up and strolled to a nearby bin and deposited her wrapper and the paper towels neatly. “OK” she said. “Where are they?”

The little boy had got over his fright and was trying to catch a pigeon using pieces of his burger bun as bait. His mother watched him indulgently and his father watched Abi out of the corner of his eye.

Abi was the kind of girl who caused that reaction among men. She was tall and slim and when she wore her tight jeans and the neat little blue cap over her long blonde hair she looked very elegant. Matty still wasn't used to it and glared angrily at any man he happened to see overtly staring. He didn't notice the boy's father's more subtle but just as detailed appraisal of Abi. Nor did the boy's mother.

They'd been dating for only a couple of months and Matty still wasn't sure that they were dating. Abi had a kind of aloofness that kept him at a distance no matter how intimate they got. He thought they were dating but he wasn't sure Abi thought the same. He was convinced that she could have any man she wanted and was only going out with him as a stopgap. It had honestly never crossed his mind that Abi might have fallen in love with him within days of their meeting and that she didn't want just any man. She was only holding back because she didn't want to scare him off. After all, she knew guys are phobic about any form of commitment. But she was content to bide her time. Matty was still at the stage of being attentive and wasn't showing any sign of taking her for granted and she liked that. "See how it pans out" she said to herself, as Matty was never far away from her thoughts.

Matty pulled a map of the zoo out of his jeans pocket and unfolded it. A slight breeze fluttered its edges. He studied it carefully and announced "The Cat Enclosure" is at grid B6". He looked around then gestured off to the right and behind them a little. "I'm pretty sure its that way." He diffidently set off in that direction and appreciated that Abi followed without hesitation. He did, however, fail to appreciate her implicit trust in him and willingness to follow.

As they followed the broad path, intermittently populated with couples and children he casually reached out and took her hand. At least it seemed casual to a casual observer, but only Matty would ever know his internal tension as he waited for her to pull her hand away. She didn't. In fact, after a couple of seconds she squeezed his hand gently and smiled a quiet little smile, almost to herself.

"Fancy a look in the Reptile House?" said Matty, with a grin. She hadn't pulled her hand away! "God no" she said with a shiver. "Snakes give me the heebie geebies, ugh"

He smiled and felt protective but they walked on past the Reptile House. 20 or 30 seconds later it occurred to Matty that he could have said something like “Don't worry I'll protect you” to show her he felt protective but it was way too late for that now. He'd only sound stupid. Maybe a tiger would jump out at her from the Cat Enclosure and he'd be able to save her and she'd realise he cared and ..., well and care back. “Hey, hope springs eternal” he thought to himself, surprised at remembering something from English Lit. at school.

For want of anything better to say, Matty said the plants alongside the pathway were looking nice. Abi agreed but didn't seem to want to pursue the matter. Although she chatted constantly with her girlfriends, she'd always been a little shy around men. For some reason few would ever talk to her although they followed her with their eyes and she never could quite understand why. It made her self conscious and she never quite knew what to say. One of the many things she liked about Matty was that he seemed shy and self conscious as well. Often the men who did talk to her were loud and arrogant and very off-putting.

It had taken Matty three weeks to pluck up the courage to ask her out. Three weeks of buying food in the canteen that he didn't want. Matty worked on the shop floor making steel girders and when Abi joined the canteen staff he couldn't believe his eyes. All the lads had been talking about her and when the jokes got too ribald, Matty clenched his fists in his heavy leather work gloves and forced himself to stay silent. He'd been delighted when Kev Anderson, a well built arrogant sod who thought he was a lady killer, had been decisively rejected when he'd asked Abi out on her second day but when a succession of other hopefuls had had the same luck and the talk round the tea urn turned to speculation of frigidity or lesbianism he started to get dismayed. After three weeks of uneaten canteen food he was about to give up and abandon her forever when he happened to notice a tiny quarter smile as she glanced at him. He'd thrown caution to the winds and with a tremble in his heart had said “can I take you out sometime?”. When she hesitated and looked him full in the eyes and then said “OK” his courage had failed him and he'd run like a frightened gazelle. No one had noticed so he was spared that humiliation from the lads and after a sleepless night and some intense early morning psyching he was able to go back to the canteen and

settle the details. Not without some beating around the bush, he had to admit, but they'd agreed to meet at the Hounds and Castle at 7.30 that evening. Their conversation hadn't been exactly animated but they had both shyly and roundaboutly extracted from each other the most important information. Neither was married nor dating anyone. Matty regarded that evening at a reasonable success as she'd agreed, after a number of false starts, to his suggestion that they go to the cinema "one night next week". He hadn't quite got around to asking her for her phone number.

Both spent the next few days intensely worrying. Abi worried because she really liked Matty and could not decide what to wear to the cinema. She wanted to look her best but not "tarty" or "slutty" or "frumpy" and tried out every combination of what she had in front of the mirror. Matty worried because he couldn't decide which of the three movies being shown at the Cinema Complex that week would be suitable. The latest Lord of the Rings movie could be good but she might not be into wizards and hobbits and think he was a weird fantasy lover. On the other hand he'd heard the one with Jennifer Aniston was a bit raunchy. Although he didn't mind the idea of watching a raunchy Jennifer Aniston movie he suspected Abi wouldn't appreciate it. On the other hand there was a biopic about some long dead pop idol from the 50s which neither of them would have heard of. As is so often the case in these situations, neither of them realised that neither of them cared one iota. Matty would have been delighted if Abi turned up in an old coal sack. All he cared about was that she'd turn up. Abi on the other hand would be simply happy to sit next to him in the dark and maybe get to hold hands. She'd never even look at the screen.

When they got to the Cat Enclosure Abi dragged Matty to the lions and they watched as a shaggy maned male dozed while a female paced nervously around the perimeter. "Typical guy" said Abi and laughed. Matty wondered what she meant but nodded and agreed anyway. The female paced over towards the male who opened one eye and regarded her for a moment then idly swiped her with a paw as if to tell her to go away. She resumed pacing the perimeter. Abi opened her mouth to say "I hope you never do that to me" but bit her lip when she realised it smacked of commitment and Matty might think she was pressuring him. Instead she said "I wonder how old they are."

Matty moved over to study the information sign attached to the wire mesh. Abi went too. He read out the highlights then said "Oh here it is. The male is 7 and the female is 5." He looked around. "It says there's another female here but I don't see it anywhere."

"That big one is just like my cat at home" said Abi. "He just lies on the couch all day and never moves until someone brings him some food."

"Yeah" said Matty. "I've heard cats are like that. I never had a cat as my dad's allergic." He paused. "Cats are awesome killers though. They can lie in wait for days then when the mouse thinks its safe, bam, another mouse for dinner." He made a grabbing gesture with his right hand. His left hand still held Abi's and he planned never to let it go, not matter how cramped it got.

"I love cats but I hate seeing them with a mouse" said Abi sadly. "They just torture them. I wouldn't mind so much of they killed the mouse outright but they just play with it until the mouse dies of sheer fright."

"I bet these guys don't eat mice" said Matty. "Probably gazelles and stuff."

Abi moved off towards the tigers. Matty maintained hand contact although Abi had shown no sign of trying to free her hand.

Then he just stopped walking and stood there, in the middle of the pathway. Abi's arm jerked as his hand came free of hers. She turned to face him and said "What's up?"

He just looked at her. His face started to go a little hard.

"I've had enough" he said quietly. "I have absolutely had enough"

"Oh god oh god oh god he's going to break up with me" thought Abi, tears already beginning to well in her eyes.

"Are we dating or are you just playing with me?" said Matty, awed by the risk he was taking. He'd rather she was just playing with him than

not see her again but he desperately needed to know, to have some idea of how she felt about him. His heart began to thump and his left leg trembled.

“What do you mean?” Abi managed to say, “Please don’t break up with me” she screamed inside her head.

“I don’t ...”. Matty stopped then started again. “I mean , I know ...” He stopped again. He didn’t know if he had the courage to say what he wanted to say. He didn’t even know what he wanted to say. He just wanted the tension between him and this fabulous creature to go so he could relax and just love her.

“What?” said Abi. “Are you breaking up with me?” A tiny tear escaped and a thin trickle of mascara slid down the side of her nose.

Matty stared at her. Breaking up? Who said anything about breaking up? What was she talking about?

“What? No, I mean, like...” he stammered. “Oh get a grip you tosser” he muttered angrily to himself.

He ran a hand through his hair and pulled it hard to try to get his brain working again.

“Look” he said. “We’ve been going out for like 2 months and we’ve kissed and all but I don’t ..., I mean I really like you but I mean, like I don’t, I mean, oh fuck it I don’t know if you like me.” He ground to a halt.

Abi stared at him in disbelief. How could he not know she liked him? She thought of nothing else but him, day and night. Especially at night. She opened her mouth to speak but nothing came out. She started to shake.

Matty turned and walked away. After a couple of paces he stomped back and held his arms out wide.

“Are you my girlfriend?” he said. “That’s all I want to know. Are you my girlfriend? All I want is to know you like me, but if you don’t ... I

mean if you don't like me then say so. I don't want to be just someone you see until someone better comes along.” He dropped his arms and visibly sagged.

Abi was confused. “Are you breaking up with me?” she said in a weak voice. “Are you?”

“Of course I'm not fucking breaking up with you” Matty raised his voice in frustration to a semi-shout. “Why would I fucking break up with you when I love you and I want to marry you?”

“Oh shit” he thought to himself “I've really screwed it up now, good and proper”.

Abi stared at him. “Wh ...” she said. “Wh ...”. She felt weak at the knees. What had he just said? It didn't sound like “I don't want to see you anymore”.

Matty stared at the ground. The axe was about to fall and he didn't want to see it coming. His shoulders slumped forward.

Abi was still staring at him, her body frozen, her mind a whirlwind.

“Did you just say you loved me?” she blurted out after an eternity.

“Yes” said Matty sullenly, not looking at her. “You can stop laughing now”

Abi stepped forward and fell against his chest. Matty lifted his arms around her instinctively. The tiny tear had become a waterfall.

Matty held her close. Confusion written all over his face. He didn't understand what was happening. Why was she crying?

“Why are you crying?” he said stupidly.

Abi laughed and sobbed and jerked her head back. “I've loved you since you said 'hello’” she said quietly, her voice quivering. “I didn't think you liked me much”.

They both stood there. Neither knowing what to do or say. Both unsure of what they'd just said to each other and afraid to take it any further in case they'd got it wrong. Both afraid to break contact.

An elderly gentleman sitting on a bench not far away studying his Guide To Your Zoo had watched the whole scene. Like many before him, Abi had attracted his attention. As he watched them he remembered his own youth and the doubts and uncertainties that had wracked him. He stood and turned to break off two flowering chrysanthemums from the shrubs beside the path and walked over to Abi and Matty. As he approached they separated. Abi pulled some tissues out of her pocket and began to pat her eyes. Her nose had begun to run so she blew it on the sodden tissue.

The elderly gentleman smiled at them both and handed each a flower.

“Congratulations” he said. “I wish you both every happiness together.”

He nodded congenially and walked off in the direction of the cheetahs.

Matty watched him walk away, his face blank. Abi stared at the flower in her hand. Then she lifted her head. All fear had left her now.

“Umm, did you say you loved me and wanted to marry me?” she asked Matty.

Matty dragged his eyes back to Abi. He had no idea what had just happened but some deep inner primeval instinct flooded his brain. “Its now or never” it said insistently. “Its now or never, its now or never”.

Matty thrust his chrysanthemum in the general direction of Abi.

“Will you marry me Abi?” he said, eyes riveted to the ground at his feet.

“Yes please” she replied calmly, taking the chrysanthemum in both hands.

(3351 words)

'Giraffe' meant either Africa or a zoo so I chose a zoo. I wrote a paragraph about a little boy encountering a giraffe at the zoo for the first time but couldn't see anywhere to go with it. So, I edited that paragraph to be about someone watching the boy encountering the giraffe and this lovely little story appeared. How it happens I have no idea but the brain is an amazing thing. And of course, once you are on a path it's pretty simple to just keep following to see where it goes. The problem is getting onto a path in the first place.

Day 92 ~ 1st April 2019 Words: Scornful, Scorpio, Scorpion

She was sitting on a flat rock beside the river when I first saw her, cross-legged with her hands in her lap. The track wound away from the river and I lost sight of her behind the rich foliage but a couple of minutes later the track veered back beside the river and I could see her more clearly. Her legs were crossed but her feet were on top of her knees in the classic lotus position and her arms were relaxed with her hands resting gently palm up. She was straight backed and her dark hair wafted with the mild breeze. I put my backpack down quietly near the track as it was clear she was meditating. Her face was alertly blank and her eyes were closed. I didn't want to interrupt. I'm not a huge fan of New Age stuff but I respect other people's beliefs and practices most of the time.

I washed my hands and face in the river and refilled my water bottle. The area was mostly a flat outcrop of rock that tilted slightly towards the river with three largish flat boulders partly submerged in the water which looked as though they had broken off the main rock at some time. The girl was sitting on the rock furthest from where the track ended, apparently oblivious to my presence. It looked like a reasonable camping spot for the night and since the sun was low on the horizon I thought I might take advantage and sleep there. The girl was scantily dressed in shorts and a crop-top and there was a pair of sandals behind her on the main rock. There was no sign of any backpack or clothing so it looked like she wasn't going to be staying long. I wondered briefly where she had come from as there were no settlements or camp sites nearby and the nearest road had to be at least 8 or 9 miles away. I settled down to wait for her to finish her contemplation of whatever she was contemplating and leave.

I'd taken a month off work in order to walk and think in the Beaverhead Forest of Montana and perhaps take some nice photographs. This spot was quite scenic and there might be some good shots around dawn the following morning. Certainly the setting sun was making the sky red which suggested the following day would be clear rather than overcast. I was reaching for my camera bag which was attached to the backpack to see how it looked through the lens when I realised that if the girl came out of her trance while I was taking pictures she might be deeply offended and think I had been

secretly photographing her. Certainly from what I could see she was attractive and could be well worth photographing.

I stretched out my legs and gently massaged my calves. They were aching a little from the walking I had done that day but after 9 days I was getting back into walking. That first day or two had been very hard as my muscles had grown slack after a year of sitting in an office chair. I hadn't had the foresight to prepare with some exercises. Hindsight is good but not as good as foresight. The girl had not moved, other than her hair waving with the breeze. The evening mosquitoes were waking up and several had sampled my blood already. She made no sign of being aware of their existence.

I untied my walking boots and took them off. The sun was just touching the horizon through the trees behind me. I wondered if there were any fish in the river. I watched the surface for a while but didn't notice any of those circular ripples that fish cause when they take an insect from the surface. Maybe the fish had gone under cover of the rocks for the night. I'm not a fisherman, mostly getting my fish from Denny's Fish and Shellfish Mart back in Baltimore. Perhaps Denny knew about the night habits of fish. Before it got dark I collected some small sticks of dead wood to make a fire for some coffee. I made up a fire near the water's edge and boiled up some river water and added some instant coffee granules. Normally I have sugar and cream in my coffee but when I'm going rough its easier to have the coffee black. Less to carry or split that way.

The girl still hadn't moved as far as I could tell. Her tanned legs and midriff were disappearing as the twilight thickened and her pale shorts and white crop-top seems to stand out in ghostly isolation. I wondered if I should go over and see if she was ok. I suppose it was possible that she might have been bitten by a snake or a scorpion while sitting there and died but surely if that had happened she wouldn't be sitting there serenely. I'm no expert but snakes' and scorpions' poison is not that fast in killing people. Even the fastest take a couple of minutes and in that time she would surely have run or done something and would probably contort in death. Macabre thoughts but it was a little unnerving.

I put down my coffee and called out "Hello" a couple of times. There

was no response although I could still see the paleness of her clothes. There was no noise other than a faint moan of the breeze through the undergrowth and some chirruping of early evening insects. I pulled my boots on over my bare feet. Always a bad idea to walk in bare feet when you don't know what's around. I have a long scar on the sole of my right foot from where I once cut it on some broken glass on a beach. That had been painful and I'd limped back to the car where my lady friend was getting changed. I held up my bloody foot expecting sympathy and possibly even some help with a bandage or something. She fainted though and I had to deal with my foot myself. I'd spent several seconds dithering between my foot and helping my lady friend before I decided that I'd be more use to her if I stemmed the bleeding. I figured it would be difficult to do much when I was forced to hop on one leg and was leaving blood trails all over the ground.

I was perhaps halfway to where she was sitting when I became aware of another sound. Another pace and I could hear it more clearly. A low and breathy "pad me hum". I stopped walking to listen. After a few seconds I heard it again "om mani pad me hum". I stood there listening. She seemed to be chanting the same six syllables over and over again with about 5 seconds of silence between each. Her voice was low and monotonous. There was no variation in pitch, just the repetition over and over again. Clearly she was still alive, which was just as well. The last thing I wanted to do was approach a solitary girl alone in the darkness. I was none too keen on even staying on the outcrop overnight with her there on the rock. This is America, land of litigation. Regardless of any safety issues I might get sued for something real or imagined.

I walked back to my little camping area and sat down again. I wondered what I should do. She wasn't in any apparent danger and, regardless what she might think when she returned to reality, I was not a rapist or mugger or any other kind of dangerous hoodlum. I suppose there was a risk of a dangerous reptile but it was unlikely at night as they are cold blooded and need the sun for energy. And with me there, I could be of assistance if someone else turned up. Unlikely but possible since the moon would rise in an hour or so and although not a full moon it would still reflect some light. And of course some people carry torches. And some people carry guns I realised. Perhaps she had a gun herself, within reach on her rock but out of sight to me.

I didn't know the gun licensing laws of Montana but in practical terms it didn't matter if she had a license or not. If she had a gun my body could be easily disposed of and no one would ever know beyond the headline "Hiking Accountant Disappears In State Forest" and as I lived alone its unlikely my absence would even be reported. In fact as I thought about it I couldn't remember if I'd even told anyone where I was going.

I nearly jumped up and made a run for it there and then. But I'm not a man of instant action so I didn't. Frankly I'm not even a man of delayed action. Scorpios are known for their bravery but also for their passivity. I was a Scorpio so I just worried for a minute or two then figured that it would be rather pointless for her to pack a firearm when she went meditating as she was so oblivious to everything. I felt in my rucksack for some bread and cheese and ate them, looking at the stars and wondering if any of them knew of life. Bodily hunger assuaged but intellectual hunger still gnawing at me I pulled out my sleeping bag and got inside. The rucksack made a barely adequate pillow but I was accustomed to that now. I glanced over towards the girl. She was almost totally lost in the darkness. Just a faint paleness in the dark which could easily be missed if you didn't know she was there. I drifted off to sleep.

I had a restless night. I woke several times thinking I'd heard a noise but all seemed quiet. If I listened carefully I could imagine I heard a faint "om mani padi hum" every now and then. Each time I woke I glanced over at her. Bathed in the faint moonlight she appeared ghostly, ethereal, spiritual. A timeless earth mother praying for ... well, who knows what. Each time I woke I went back to sleep, reassured by her continuing presence but disturbed by her strangeness. Vague and indistinct dreams twisted through my sleeping mind.

I awoke shortly before dawn and decided I wouldn't be going back to sleep. I climbed out of my sleeping bag, found my boots and headed towards the bushes to relieve myself. The dawn mosquitoes were now on duty. Back at my campsite I packed away my sleeping bag and got out my sheath knife and the length of salami. I drank some water from my water bottle and, cutting a decent chunk of salami, I settled back to watch the sunrise. I wasn't going to bother to photograph it. I'd feel a little stupid bobbing around with a camera searching for good

angles with that girl still there. Even though she was as immobile as the rock she was on her presence was undeniable. I glanced over to check on her and she was still there, although she had moved. Her arms were no longer resting in her lap, they were stretched out in front of her, in the direction of the sun, as though pleading with it.

“How strange” I thought. “At least she's obviously alive.”

As the first rays of sun broke across the river she let out a piercing scream and I dropped my salami. No, it wasn't a scream, more of a keening, wailing type of sound but again a monotone. No variation in pitch. I watched her avidly, a tiny part of me hoping she get up and dance naked in the reawakening light of dawn in some primitive fertility ritual. She didn't. The cry shut off abruptly but a few seconds later she repeated it. This went on for, ohh two or three minutes, until the sun's disk was fully above the horizon. She fell silent and slowly opened her arms until they were wide apart like wings. She held that pose for a minute or so then leaned forward until her forehead touched the rock, tipping slightly forward on her bent knees while her arms came to her sides and lifted backwards so that she looked like a swan. She lifted her head from the rock but kept her body prostrate.

“Ootos Ra, Ramos Oot” she declaimed, not loudly but her voice carried clear and distinct.

“Ootos Ra, Ramos Oot”

“Ootos Ra, Ramos Oot”

“Atman, Bhodi, Dharma, Arhat”

“Ootos Ra, Ramos Oot”

“Immer Questos Ramos Atman”

I'm not too sure of the spelling, I didn't recognise the language, but that is what the words sounded like. Her voice was clear and sweet and commanding. There was nothing to suggest she had just spent an entire night sitting on a rock chanting. It was quite compelling. Even I, a boring accountant from urban Baltimore was deeply affected. There

was something about her that demanded spiritual attention. Even the modern shorts and crop-top did not detract from her charisma as she prostrated herself upon that rock, her hair heavy and lustrous like a dark shroud around her head and shoulders. I felt myself drawn by some undefined internal force to go to her and worship at her feet yet I did not move. Even the birds had ceased their song to listen to her and the salami lay on the ground, untouched by ants. Her power radiated and I felt minute and insignificant.

Abruptly her torso lifted and she raised her arms above her head. With her face full in the early sun she let out a piercing scream and fell silent. Her arms dropped to her sides. Slowly she unfolded her legs and rose to her feet in a single graceful movement. There was no sign of stiffness. She stretched luxuriously, almost like a cat and rolled her head around on her neck. She ran her hands through her hair then pulled the bottom hem of her crop-top to smooth it. She took a long deep breath, as though she had not breathed for days and savoured every molecule. As she breathed out she turned unhesitatingly towards me as though she knew exactly where I was and looked me directly in the eyes.

“Namaste brother” she called in a friendly almost familiar tone. “How went your night?”

I was quite taken aback. I was still under the spell of her magic of the last few minutes and my brain was cobwebbed. I remained silent.

She stepped off her rock and strode towards me, ignoring her sandals. I had the presence of mind to stand up. Clearly this girl had no need of guns.

“I watched you arrive” she said, “from behind those trees.” She gestured behind me.

“I thank you for your respect brother”

I smiled and nodded. Speech seemed beyond me but there was nothing I could think of to say. She'd been on the rock when I had arrived.

She placed the palm of each hand on my cheeks and kissed me on my lips for what seemed like a month, then she bent to my feet and retrieved the chunk of salami. She ate it slowly, her grey eyes never blinking as she looked at me.

“I have not eaten for a week” she said gravely. I offered her my water bottle and she drank deeply.

“I thank you again brother. Gifts given freely are gifts of the soul.”

“Oh yes” I said to myself. Then aloud “Have you been on the rock for a week?”

“Yes” she said simply but offered no explanation.

She turned and walked into the river and immersed herself. I turned my back so she could wash in private. I heard her splashing then she appeared by my side, dripping wet but still clothed. Her crop-top clung to her in disturbing ways and her hair hung wet and sleek around her face. I rummaged in my rucksack and pulled out my small travel towel. It wasn't too dirty and I proffered it to her. She dried her hands and handed it back then sat on the rock, facing the river.

“Come”, she said. “Sit beside me in the sun. Let us be companions until I must go”

I sat beside her. Not too close but not that far away either.

“My name is Jonathan” I said. “I'm on a hiking trip in this forest. Whats your name?”

“Marybeth” she said and giggled. “That wasn't what you expected was it.”

I had to admit it wasn't. I'd expected something exotic and goddess-like, such as Akonadi or Vakarine. Something as prosaic as Marybeth seemed inappropriate.

“Are you American?” I said, fancying I could see a touch of American Indian in her, or perhaps even India itself since that's where most of

the world's mysticism originated.

“No” she replied. “I am of the earth but not of this Earth”.

“Ahh” I said. “That explains it”. I don't know why I said that since it didn't explain anything. It didn't even make sense. But hey, I'm sitting on a river bank with a pretty girl who seemed to have extraordinary power. Call me kinky but I like that in a girl.

“Umm, I hope you don't mind me asking” I said suspecting that she would mind but in all honesty what did she expect? “Why were you sitting on that rock? Were you meditating?”

I expected a scornful reply. The very few people I'd met who meditated always seemed a little scornful when I asked them why they did it, as though I should know why without having it explained to me.

Her gaze swept the river and the rising sun. She sat in silence. I figured she wasn't going to tell me. She drew a deep breath then released it with a hiss.

“I must commune with the Consciousness of the Universe” she said. “It is my task to justify the continuing existence of your kind. I must perform this task each year.”

She paused.

“Each year it becomes more difficult. I fear the time is coming when I cannot justify and judgement will come upon you.”

Ordinarily I would have laughed. We get weirdos all the time in Baltimore and they are usually good entertainment. But this girl ... was not weird. Strange most definitely but not weird. I noticed she was entirely dry. Even her thick hair was fully dry. A chill ran through me and I shivered. She stood up. So I stood up.

“It is time” she said. “I must return to the earth”.

She took my hand and held it while staring into my eyes. I felt she was

searching the depths of my soul.

“You have made my task next year easier. Farewell Brother.”

She lifted my hand to her lips and kissed it, then released it.

“The Universe thanks you for your gifts of respect and nourishment. Fare well.”

I looked at my hand as it was tingling where she had kissed it. Then I looked up to see if she was laughing at her joke but she had vanished.

I still have her sandals to this day.

(3254 words)

The basis for this story came from a YouTube video I watched, ohh, maybe a year before. I had wondered if meditation might be useful so I watched this video of a lovely girl sitting on a rock in a river meditating while soft music played and her voice-over said meaningful things about letting go and so on. Unfortunately, it didn't do much for me but the image of her has stayed in my subconscious. When I got today's words I immediately googled 'scorpion' to see where they lived and apparently they are to be found everywhere except Antarctica which wasn't a lot of help. But I associate scorpions with hotter climates and a girl sitting on a rock in a river in a steamy jungle came into my mind. OK, the steamy jungle turned into Montana and the blonde girl changed her hair to black but I got fascinated about how I could possibly bring this story to a close. After all, she wasn't doing anything!*

** In YouTube, search for Boho Beautiful. I'm sure she won't mind some more viewers.*

Day 93 ~ 2nd April 2019 Words: Jasmine, Jasper, Jaundice

Outside the room a police siren blared as they rushed to some emergency. Inside the room nothing much was happening. There was a tall bookcase against one wall and beside it stood a music stand with a large photograph of an abstraction propped on it. Against another wall sat a large armchair. Beside it stood a tall carved wooded candlestick holder with a fat candle. Not much but it was a small room and looked cramped. The window was propped open with a hammer and a scent of something exotic pervaded the room. Perhaps it was frangipani. Jessica wasn't sure but it was certainly familiar.

She sat in the chair pretending to read a book. She had taken one at random from the bookcase but hadn't bothered to read the title. Occasionally she looked at the first page but the letters and words failed to register on her consciousness. Jessica was prone to daydreaming, a facet of her personality frequently commented upon by her school teachers. Typically along the lines of "Jessica is intelligent and capable and could do well if only she would stop daydreaming and pay attention". Her mother had never taken a lot of notice of school reports. Her view was that the child would develop in her own way and at her own pace and a detailed knowledge of facts wouldn't make her a better person. In truth this was a view shared by a surprising number of her teachers but they felt themselves unable to verbalise it because they were paid to cram her with a detailed knowledge of facts. As professionals they felt obligated to at least comment on her tendency to daydream, even if in the end they allowed her to do just that. Her father's view was the same as her mother's as it was generally easier.

Given Jessica's age of 19 it would be forgivable to presume that she was currently engaged in daydreaming about love or a boy or both. She was in fact daydreaming about paint. She wanted to decorate her room, the room in which she sat. It was not her bedroom as that was further down the hallway. This room was euphemistically called her "study" or sometimes her "play room". Whatever it was called it was Jessica's and no one went in there except the cleaning lady every Tuesday morning.

The walls and ceiling were painted white although the floor was bare

but varnished wood. The room had been painted white in order to make it seem bigger but in fact made it only look slightly squalid. It had no character, no essence, no drama. The room did not speak to her. And this was important because, and Jessica did not yet know this, she was not just a dreamer. She was a seeker. A seeker of universal truths and she needed a space that spoke with her, a space that helped the universe to come into focus. So she sat and daydreamed about redecorating the room, not yet knowing, still only feeling. Jessica, despite her lack of detailed knowledge of facts, could feel most deeply and what she felt most deeply of all was the absence of truth, or rather Truth, in those facts. Facts, she felt, had no substance. They merely described but did not exist. Yellow, for example, described the colour but was not of itself the colour. Mathematics described the world but was not of itself the world. Science described the universe but was not of itself the universe. Literature described love but was not of itself love. As yet unknown to herself, Jessica sought the substance not the description. And so she daydreamed, the book unread. The white walls reflecting only their own harshness and ignorance.

Several thousand miles away a mystic came out of his trance. He looked around, aware that something had interfered with his aura. The scent of jasmine drifted in through the gaps in the walls. He could see nothing that would account for it and recomposed himself to enter his transcendental state again but could not focus. Something was definitely amiss. He unfolded himself and went to the small toilet behind the shack where he lived. When he returned to the corner where he had been sitting he saw a small stone. Picking it up he turned it over and over in his hands, feeling its substance. It was a piece of jasper, smooth and red. It comfortably fit in the palm of his gnarled hand and he could feel his aura bending and twisting around it. He resumed his posture and placed the stone on the ground in front of him. He closed his eyes and focused his being on the stone, probing to find out why it disturbed him. Slowly he felt it. He felt the whiteness of white walls. He felt an unseen book in a relaxed hand. He felt Jessica's dreams. And knew she was a seeker. He felt her unease and her lack of comprehension. He felt her confusion. And so he acted.

In Italy, a young man by the name of Enrico Parelli, stumbled and fell.

He picked himself up and brushed down his stylish chinos, aware that the girls sitting at the table outside the cafe had seen him fall and were even now laughing and making comments. His hand hurt but he wasn't going to give them the satisfaction of seeing that. His jaundiced view of the girls, and in fact of women generally, stemmed from a recently ended love affair. The girls were not laughing at him. They were completely unaware of him for they were concentrating on the tale of one of their party whose love affair was far from ended and she was describing it in great and ribald detail to their mutual amusement. Enrico stalked off through the early night to his apartment where he lived with his mother and her lover of many years. They were both out, very probably at the local opera, so he went to the kitchen to see what food was to be found.

As he expected there was a plate of pasta in the fridge which he transferred to the microwave oven and heated for 5 minutes. When the microwave pinged he prodded the pasta with his finger and decided it was not hot enough and set the machine for another 3 minutes. Absent minded he pulled his handkerchief from his jacket pocket and something fell to the floor. He wiped his finger and bent to retrieve it. It was a small, glossy red stone. Enrico had no idea what it was doing in his pocket but the microwave pinged again so he returned the stone to his pocket and his attention to the pasta which he carried into the lounge and put on the low table in front of the couch. He retrieved an opened bottle of wine from the wine rack in the corner of the room and turned on the TV with the remote. He flipped through the channels until he found a comedy and proceeded to eat his pasta and drink occasionally from the bottle, determined not to find any aspect of the comedy funny.

When his mother and her lover returned he tried to engage with their talk of the opera and who had been there but his mind kept drifting away. In time he excused himself and went to his bedroom. His mother and her lover shrugged their shoulders at each other, unspeakingly sharing their knowledge of the sadness of unfulfilled and unrequited love and that only time could heal. In his room Enrico started to undress for bed and emptied his pockets onto the table beside his bed. The stone gleamed invitingly but Enrico was not in the mood for pretty things. He climbed into bed and tried to sleep. It was slow in coming but in time he slept deeply and dreamed of a white room and

a girl, a girl who did not laugh at him, a girl who knew him for what he was rather than what he pretended to be. It was a disturbing dream but when he woke he could scarcely remember it. Dreams are like that. As fleeting as a speck of dust in a hurricane.

He joined his mother at the breakfast table. Her lover still slept. He poured milk over his fette biscottate, a type of hard but sweet bread, while his mother poured them both fresh coffee. As he slowly crumbled the biscottate in the milk he told his mother he was going to London, perhaps for a holiday, perhaps to find a job. His mother looked at him intently. It was not uncommon for a failed lover to run away to hide. Somewhat puzzled at his announcement, which had been uttered before he had even thought of it, Enrico sought to justify it.

"I need a holiday Mama. I am feeling stale and I cannot live here forever without a job. Perhaps I can find one in England." he said.

"Perhaps", she replied. "A holiday will do you good but you may find that getting a job as difficult as here."

"Yes" said Enrico, beginning to regret it already but determined not to be put off. "But Mama they might like a nice Italian boy."

She laughed, knowing that English girls had a reputation for going wild over Italian charms. "Yes Enrico, how could they not like you! But stay safe. When are you going?"

"I thought perhaps this afternoon." replied Enrico, astonished at his urgency. He wasn't even sure he wanted to go but there was a sudden need to explore, to travel and London seemed to be calling him.

His mother nodded. Enrico was her son and she would do whatever was necessary to help him.

Back in his room, Enrico packed a few clothes and took his case to the front door. Fetching his jacket he hesitated then picked up the stone from the bedside table. "This will bring me good fortune" he thought to himself. "Already my life is changing since I found it."

His mother's lover drove him to the airport in good time to collect his ticket before the plane departed. His mother had hugged him before

they left but would not come to the airport. An airport departure was so much more final than simply going out in a car.

The Indian mystic twitched in his trance. The jasper before him took on a blueish hue.

Jessica awoke with a start. The book had fallen from her hand and her back and neck were sore. Looking at her watch she realised she had slept the whole night in the chair. She stood and stretched to ease the kinks. "Blue" she said out loud. "I want a blue ceiling". She thought about it for a few moments gazing at the ceiling and nodded her head. "Yes definitely blue" she decided and went to the bathroom. After using the toilet and showering she went to her bedroom for fresh clothes and went in search of milk and toast with Marmite. She was going to the airport later with her father to collect her mother who had been to a conference in Atlanta.

Enrico arrived at Heathrow airport at the same time as Jessica and her father. While they parked the car and went to the Arrivals Hall, he was waved through passport control, past the queues of non-EU passport holders, and collected his solitary case from Baggage collection. The customs officer glanced at him and decided he was not the type to be carrying anything illicit and did not more than tap the side of the case. Jessica and her father still had plenty of time before her mother's flight so they went to the Observation Lounge. Jessica had loved to watch aircraft take off and land since she was a small child.

Leaving the Customs area, Enrico walked into the starkness of the Arrivals Hall. He had absolutely no idea what to do next and the crowds of people milling around waiting for their friends and loved ones confused him. His English was good but he wasn't used to hearing so many people speaking in the language at the same time.

The mystic chanted and slowly waved his hands over the stone. The bluish tinge had deepened on the red to seem a deep purple.

Finding seats in the Observation Lounge, Jessica and her father waited for the next plane to take off. This being Heathrow it would happen within a minute or so.

"I'm thinking of painting the door and window frame of my room purple" she said to her father. "I think it will look superb with the blue ceiling."

He father nodded. He had learned many years ago never to argue colour schemes with a woman. He wasn't going to break that tradition now no matter what he thought.

"Its your room" he said. "You are free to paint it any colour you want, so long as you don't use real gold or silver". He laughed. If she really wanted real gold leaf on the walls he'd find a way. He indulged his daughter shamelessly.

A Trans-Am plane lined up on runway 7 and they both watched its takeoff. One thinking of travel to exotic places, the other dreaming of purple and blue as a backdrop to infinity.

Enrico saw a sign to the Observation Lounge and headed towards it, stopping for a take-away coffee to take with him. He looked around for a book seller to buy a tourist guide to London but could not see one. In fact there were no shops in the Arrivals Hall other than drinks and fast food as few people waited long and were in no mood for buying things they could easily buy in their local stores. Most of the waiting was done in the Departures Hall and so, for purely economic reasons, the shops were all located there. Bored travellers spent more than tired arrivals, hurrying to finish their journeys.

Enrico collected his coffee in its cardboard cup with an ill-fitting plastic lid and wandered off in search of the Observation Lounge. He had no interest in watching the plane. He really just needed somewhere to sit quietly for a while while he figured out what to do next.

The mystic sighed deeply. Flecks of pale yellow threaded slowly through the stone.

In the Observation Lounge, Enrico saw there were plenty of seats available. Few people ever ventured into the Lounge. They were generally too busy finding their flights or browsing the attractive duty-free shops in the Departures concourse. He saw a middle aged man

with a young woman sitting at the end of a short row of seats near the broad windows. She was attractive in a pale skinny way. Enrico preferred the dark buxom girls of his homeland but he could sense she was a friendly girl and her father, hopefully he was her father and not her lover, could give him some advice on what to do now he was here. He went over and gestured to the seat next to the man.

“Scusi” he said to the man, “can I sit here and talk with you?”. His English was quite good but his accent was a little thick. There was no doubting he was Italian.

“Certainly” said the man with a nod. “Help yourself”.

Enrico put his case on the floor and sat on the edge of the seat, depositing the coffee cup on the flat top of his case.

“I am Enrico”, he said, tapping his chest. “From Italy”.

“I am John”, said Jessica's father “and this is my daughter Jessica.”

All three smiled at each other. Jessica sensed Enrico had no guile in him. She sensed that he was also lost and confused. She wondered why.

Being British, John was content to let the conversation end at that point. Being Italian, Enrico hadn't even begun. He started to explain, his English a little halting as he sought to remember the English words. At the back of his mind he thought that he had met this girl somewhere before, although he was sure he would remember her more clearly if he had. Perhaps she was of a type common to England and he'd seen someone like her on television.

Within 4 or 5 minutes Enrico had reached the core of his dilemma, having explained the circumstances of his failed love affair, his unemployment and how he came to be on a plane to London with no destination in mind beyond the airport.

The mystic leaned forward and breathed on the stone. Flecks of green began to appear between the snaking yellow lines.

Jessica heard only truth in Enrico's voice and saw only truth in his eyes.

“Dad”, she said quietly, “why don't we let Enrico stay with us in the spare room for a few days while he gets himself organised?”.

Her father considered. His brother and his wife were visiting and would need the spare room but that was not for several weeks yet. He was proud of his daughter's compassion but did not have her sense of truth. He could see possible dangers in letting a stranger stay with them.

“Lets see what you mother says” he temporised, giving himself more time to think of a reason why not . “She may have plans for the spare room we don't know about”. He suspected Enrico was genuine but would be extra vigilant until he left. He knew his wife would agree as she'd have no opportunity to do otherwise when presented with such a request as soon as she arrived. Enrico felt relieved. He hadn't expected such generosity and resolved to be the perfect guest. He wondered if he should offer to pay them.

The mystic leaned forward and picked up the stone between his thumb and forefinger. With his eyes still closed he rotated the stone until he felt the spot he was looking for and touched that spot to his tongue. He then lifted the stone to touch his forehead then placed the stone back on the earth floor of his shack. He felt his aura begin to settle. A black patch had appeared on the surface of the stone and faint spots of silver seemed to dance there.

John drove the car away from the airport, It would probably only take an hour to get home at this time of day and the traffic was quite light. Jessica and Enrico sat in the back. Enrico had volubly expressed his thanks for her generosity and kindness in offering him a place to stay and she had smiled at him but seems shy and withdrawn. Enrico tried to talk with her but she seemed not to understand that English girls went wild for Italian boys. She answered him politely but at no great length and asked him nothing in return. After a while he gave up and they sat in silence, half listening to Jessica's mother talking about her trip and the conference.

They had been driving along the motorway for over half an hour when Enrico remembered the stone in his pocket. His lucky stone. He fumbled in his jacket pockets until he found it. He pulled it out and was surprised to see that in the slightly overcast English light the stone looked more purple than red and seemed to have flecks of green and yellow in it. He turned the stone over in his hands then said to Jessica "Is my, how you say, lucky stone. It bring me to you. I give you the stone as my thank you."

He smiled and lifted her hand and place the stone in the centre of her palm. She smiled and felt the truth of the stone, the reality of it. She looked at it and exclaimed "Why this is the exact colours I want my room! See, the blue for the ceiling and purple for the door and yellow and green for the walls! How magnificent and thank you very much Enrico, I shall treasure this stone always." Despite this she wondered about the black and silver blemish on one side. She couldn't see how black and silver would fit into her room design but the black and silver did not feel false.

Enrico smiled. He wasn't sure what room she was talking about but he felt it would look a little strange with those colours. He preferred the earthy tones of Italy. But she seemed pleased with the gift and was talking a little less reservedly with him now. When they got home, Jessica rushed to her room and placed the stone carefully in the exact centre of the middle shelf of her bookcase, piling a few books on top of the bookcase to make room for it. After admiring it for a few moments she gazed around her white room imagining the colours and how it would feel. She nodded and hugged herself.

Back downstairs she joined in the discussion on which takeaway to have for dinner and who would have which dishes. Her father phoned the order through and went to collect it. Enrico was surprised and saddened to discover they did not drink wine with their meal.

Later that evening, Jessica's parents went to bed early as her mother was tired. Not particularly wanting to be alone with Enrico she excused herself after a sufficiently polite interval and went to her room. She propped open the window with the hammer and sat in her chair. She began to visualise the room with the new colours. The tired whiteness taking on beauty and significance in her imagination. She

drifted off to sleep again in her chair.

The mystic slowly came out of his trance. He opened his eyes and gazed at the spot where the stone had been. He lifted his arms above his head and chanted unintelligible words. Suddenly he brought his hands together in a loud clap.

“Let it be so” he commanded in a strong clear voice.

Jessica awoke with a start. She looked around the room in astonishment. The ceiling was a rich velvety blue and the door and window frame were a glowing reddish purple. The walls were pale gold enwrought with green flashes. It was magnificent. She was about to get to her feet when she saw the wooden floor had gone and fell back into the chair in fright. There was no floor. Only the blackness of empty space dotted with silver stars. Her chair floated in the void.

She became aware of the rich and heady fragrance that wafted in through the open window. She knew it was jasmine.

Her education was about to begin.

(3816 words)

After I typed in the words for today I sat staring at the otherwise blank page. Nothing was coming. I smoked a cigarette and the page stayed blank. Not a damned thing came to mind. I started to think that I'd lost it. Reached the end of my creativity. Well, it was bound to happen sooner or later. A shame but that's the way life is. A police car went by so I wrote that down for want of anything better to do. Nothing else happened so I started to write about my room. It's a small room, about 10 feet square so there wasn't really a lot to say, although the sash of the window has broken and it really is held open with a hammer. I figured someone should be in the room but I'm boring so I put in a pretty girl because frankly I much prefer to write about pretty girls than about myself. Then it ground to a halt again. I'd done this kind of 'write-and-see' before and always a story had appeared but this time it didn't. I had another ciggie and googled 'jasper'. I thought it was just a name but it turns out it's a type of red rock that's quite pretty. I wondered if Jessica might have a piece of jasper in the room but that didn't feel right to me so I let it go and debated whether I

should go and get some coffee. Then I thought of an Indian guru-type person holding a piece of jasper and four hours and 3800 words later I stopped typing.

I really really have no idea how this works and you can't begin to imagine how blown away I am by it. This is one of the points I'm trying to make with this book. It is so easy to get discouraged and give up quickly.

Is this a good story? Well, who cares at the end of the day. I spent 10 or 15 minutes more-or-less blankly staring at a computer screen then my brain decided to get involved and I had fun imagining the rock changing colours and the guru manipulating things on the other side of the world. This is why I started this journey, to get myself out of the cycle of "can't think of anything, give up" that applied to so many situations in the past. Whether the story is good or not is your decision as the reader. For me it's good because I'm thinking new thoughts and having new ideas. Which is just awesome.

Iron Dave could see the girl in the back seat of the car in front of him. OK, he could only see her head but she had absolutely gorgeous hair. Long, thick and straight it was mostly blonde but there were streaks of darker colours. Very tasty. Looked like she could be a trophy blonde and the back seat of his Harley could use a trophy blonde. At the traffic lights he pulled up alongside, his v-twin engine throbbing with vitality. He flexed his arm so the muscle of his bicep bulged – that really impresses the girls – and slowly looked over at her, showing every ounce of cool that he had. The long nose of an Afghan Hound looked back at him. It dropped its tongue out and woofed expectantly in greeting. The old lady in the driving seat saw him and wound up her window. He stared at the dog then turned back to look at the lights. When they changed to green he revved the motor and roared away. It just wasn't his day. He'd been having a string of them.

Charmaine left the hairdressers early. It was a quiet day so she left the cleaning up to her apprentice and put up the Closed sign. She wanted to do some shopping and her boyfriend was an absolute bastard to find clothes for. He was a XXXL in the chest but only an M in the waist and an annoying XL when it came to the thighs. She wanted him to look stylish but practicality came first. Any clothes had to fit and that's what he invariably ended up with. Just any clothes. Nothing with any style or even colour coordination. Admittedly he normally wore oil stained jeans and a leather jacket with "Diablos Motor Cycle Club" and a picture of a skull with pistons in its eye sockets on the back but sometimes he did try to dress reasonably when he took her out. Mostly he was with the other guys and had to maintain his image but there were occasional times when he was just with her and could relax. It was a waste of time trying the men's fashion shops as they were small and didn't stock the bigger sizes but she hadn't been to the department store in the High Street for a long time and, while not exactly fashionable, they did usually carry a wide range. The biggest problem was that the people who made clothes assumed that when men's chests were XL or above that they had bellies even bigger. They also assumed that mens thighs were small than their waists, by a substantial margin. This meant that virtually everything he wore had yards of surplus material around his middle. Charmaine thought that made him look fat.

Iron Dave parked his Harley outside Larry's Gym. He'd been christened Irwin Ronald David by his doting parents but few had the courage to call him Irwin when faced by a 6ft4inch, 24 stone biker with shaggy hair, long beard and tats all over his visible muscles. Iron had been coined at school because he was listed in the attendance register as I. Ronald but it had really taken hold after he started weight training. It fitted his personality. Pumping iron was what he did when he wasn't stripping motorcycles for parts. Inside the gym he stripped and put on his ripped threadbare tracksuit pants and aptly named sweatshirt. He sweated a lot at the gym and washing clothes wasn't his forte. Besides, its comfortingly familiar smell put him in the mood for a good workout and even his closest mates weren't going to tell him he stunk. He clasped a few hands and acknowledged some familiar faces then started his warm up. Three hours at the weights and he'd be ready for his dinner.

Charmaine had seen some nice suits in the department store. A waste of time looking though because there was no way she'd ever get Iron Dave into a suit even if she found one to fit. But it was nice looking at them and imagining him in one. He probably wouldn't wear a suit even for their wedding and there was little prospect of that event happening. She sighed and headed for the sportswear section. That was always a good place to start since sportswear was usually baggy and elasticated. The trouble was most sportswear was either grey or blue. After pawing a variety of items she settle on a dark grey cotton sweatshirt with a hood and a matching pair of tracksuit pants with a double red stripe down the side of one leg.

After his workout Iron Dave had a shower and dumped his workout clothes in his locker. Firing up the bike he headed home. Charmaine had his usual steak prepared and he wolfed it with three helpings of chips. Charmaine had a light salad as she was careful about her figure. Sitting back on the couch afterwards, Iron Dave opened a beer and downed it in two gulps. He reached for another and Charmaine lit a cigarette.

"Got you some new clothes today" she said.

"Oh yeah" he grunted disinterestedly.

“Yeah”, she said. “Went to the department store. You wanna see?”

Not waiting for a reply she pulled out a couple of shopping bags from beside her end of the couch.

“I got you some new sports stuff for the gym” she said, holding up the huge sweatshirt against her tiny frame to entice him. “That old sweatshirt must really stink by now.”

He glanced at the shirt. “Yeah could be. I don't notice. Like the hood. Gets cold there in the winter”

Things were going well. He hadn't even sworn.

She put the sweatshirt with the tracksuit pants and pulled some jeans from the other bag.

“Look”, she said. “I found these. They're loose fit which means there baggy in the leg and they've got these straps with buttons on the side so you can tighten the waist band. Try them on”.

Iron Dave stood, heaving his bulk athletically from the low couch and dropped his oily jeans. He didn't like underwear. He pulled the new jeans on and Charmaine fussed with the buttons at the sides. At their tightest the waist band was only a couple of inches bigger than his waist. This was impressive as she'd never seen him in jeans that fitted so well. With luck she'd be able to get her mum to move the buttons to make it even tighter. Iron Dave went to the bedroom to check himself in the mirror. He came back looking pleased. “Nice” he said, more voluble than normal to indicate his pleasure.

Charmaine was pleased. This was going well and it was possible her strategy was going to work. She'd bought him a couple of sleeveless t-shirts in the hope she'd be able to chuck out some of his old ones. There was one in particular that she hated but he liked it and had refused to get rid of it. The one time she'd tried to throw it out he'd retrieved it from the garbage and given her a split lip. The shirt had “If You Can Read This The Bitch Has Fallen Off” on the back and she hated it with a passion.

“Got you these as well” she said, draping the t-shirts over the back of the couch for his inspection. Then came the crunch line. “Maybe you can chuck out some of your old ones”. She held her breath and tensed up waiting for his reaction.

Iron Dave had had a good day. He'd sold a job lot of Kawasaki parts for a decent wad of cash and the workout at the gym had left him tired but feeling powerful. He looked at Charmaine, seeing her tension, and laughed.

“Fuck it, yeah ok babe”, he said with a half laugh. “You can use the bitch for rags”.

He felt pleased. Looked like he'd be getting a good workout from Charmaine in bed tonight. Then he remembered the Afghan Hound and scowled.

Charmaine visibly relaxed then tensed up again when she saw the scowl. “You sure?” she said tentatively.

Iron Dave belched loudly and reached for another beer. She was a good girl even though her hair was nowhere near as sexy as the dog's. “Yeah sure I'm sure.”

He stopped and searched for something else to say. Words weren't his speciality. He slapped Charmaine on the backside and said “Yeah cool ... thanks for the clothes.”

She smiled and playfully pulled his beard making him drop his head so his mouth was within reach. The 14 inch difference in their height was only ever a problem when they were standing. He never danced so there was no problem there. The 16 stone weight difference was a bigger problem as their bed sagged badly on his side and she was unable to stay on her side of the bed unless she hooked an arm and a leg over the side of the mattress. They needed a new bed but one thing at a time. He could only cope with domestic changes in small doses.

“I'm going to get my head down for a bit” he said breathlessly after a few moments. Fuck she was a good kisser. “Denny wants me at the

club tonight.”

Denny was the head of the Diablos and owned a nightclub on the edge of the fashionable part of town. He sometimes employed Iron Dave as a doorman. His size was intimidating and few potential troublemakers took the risk to see if he was as mean as he looked. The few who did had discovered that he was.

“Just on the door?” Charmaine didn't mind that but sometimes Denny had a deal going down and wanted Iron Dave for protection. The trouble was that the people Denny did deals with weren't as easily intimidated as the usual punters and rumour had it that sometimes people got shot. Charmaine didn't like those rumours. At least not where Iron Dave was concerned.

“Nah” he said. “Denny's got a meeting. Thought we'd go down later and make a night of it. The business should only take a couple of minutes but it'll be a real earner.” He winked at her. “Might be able to get that new bed you want doll.”

Charmaine sighed but knew that if it came to a showdown, Denny would win. Diablos were for life and loyalty was strictly enforced. Aggressively. She'd have no chance.

“What time?”

“Midnight babe”

“K. I'll be ready.”

At midnight Charmaine was dressed to kill in a skin tight very short low cut dress and 4 inch heels. Her black hair piled on top of her head in the latest fashion. Iron Dave was in his working clothes. Diablos leather jacket, jeans and heavy boots. Leaving the squat terraced house, Iron Dave stumbled and knocked the terra cotta Buddha left beside the path by a previous tenant into a puddle of stagnant water under a leaky drainpipe. He swore but returned it to terra firma. They took the car since Iron Dave kept support equipment stashed in the boot which he couldn't carry on the Harley. There wasn't really anywhere you could stash a shotgun, pick-axe handle, two baseball

bats and a sharpened crowbar on a motorcycle without drawing attention.

Two other Diablos were on the door when they arrived at the club. Iron Dave did his usual chest-butting greeting with them and they entered, admission free. Denny was at the bar and Iron Dave went over to talk to him.

Charmaine looked around the club. It was too dim to see but she thought she could see Mandy and Big Beth beside the dance floor. Beth's profile was quite distinctive. She had known Mandy since school and Beth was the on-again off-again girlfriend of Grinder, one of the Diablos on the door. She had a psychotic streak and Grinder was terrified of her. She'd once broken his collar bone when she hit him with a half-shaft. She'd told the police that she'd been aiming for his head but lost her grip because of the oil on it. The police released her with no charges figuring she'd do a better job keeping Grinder off the streets than they would. Iron Dave stayed at the bar with Denny except when he briefly left the club and returned with his equipment bag which he stowed behind the bar.

Charmaine stayed with Mandy and Beth, gossiping and sometimes dancing. The local lads stayed away from them as it was widely known who their boyfriends were. The girls didn't mind since the local lads weren't up to much seeing as how they weren't part of the ruling class. The Diablos ruled and there were no contenders for dominance. Not since some Hells Angels tried to move in on the territory four years ago and had barely survived to tell the tale. The police didn't really mind. This was generally one of the quietest boroughs in the city.

Around 2am things began to happen. Three cars pulled up outside and several large gentlemen in suits entered the club. All had shaved heads and affected an air of disinterest. They panned out around the club, each coming to rest in a spot that afforded them good visibility. Charmaine spotted them as soon as they walked in.

"Nice suit" she said to the nearest. "Where did you get it?"

"Had it made to measure love" he replied. "Can't get em off the peg in my size."

“Was it expensive?” she asked, an idea coming into her head.

“Very” he replied. The idea left her head.

She rejoined Mandy and Beth. Half a dozen Diablos had appeared from a back room and were now forming a half circle around Denny at a discreet distance.

“Hey” said Mandy, nudging Charmaine. “That guy over there is staring at you.” She nodded in the direction of one of the suited visitors. Charmaine turned to look but he was difficult to make out as he was standing in the shadows.

The man walked over to the girls. He was smaller than Iron Dave but not so you'd notice. Charmaine recognised him as soon as he came into the lights of the dance floor. He was Yousef, a guy she'd dated before she met Iron Dave. The dance floor lights reflected off his shaved head.

“Oh shit” she thought. “Dave will go spare.”

“So we meet again” Yousef said in his strangely accented voice which was higher pitched than you'd expect from a man his size.

Charmaine looked towards the bar but Iron Dave had his back to her. Denny was talking to an older gentleman and a younger man who carried a small suitcase. It looked like Iron Dave's night job was ongoing.

“So what you doing here?” she asked Yousef, trying to think of a way of getting rid of him before Iron Dave saw her talking to him.

“Am with Da Man” said Yousef, pointing it the older gentleman at the bar with his chin. “You's lookin hot girl.” He grinned lasciviously and slowly looked her up and down. “Mighty fine”.

“I'm here with Iron Dave” said Charmaine. Mandy had sidled back out of the way against a wall but Beth was watching Yousef intently, expecting trouble and ready for it.

Yousef nodded slowly, his eyes never leaving her face. "Am with Da Man" he said again and reached out to touch her face. "When he gone you drink with me". He half turned and said again "You gone drink with me girl. No arguing." He walked back to his shaded position and turned his attention to the meeting at the bar.

Charmaine thought of leaving and going back to the car to wait for Iron Dave but saw that Yousef was between her and the exit. The other exit was behind the bar and there was no way she could leave that way until the meeting was over. It looked like it would be over soon. Denny's briefcase was being inspected by the younger man while Cueball, Denny's right hand man, was inspecting the small suitcase.

"If there's any trouble, I'll take out Yousef." Beth muttered in her ear.

"Yousef should go when this is over" Charmaine muttered back. "The Man won't like him staying."

She was watching Iron Dave who was still closely watching The Man. It looked like the deal was done since Denny and The Man were smiling at each other and the two cases were closed and firmly held in the hands of the ones who'd inspected them.

"They'll be going in a minute" Charmaine said to Beth but Beth had gone. She'd quietly moved over to stand beside Mandy.

Sure enough, The Man shook Denny's hand and headed for the exit, preceded by two of the large suited gentlemen. Iron Dave leaned towards Denny and said something that made Denny laugh. Denny and Cueball disappeared into the room behind the bar and Iron Dave retrieved his equipment bag and walked over towards Mandy.

"Keep an eye on this for a bit love" he said and dropped it with a muffled clank at her feet.

He walked over to Charmaine.

"Who was that you was talking to just now?" he demanded.

Charmaine looked up at him. "No one" she said, her throat

constricted.

“I fucking saw you bitch” said Iron Dave. He was normally a fairly affable but the tension of the job had left him irritable.

Yousef appeared at Charmaine's side. He hadn't left with the others.

“She gone drink with me.” he said and stared Iron Dave in the eye.

“Oh its you you fucking Arab turd” snarled Iron Dave. “I fucking told you to stay away from my bitch or I'd fucking kill you”

The two men faced off, flexing their muscles and trying to outstare each other. Charmaine looked like a scared rabbit beside two elephants. She was shaking and tried to step between them. Neither even noticed her.

Iron Dave stepped forward so his chest pushed against Yousef's. Yousef didn't retreat one millimetre. His smile broadened.

“You done beat me one time. Ain't never gone happen again.” His eyes bored into Iron Dave's and his face grew hard. He pushed back and Iron Dave flinched. Yousef pushed harder then started to slump. His eyes became vacant and his hand reached up to Iron Dave's face. He sank slowly to the floor. Iron Dave stared at him in puzzlement, his fists ready for action. Charmaine screamed and stepped back.

“Fuck me” said Beth from behind Yousef. “That's a fucking handy crowbar.” and she gestured to where it protruded from the back of Yousef's head. “Tasty”.

(3168 words)

I spent much of this day thinking about my difficulties with yesterday's story. My wife loved it and I think I finally came to terms with the idea that even if I was stuck, given time a story would come along. The reason I say 'finally' is that I went into today's story confident and with some preliminary ideas for the first time. I wanted to do something that was dramatically different from the last few stories which had been either mystical or introspective. I also wanted to make use of a past event from

my life which I had remembered when my wife and I went food shopping – the incident with the dog. Here, I wanted the guy to pull up beside the dog and show off a little so it was easier if he was on a motorcycle and the rest then followed on. Although it wasn't planned I liked the idea of two tough guys facing off only for one of them to be unexpectedly killed by a woman. Having said that, I know nothing of drug deals so the nightclub scene was pure imagination based on Hollywood and the Sopranos and is probably unrealistic. My wife didn't think Denny and The Man would shake hands.

What is also different is that I finished this story and realised that I hadn't used any of the three little words. I had completely forgotten about them. So I had to go back and find a way to fit them in. Hence the bit about the terra cotta Buddha being knocked into water and returned to terra firma. It doesn't really fit the story.

I was delighted when my wife said she hated this story. She really didn't like Iron Dave or Charmaine which was excellent news because I hadn't intended them to be likeable. They were supposed to be people you really wouldn't want to meet and my writing seems to have developed enough to carry that message. Iron Dave, incidentally, was based on a (scary) biker I used to know in my youth back in London and Charmaine was a bit of a caricature of a type. I confess, after several stories of angst and mysticism, that I liked Beth being impressed by the effectiveness of the crowbar rather than being shocked at what she'd done!

Day 95 ~ 4th April 2019 Words: Mention, Mentor, Menu

The restaurant was busy but since I'd been told to meet her here I gave the maitre'd my name. He glanced briefly at a sheet of paper on his little desk – more like a lectern than a desk – and said

“Ahh, Mr Bradshaw, Miss Williams is expecting you. Let me show you to your table.”

He led the way to a table set for two by the back wall. Audrey, Miss Williams, was at the table toying with a bread stick. She smiled as we approached and the maitre'd unobtrusively slid out the vacant chair and waited – I imagine waiters are good at that – for me to sit. Instead I warmly greeted Audrey and we touched hands briefly. Then I sat and the maitre'd slid the chair under me. I've never quite seen the point of this as the chair never ends up in the right position so as soon as he had gone I adjusted it so I was comfortable. He returned with two, rather stylish, menus and a fresh flagon of water to replace the one that was probably 10 minutes old by now. He presented each of us with a menu with a little flourish and fussed over the layout of the table for a moment. With an almost non-existent bow he departed silently. Thank god that was over. It's so much easier in McDonalds.

Neither of us had spoken while this little performance was enacted. Audrey broke the silence.

“So you found the restaurant with no trouble?”

“Yes”, I said. “Although I couldn't find anywhere to park for a while. Fortunately as I was coming round the second time someone pulled out a little further up the road so I grabbed that spot.”

She gestured towards the wicker basket with bread rolls in it. Out of politeness I took one and deposited it on my side plate.

“This seems to be a nice restaurant”, I said, for want of anything better to say. I glanced around and it did seem to be nice. The lighting was low but not too low and there were artistic but unobtrusive decorations around the room. Some of the tables had flickering candles. The ambience was really very pleasant. Almost charming.

The place had an expensive feel to it. Mind you, cheap eateries don't have a maitre'd. I knew that because I was quite familiar with cheap eateries.

"I come here periodically" said Audrey. "Sometimes with a mentee but generally with a client. The restaurant is reliable rather than fashionable. I do so hate background music. Music is created to be heard, its not wallpaper."

"Oh you are so right" I agreed. "Especially canned music piped through tinny speakers. I think there might be room here for a quartet in that far corner."

She smiled. "Perhaps if they sit close together."

A waiter came over to the table. A flunky this time, not the head honcho, and offered me a wine list. I glanced at it to see what it was.

"I'm afraid I know little of wine" I said to Audrey. "Perhaps you'd better" and gestured in her direction. The flunky shifted angle with only the slightest hesitation. She took it.

"I'll order wine after we have chosen the food" she said dismissively.

"Of course madame" the flunky replied and disappeared unobtrusively. Everything was unobtrusive here. I was quite impressed. I opened my menu and saw why. Nothing had any prices. That meant expensive. Very expensive. Classy. No McHappy meals here. Not even a chalk board with the day's 'specials'.

"You don't want an hors d'oeuvre, do you?" she said with a slight lift of an eyebrow.

I took the hint and declined.

"I think I'll have the grilled sirloin with blue cheese dressing" she said decisively and reached for the wine list.

I'd only met Audrey two days before and she had given me the impression she was decisive in all things. I wasn't familiar with most of

the things on the menu so I chose escargots de bourgogne at random. She didn't react and placed the wine list on top of her menu. Almost immediately another waiter appeared and stood silently beside the table, looking expectantly at me. I wondered why. Then it clicked. He expected me to order for both of us. Fortunately I remembered what Audrey had chosen and duly passed on the details. He murmured "Sir" and departed as silently as he'd arrived. On his heels the wine waiter appeared and clearly recalled my earlier response to his wine list. He ignored me completely and waited attentively for Audrey to notice him.

With magnificent aplomb, Audrey ignored him, making him wait while she broke open a bread roll. Then she condescended to become aware of him and proposed a Chateau du Peniose Rouge provided they had the '77. The wine waiter conceded that they had a bottle of that vintage and murmured "An excellent choice, madame" before disappearing as silently as his partner.

We discussed the weather for a while. Cool but clear with the chance of rain later in the week. Then we noticed some of the wall decorations and commented on them. I spoke quite fondly of a mural of a fishing village on the wall behind her, mainly because it was easily visible without having to contort myself. Then we hinted at opinions on Brexit. Mine agreed with Audrey's. It wasn't a subject I felt deeply about. We had just started to agree that sports weren't particularly interesting when our meals arrived. The sirloin in blue cheese dressing looked nice but I seemed to have snails in their shells. Oh well, people eat them so they can't be poisonous. Best pretend they're scampi. The waiter had placed a small 2 pronged fork next to my plate and while Audrey was explaining that she'd used to think that blue cheese was dangerous because it was mouldy but someone had explained that it was a harmless bacteria added to enhance the flavour, I deduced that the small fork was there to dig the, umm, scampi, out of their shells.

We stopped making small talk for a while and concentrated on the food. To my surprise I discovered that the snails were like small garlic flavoured pencil erasers. Fortunately I like garlic and the wine washed away all the taste anyway. I hoped my stomach would forgive me. Audrey started to give me a little background to the company.

Apparently it had been founded some fifty years previously by a brilliant young man with a gift for biophysics as a research organisation. Many of its early innovations had found lucrative markets and the organisation had become self-funding surprisingly quickly. A factory had been set up and more innovations had followed, primarily in the fields of aeronautics, communications and space technology. More factories and research facilities had appeared and the organisation had diversified into biochemistry and astrobiology. Which was where I came in. My research speciality at university had been silicon based life forms and the possibility of such life on worlds elsewhere in the galaxy. The conversation then moved on to office politics and who were the best people to network with in order to achieve rapid promotion and who should be avoided.

Audrey was, as I knew, Head of Astrobiological Research and a member of the inner team that made up the core of the company. They set policy objectives and were the only ones who worked directly with the founder Willard Canturbury. It seemed he was somewhat reclusive and generally only communicated by phone or email. It was Audrey's role to mentor me and guide my research.

At this point a waiter removed the remains of our meals and a third waiter had appeared to offer us desserts. Audrey chose a strawberry confection which seemed to have an excess of cream and a few scattered slivers of almond and I had some chocolate cake in the hope that something familiar would aid my digestion. I was still unclear why my mentor had invited me to dinner. Surely all this could have been covered in her office? I was beginning to have a vague apprehension that she might be trying to seduce me. I knew it was an absurd thought as there was at least a 25 year age difference but she was still attractive and I knew she was single. I put it down to the vanity of youth and tried to dismiss the idea from my mind. A deep inner voice whispered to me that I wasn't averse to the idea but I shushed it immediately and continued to pay quiet attention. Whatever happened she was my boss and my mentor and much of my future depended upon her.

To my great surprise she drew the evening to a close not long after the desserts. After retiring to the ladies room, she caught the eye of the maitre'd who presented a discreet black leather folder into which she

slipped a credit card. She asked where I was living and with whom, to which I acknowledged the existence of a cat. This seemed to bother her slightly but some people don't like cats and it didn't seem important anyway. Other aspects of my living arrangements were enquired about but with a disinterest that suggested absolutely nothing.

The rain forecast for later in the week had arrived when we left the restaurant and after thanking her for dinner and bidding her goodbye I walked quickly to my car. The car seemed to be in a good mood and started at the third attempt. My cat was also in a good mood when I got home and completely ignored me. When she's in a bad mood she tries to shred my hands. The snails were also in a good mood as the following morning my bowels were as pristine and regular as ever.

I forgot the dinner over the next few days as I became engrossed in my work. I did, however, discover that Audrey had a mild allergy to cat hair but so long as I brushed the hair off my clothes before coming to work it was never a problem. Something that did puzzle me, and it was many years before I found out the truth, was why she'd taken me to dinner. Casual conversation with others in the department revealed that Audrey had never before taken a mentee to dinner before. In fact she had never been known to socialise with anyone outside the workplace and the idea that she would entertain clients was absurd. She was head of a research department and we had no clients. Puzzling but of no significance. Perhaps she liked my eyes but had decided against seeing them in the bedroom. Who knows.

It was about four years later that I married and a year after that that our first child was born. By this time I was Deputy Head of Research and Audrey had moved on to other things. She was still with the company but was no longer seen around. Occasionally someone would remember her and say something along the lines of "Haven't seen Audrey in a while. I wonder what's happened to her." but that's about it. I was engrossed in my work on silicon life and my private life was fairly content. All couples have their ups and downs but ours were nothing we couldn't handle.

It was, ohhh, ten or eleven years after I married that I had a breakthrough in the lab. We managed to create a silicon-based

bacterium that lived for nearly 10 minutes. This was the first practical demonstration that non-carbon based life could exist and I was bitterly disappointed that the company forbade me from publishing the results. This could have won me a Nobel Prize and I sulked for a very long time. My team spent two more years investigating the properties and behaviours of our bacterium and we learned how to create them in large numbers and improve their life span. As our confidence grew we became ambitious and attempted to create simple multi-celled organisms. I ought to mention that bacteria are single celled. It took another year or so but we managed. Imagine that – the world's first non-carbon based multi-celled organism. It was out of this world.

It was not long after that that I had an email from none other than Audrey. Inviting me to dinner. I thought that she must have retired by now. She'd been in her 50s when I'd last had dinner with her and that was 15 or 16 years ago. She must be pushing 70 by now, perhaps older. I recognised the restaurant as soon as I arrived. The maitre'd was different but the restaurant looked otherwise unchanged. As before, Audrey was already there when I arrived and I was escorted to very possibly the same table.

To my surprise, Audrey looked exactly the same, while I was now in my mid-40s and had lost a significant amount of hair and gained more than a few pounds. She even looked to be wearing the same clothes but since she habitually wore a tailored grey business skirt and jacket it was difficult to be sure. But she was as slim and attractive as when I last saw her and most decidedly did not look to be in her 70s.

“Christopher, how nice to see you again” she said when I was ushered to the table. The maitre'd performed the same trick with the chair as his predecessor. They must attend a school for maitre'ds to learn these skills.

We clasped hands and I kissed her on the cheek. We had got to know each other quite well in my early years with the company and I assumed the familiarity would be unchanged. She smiled so I was reassured that I hadn't broken any social etiquette. My wife has told me several times that my social skills are not as well advanced as my scientific research skills. My stock reply is that they can't be that bad

as she married me. That usually gets a smile, but one that grows tighter every year.

Once again we exchanged small talk and Audrey showed a surprising awareness of the doings of the department despite her extended absence. She also seemed to know of people who had joined after she'd moved on. She again ordered the sirloin in blue cheese sauce while I opted not to have the snails. Once was enough for me. I prefer my pencil erasers without garlic sauce. She had discovered when we worked together that I was not a wine drinker and this time did not order wine to go with our meal. We talked of my research and the progress of my work on multi-celled organisms. I won't reproduce any of it here as we got quite technical. She surprised me by showing that she'd read all my internal progress reports. I was under the impression that they were restricted to the people on a very short list that did not include her name. I made a mental note to check up on this. I'm not overly security conscious but if anyone else got the Nobel Prize for my work there would be serious repercussions. Not that I suspected Audrey, of course, but who else was getting the reports who wasn't on the list?

After the main course, she again surprised me by declining dessert and suggesting we went for a walk. I agreed of course. It was apparent that she wanted to talk further but was having difficulty in the restaurant. We left the restaurant and headed off in the general direction of the river. It was a pleasant evening for a walk, being not too hot or too cold. London on a summer evening can be quite nice.

We walked in silence for a while then she cleared her throat.

"You've worked out that I've read all your reports." she said flatly.

"Yes" I replied. "I've been wondering how since your name is not on the distribution list. Is someone passing them to you?"

We reached the river and turned onto the South Bank Promenade.

"Actually I am on the distribution list." she said. I was puzzled. Audrey Williams was not on the list. I personally sent the emailed reports to each person individually each month.

“In fact, I’m at the top of the list.” She paused, as though this was the final chance to back away from what she was about to say. “I am Willard Canturbury”.

I confess I found that hard to believe. Willard Canturbury was a man and Audrey was most definitely a woman. I pointed this out to her.

“Have you ever met Willard Canturbury?” she asked. I had to admit I hadn’t.

“So you only know him by name? Names can be deceptive.”

I had to admit this point as well. I was only assuming that Willard was a man’s name and there was no reason why a woman couldn’t use a man’s name anyway.

“In fact”, she continued, as we strolled side by side along the promenade, “Willard Canturbury isn’t a man’s name or a woman’s name.” She stopped walking under an ornate street lamp – installed a couple of years earlier by the Council to make the promenade more touristy.

“In fact its not even a human’s name”.

I stopped too. I needed to look into her face to see whether she was smiling. Audrey wasn’t known for her sense of humour but she may have changed in her old age.

“What do you mean?” I said. There was no trace of humour in her face. If possible she looked more serious than ever before.

“Willard Canturbury’s ship crash landed on Earth about 75 years ago” she said, her eyes intent. “Repairs were needed but this planet simply did not have the technology. I set up the company in order to create the technology to make the repairs to enable my ship to return to my home planet. I can prove all this quite easily. If you don’t believe me I can take you to the ship which is kept in storage in one of our research facilities in Switzerland.”

I confess I didn’t believe her. I still thought this was some kind of

elaborate practical joke. I searched around for something to say.

“So, erm, why are you telling me this.”

The tension in her face made her look hard and blue-grey under the fluorescent street light. As if Ye Olde Londone had fluorescent lighting. I think the Council needed better researchers.

“My species is silicon based. I am dying. I need you to make me a new body.”

“Oh”, I said. “Is that all?”

(3158 words)

The word 'menu' suggested a restaurant but the problem word was 'mentor'. This is why the restaurant opening goes on so long. Obviously I was dining with my mentor but it took me a while to think of why I was being mentored. It wasn't until I started describing the company that we both worked for that I remembered a movie I'd seen way back. David Bowie played an alien who had to set up a company to make repairs to his spacecraft. After a while I realised that that didn't actually have anything to do with why I was being mentored – there had to be something special about me as opposed to the general company. So my thanks to Isaac Asimov** for his short story which I read as a child about 'siliconies', pets that off-world spacemen kept that were based on silicon not carbon. My thanks to Wikipedia for information about single and multi-celled organisms.*

Incidentally, digging out the reference for the David Bowie movie I discovered it was based on a book by Walter Tevis, who wrote the book that the movie The Hustler, starring Paul Newman, was based on. The Hustler was about a pool player and was very influential on me in the days when I fancied myself as a pool player. It's a small world.

Of more relevance, perhaps, is that yesterday's new found confidence did not desert me today. I typed the day's words into my word processor and with barely a minute's thought launched into the restaurant scene, trusting that something would occur to me to cover 'mentor' and make this a story.

As I was writing I had Willard Canturbury set the company up 20 years previously but towards the end I realised that this would mean Audrey would still be quite young so I went back and changed it. Apparently also, maitre'd is spelled maitre d', being short for maitre d'hotel. You learn something every day. I have never eaten snails so I don't know what they taste like.

Incidentally, I was quite tired when I wrote this story. The last few stories have been long and quite intense and have cut into my sleep. My routine for a while had been to take the dog for a walk after my wife went to bed, then make her sandwiches for her lunch the next day then settle down to write stories. This was fine when they took less than an hour but by this stage they were taking 3 or 4 hours but I was still getting up around the same time. I was intending to not bother with a story that night in order to catch up on my sleep but found I couldn't. I somehow felt 'duty bound' to write something. Perhaps that's why this one was a relatively straightforward Sci Fi and not something weird and 'out there'. Let's see what tomorrow brings.

** The Man Who Fell To Earth, 1976*

*** The Talking Stone by Isaac Asimov, 1955*

5 April 2019 Words: none

Something is wrong today. I tried to do my exercises, which I'd done many times before, but my balance was off, my timing was wrong, I forgot bits and ended up all over the place. Bad day. Bad karma.

Everything around seems normal but I have a sense that something isn't right. Is it me or is it the world? Am I disjointed or is the world spinning slightly off axis?

Whatever. You can worry too much about these things. After all, I'm just a mass of chemical processes and sometimes a chemical or two gets slightly out of balance. I got out the vacuum cleaner and got on with my chores. Tomorrow will be back to normal. Its a nice sunny day and not too hot.

I noticed the mailman pass by through the window as I was putting the vacuum cleaner away. I checked the mail box, nothing of interest. Just a statement from the bank which I'll leave for my husband. He likes to check off the various payments and deposits because a healthy bank balance keeps him happy. When I went into the laundry to get the mop as it was time the floors had a wipe. I noticed that the vacuum cleaner wasn't how I'd left it. That was strange. I always put it in the corner with the cord sucked back in and the extension cable coiled and hanging from a hook in the wall. I was certain that that was how I left it before going to check the post. It was on its side, pulled partly out of the corner with the cord all over the place and the extension cable sitting neatly coiled on top. The dog was in the yard and the garden door was shut so it couldn't have been her. Oh well, I must be going senile. I tidied the vacuum cleaner away and got out the mop.

As I was mopping the phone went. It was Caroline ringing to see if we were going to the school fair on Saturday. Well that wasn't really why she was ringing, that was just the excuse. So I asked her how Johnny was. Johnny is her boyfriend. She met him a couple of years after her divorce and the relationship had slowly developed. She still hadn't slept with him but she was building up to it. The trouble was that he annoyed her immensely every now and then and they'd separate for a while then get back together. I wished she just shag him and be done

with it. All these hormonal tensions can be very irritating.

“He's fine”, she said, “I guess.”

I guess? That means she's dumped him again. Do I really want to go there yet again? I sighed.

“What's he done this time?”

“He told off Molly for taking her iPad to school. You know how much she loves it with all those animal games and she wanted to show her friends and” Caroline was off and it would probably be 10 minutes or more before I needed to say anything. Molly, by the way, was her 7 year old daughter. I put my phone on the counter top and turned on the kettle. Judging by past experience this conversation would probably go on for the best part of an hour and most likely would end with her regretting she'd rowed with Johnny and swearing that if they got back together she wouldn't lose her temper again. Until the next time. I laughed to myself and reached for the box of teabags in the cupboard. It wasn't there. Strange. I checked the flip top bin to see if my husband had had the last bag and thrown the empty packet away. It wasn't his style but you never know. My phone was still squawking and the bin had no trace of a tea bag box.

I started opening cupboards at random but there was no sign of the tea bags so I grabbed the coffee jar and ladled a teaspoon of granules into a mug and poured in the boiling water. I opened the fridge to get the milk and saw the tea bags in the fridge. All over the place. This particular brand of tea bags had them joined together in pairs and all the pairs had been pulled apart. I found the empty box inside the freezer compartment.

The tone of the squawking from my phone changed so I picked it up.

“Are you there Bren?” I heard.

“Yes, sorry” I replied.

“I was just saying do you think I was too hard on Johnny, I mean he only has Molly's best interests at heart.”

I didn't know what else had happened apart from the iPad business but I said "Well you do have a tendency to fly off the handle without getting all the facts.", because she did. And it was part of the ritual.

"I know I know" she moaned and then went off into one of her 5 minute self loathing sessions. I half listened as I picked up each of the tea bags and put them back in the box. The occasional "uh huh" and "right" was all the input I needed to give. What had happened to the tea bags? Surely Frank, my husband, wouldn't have done that? He's the type who goes very quiet when I've upset him. He doesn't take things out on innocent tea bags and the kids wouldn't have done it. Even if one of them had started as a joke, they'd have soon abandoned it in favour of some of the food in the fridge. They were perennially hungry. Young kids always are.

Caroline wound to a close, regretting getting angry with Johnny and promising to ring him when he got home from work. "Go and fuck his brains out" I wanted to say. "Its only repressed frustration that makes you act this way." But I didn't. Caroline needs to figure this out for herself. She blamed herself for all her ex-husband's failings and seemed to believe that she needed to be unblemished in order to keep a man.

We ended the conversation, never having decided about the school fair, and I hung up. Which is a bit of a silly expression as these days you have to swipe right with your thumb and touch a red square. Which is awkward with long fingernails. Fortunately I don't have long fingernails. Its been years since I'd hung a phone handset on a phone but I guess "hang up" is now part of our culture. Like 'clockwise'.

I wrung out the mop and added some more hot water to my bucket and finished the floors. I took the mop back to the laundry and the vacuum cleaner was all over the place again. What the hell? Is someone playing a joke on me? I tidied it up. Again. I went back into the kitchen and shut the laundry door. I counted to 5 in my head then opened it. The vacuum cleaner was tidily in the corner. Hmmm. I shut the door again and tipped out the dregs of my coffee and rinsed the cup. I opened the laundry door again and, sure enough, the vacuum cleaner was all neat and tidy.

I turned back to the kitchen and there were tea bags all over the floor. How the hell did that happen? I picked them all up and searched for the tea bag box but I couldn't find it anywhere. I even checked the freezer compartment but it wasn't in there. I dug a sandwich bag out of the packet and put the tea bags in it and sealed the opening. A thought crossed my mind so I put the sandwich bag on the counter and looked inside the laundry. Yup, there it was, perched neatly on top of the vacuum cleaner. Whoever was doing this clearly had a sense of humour. I retrieved the tea bag box and put it back in the cupboard with the sandwich bag inside. My husband would never notice. He rarely made the tea and would probably just assume that this was a new style of packaging. He was a bit dopey at times but I forgave him all his idiosyncrasies since he loved me unreservedly. That counts for a lot in my world. Which seemed to be going mad.

I still had the bathroom to clean but I was hesitant to look inside. Would there be toothpaste all over the mirror? Unrolled toilet paper all over the floor? Maybe the shower curtain was now hanging over the window. "Get a grip" I said to myself and marched in. If anything it was unusually tidy. Even the toilet seat was down. Frank's pyjama bottoms were draped over the towel rail but that was normal. I grabbed them and took them into our bedroom. It took me a moment or two to realise the bed had gone.

Jesus. My first thought was that I should clean under the bed more often. Where the bed had been was a layer of grime, hair, dust and a couple of non-matching socks. Then it struck me. Where was the bed? And how did it go without me noticing? It was a Queen sized bed and was awkward to manoeuvre down the corridor. I would surely have seen if anyone had come in and taken it and Frank couldn't do it all by himself. It had definitely been there last night as we'd slept in it. I'd have noticed if I'd slept on the floor.

I went from room to room searching for it. It wasn't in the kids room. There was the usual chaos in there but not enough to hide a queen sized bed. It was absurd but I checked the bathroom. It wasn't big enough for a bed but who knows. I checked the spare room. Sure enough there was a bed in it but it was the single bed that's always in there. No sign of any queen sized beds hiding underneath it. I checked the lounge. I even checked behind the couch as if a queen sized bed

could lurk there. Back in the kitchen I double checked the tea bags but they were untouched and as I went through the laundry to the back door I noticed the vacuum cleaner was neatly stored away. Out I went into the back garden. Beauty, my dog, was dozing under the laurel tree but opened an eye when she smelt me and gently thumped her tail. I checked inside the garden shed but the bed wasn't there either. Curiouser and curiouser. I crossed the garden to the garage door. Beauty had fallen asleep again. She wasn't much of a guard dog but if someone had come in and stolen the bed she'd have delayed them trying to get an affectionate pat.

The bed was in the garage. In the exact centre. Perfectly made with the pillows nicely plumped up and the bedspread smoothed down. I would have admitted that it covered the oil stains on the concrete floor quite well but my hair was feeling very strange and I was shivering with surprise and fright. How the fuck had the bed got in here? I turned the light on because the garden door behind me had quietly shut itself. Probably the breeze. The pile of old cardboard boxes in the corner hadn't been touched and the lawn mower was in its usual spot. The kids bikes were propped against a sidewall and the broken garden chair was still there. Frank said he'd taken it to the tip. He was no mechanic so there weren't rows of shelving with tools and assorted screws and nails and other manly things in the garage but the shelf where we kept the shears and other gardening odds and ends also seemed to be untouched.

Just an perfectly normal queen sized bed. In the centre of the garage. With the rollerdoor closed. And a naked light bulb gently swinging overhead, casting shadows that moved and distorted in disturbing ways. There was obviously no one in the garage. There was nothing to hide behind. I said "Hello? Is there anyone there?" with a quiver in my voice hoping against hope that no one would answer. Fortunately no one did or there would have been more than oil stains on the floor.

I turned back to the garden door but it seemed to have jammed. The gust of wind must have been stronger than I thought. So why didn't the door slam with a noise? Ahhhh. Best not to think about that. I rattled the handle and pushed against the door. It wouldn't open. I slapped it a couple of times with my hand. That usually works on Frank but it didn't work on the door. It was as immovable as the man

who'd sacked me from my first job. Pleading didn't get my job back nor did it open the door. Beauty scratched the door from the other side. Oh god, please let it be Beauty. My heart was beating faster and I felt short of breath. I wasn't sure I wanted to open the door after all. What if it wasn't Beauty scratching?

I remembered that the mechanism for the rollerdoor had a string that you could pull which opened the door without the remote so I started to edge my way to the front of the garage, staying as close to the wall as possible. I was nearly within touching distance of one of the bikes when something violently pushed me and I fell against the bed. I started to scream when the light went out and something grabbed my legs and heaved me fully onto the bed. "Oh great" I thought "I'm having a nightmare and I'm about to be raped by a ghost." I reached out to push Frank so he'd snore and wake me up but he wasn't there. And he didn't snore. And I wasn't asleep. And I was petrified.

Whatever had pulled me onto the bed had let go. I couldn't feel anything except the bed underneath me and the incongruity of day clothes in bed. My heart was pounding and I could feel the blood thumping in my temples. I was shaking all over and had no control over my limbs. I tried to sit up, to get off the bed but nothing worked. My eyes were wet with panic and my throat so constricted I couldn't scream. I tried but I couldn't scream. I tried very hard. I could feel a warm wetness in my jeans as I started to pee myself.

Nothing happened.

There was a faint reddish glow in the garage, coming from the Working light on the main power box and slowly my eyes became accustomed to it. Although it was dim I could see that there was no one there. I started to calm down. The panic had left me and I needed to get out of my jeans. I swung my legs to the side of the bed to get off but they banged against something I couldn't see. I tried again and the same thing happened. I reached out with my hand and I could feel a smooth, cool hardness rising up from the side of the bed, like a metal sheet, even though I could see the garage wall through it. I got to my knees and felt all around the bed. The invisible metal surrounded the bed on all four sides. I felt upwards and there seemed to be another barrier over the bed. It was high enough to let me knee

upright but not to let me stand. I tried to force my hand down between the mattress and the barrier but it was too tight. Even if I pulled the mattress back a bit I couldn't slip my hand between.

I sat back and started to do some yoga breathing exercises I'd learned a couple of years ago when I got a craze to try yoga. They helped to calm me a little. Enough at any rate to reduce the blind panic to a tolerable level. I explored all around the bed again, hoping there was a hole somewhere in the barrier. There wasn't. It occurred to me that if I had a knife I'd be able to cut through the mattress but being foolish I didn't make it a habit to carry a knife with me. I wouldn't have been able to get through the slats under the mattress anyway. Looked like I was trapped. I sat back and concentrated on my breathing exercises.

It had been about 11.30 when all this had happened and I didn't think much time had gone by. Frank wouldn't be home until after 6 although I was supposed to pick up the kids from school at 3.30. That was a worry but hopefully whatever's happening will be over by then. Anyway, the school was used to parents being late. They charged a fee for every ten minutes so they had the facilities to look after the kids at least until Frank got back. I felt in my pocket for my phone then realised I'd left it in the kitchen. My throat had deconstricted and I tried screaming a couple of times – well more than a couple really – but the neighbours were away.

The breathing exercises seemed to be helping. I was feeling a lot calmer. Well maybe it was more that nothing was happening than the breathing. We get used to things given a little time. I became aware of a deep but faint thrumming sound. It got higher in pitch but no louder. I wondered if it was a police helicopter come to rescue me but I somehow couldn't convince myself. The pitch got higher and higher until it passed beyond my hearing. I had absolutely no idea what was causing it.

Then the bed started to vibrate and wobble and the walls of the garage grew fainter. Faint splodges of colour seemed to move slowly around the invisible barrier of the bed, changing shape and luminescence. Slowly and endlessly they moved, shimmering and changing colour, above and around. I became aware of noises, sounds like voices but saying unintelligible things. The sounds began to sound

human and I could hear snatches of what seemed to be foreign languages. When I heard what sounded like French I came out of my trance and call out. "Who's there? What's happening?" I may even have whimpered a little.

The voice changed to English. "Do not be afraid. Do not be afraid", repeating itself in a low register, reassuring but somehow not human. I felt myself calming as the mantra repeated. After perhaps two or three minutes I felt completely calm. My heart rate was back to normal and my breathing was light and relaxed. I was aware that the dampness of my jeans had dried although a faint odour suggested they hadn't been cleaned. The voice continued "Do not be afraid". "I'm not afraid" I said after a while.

The voice stopped. I lay back and waited for whatever was going to happen. I felt calm and in control even though I obviously wasn't. Whatever was going to happen was going to happen regardless of my feelings on the matter. I felt a little like I had when I smoked a joint at college. Interested but disassociated.

The splodges of colour around the bed had faded to blackness. Here and there I could see a faint dot of light. Slowly the idea formed in my mind that the blackness was space and the dots were galaxies. The bed was travelling through infinite space and taking me with it. "Cool" I thought. "The kids would love this."

Time passed.

Frankly this was beginning to get a little dull. Although I was calm and disassociated, space was getting a little monotonous. The human mind need more than a few small dots against a black background to keep its attention.

Time passed.

I tried to sleep but my calmness and disassociation didn't go that far. I tried to remember who I'd been speaking to on the phone earlier and what the conversation was about. I couldn't but it didn't seem important anyway.

Time passed.

Oh goody. There was something glowing green ... ahead?, behind? to the left? I didn't know how to orientate myself. Let's just say "over there" and be done with it. There was something green glowing over there. Whatever it was the bed and I, "was I the cabin crew?" I thought to myself irreverently, were heading towards it. "We are flying at a height of 20 trillion light years. Please prepare for landing. Put your bed in an upright position and extinguish all anxieties." OK so I haven't lost my sense of humour, even though I seem to have lost my mind. And my kids and husband now I come to think of it. Strangely the thought of no one picking up my children from school bothered me not one little bit.

The green glowing thing grew closer and brighter and I could see different shades of green within it. It was strangely amorphous and lacked any solidity. It had no edge and soon the bed was glowing green as well. "Pretty" I said aloud. I tried to touch the green but it had no substance. I could see it in my hands but couldn't feel anything.

There was a high pitched humming sound which lowered in pitch until it thrummed deeply and died away. It was the opposite of the sound I'd heard earlier so I figured that the bed had arrived. Where, I could not begin to imagine.

"Welcome" came the deep, almost human voice.

"Thank you" I said. I couldn't think of anything else to say. Nothing seemed quite appropriate.

I waited for the voice to say something. It didn't.

"Where am I?" I asked after a short silence.

"At the centre of the infinite universe" came the reply. I realised that I wasn't hearing the voice through my ears. I was hearing it deep inside my brain. It felt strange.

However, I am not my father's daughter for nothing. I pulled my wits

together.

“If the universe is infinite” I thought, “how can it have a centre?” I smiled. Arguing metaphysics telepathically with an alien seemed an improbable destiny.

“The centre of the infinite universe is wherever you are” came the reply within. “you are here therefore this is the centre”.

Now that was cool. I'd always thought the universe should revolve around me. It was nice to have it confirmed.

“Why am I here?” I thought. Actually that was a silly question I realised. As the universe revolves around me the better question would be “Why are you here?”

“Why are you here?” I thought.

“I am dying. I am here to transfer to you.”

“Transfer what to me?”

“The Consciousness of the Universe”

“So you are God and I am to replace you?”

This made a change from talking to Caroline.

“Even Gods answer to the Consciousness of the Universe. I am awareness. I am thought. I am existence”

“Why me?”

“You are the last pure soul. The last awareness. The infinite moment. You are the transcendent.”

Oh golly.

“I transcend what?”

“You transcend life. You are all. You are life and death. Animate and inanimate. Past and future. You are One. You are All. You are the Consciousness of all things. The consciousness of the Universe.”

I sat silently on my bed. This was a lot to absorb.

“What if I refuse?”

“You cannot refuse. You are all. You are the infinite self and the infinite non-self. You are the refusal and the acceptance, the giver and the receiver, the before and the after. You are action and inaction. You are the Consciousness.”

I had no idea what to say or think. I hoped Frank remembered to feed Beauty.

An eternity passed.

As it was in the Beginning, so shall it End. The Beginning and the End are one.

“Let it be so” I thought.

And it is so.

(4076 words)

This was a very strange day. I do a little Tai Chi most days but this day it went totally wrong. Part way through I found myself in a part of the garden that the Tai Chi doesn't take me, feeling very disorientated so I stopped. I started a 2nd time and got confused with the sequence of moves. I tried a third time and stopped mid way again, completely unable to remember what came next. I came inside and had a ciggie and got a very strong urge to write so I fired up my little notebook computer and started writing and this strange little story emerged. I didn't even bother to get any dictionary words.

I finished and printed it and while waiting for my wife to get home I had another go at my Tai Chi again. It was flawless. I went through the entire routine with no misadventure. Clearly something was blocking me until I

had gotten it off my chest and on to paper and I still did my normal, dictionary based, writing in the evening ...

Day 96 ~ 5th April 2019 Words: Bully, Bulrush, Bulwark

Emma usually took her dog for a walk around sunset. She liked to stand and watch the sun going down and listen to the sounds of the world. Or at least of that little part of the world she occupied. Charlie, her dog, preferred the smells of the world. They made a good pair since Emma had got dog walking down to a fine art. Her view was that it wasn't exercise. Charlie didn't need exercise as he was pretty fit. She believed that the whole point of going for a walk was for Charlie to get out and experience the world. A dog's sense of smell is at least 100,000 times more acute than a human's so the world Charlie experienced through smell was vastly richer than the world Emma experienced. She envied him slightly and did not begrudge him time to thoroughly explore the smells of bushes or trees or gutters or whatever took his fancy. Regardless of how long he took to thoroughly investigate something, Emma was content to stand and wait, watching and listening. When Charlie was ready to move on Emma would follow, a long leash length behind, wherever Charlie led.

Today, Charlie was heading off towards the lake. It was only an ornamental lake in the middle of an estate of boxy looking houses but it was still a lake. It was a mile or so to walk around and there were grassy areas and benches and in recent years wild birds had started nesting in the lakeside trees. Water fowl also took up residence on the lake and most days there was a scattering of ducks busily upending their bottoms to grab at the weeds growing from the bottom. There were no fish of course. It wasn't that kind of lake. The developers had built the lake as a means of selling the houses, not to encourage fishermen.

The lake wasn't visible from Emma's house. To get to it she and Charlie had to turn left at the end of her road into Blueberry Road then do a quick right-left around the end of Mulberry Road. For some reason the even numbered houses on Mulberry Road extended two houses further than the odd numbered houses which forced Blueberry Road to have a kink in it. This means that Emma and Charlie could not see the lake until they'd gone past the Mulberry Road kink. At the end of Blueberry Road they had to cross Lakeside Boulevard, a name far grander than the actual road, before reaching the lake side itself. Still, it was worth it. There was a broad grassed area around

most of the lake and a concrete slab path meandered around the grassed area.

So today, when Emma and Charlie reached the lake, Charlie snuffled around for a while and decided to follow a trail heading off to the right. To Emma, this meant they'd be able to go most of the way around the lake before having to resort to the road to get past the cafe at the end of the lake where Lakeside Boulevard joined the main highway intersection. Which in turn meant she'd be walking into the sunset for the first half of the journey. To Charlie this meant that he could investigate the strange new creature whose scent he had picked up and wanted to follow. He could see in the dark so sunset meant nothing to him. Still, there were a myriad of other smells that needed investigating so progress around the lake was slow and rarely coincided with the actual path.

Emma nodded to a few people she half knew. Some were people who also walked their dogs around this time although they were 'exercise walkers' who resented the time wasted by their dogs smelling things when they should be striding along in the fresh air. Some, of course were the inevitable joggers who always seem to be attracted to water. Go to any half decent sized patch of water anywhere in the world and someone will be jogging around it. She waved at the old lady who lived at 137 Lakeside Boulevard who liked to sit outside when the weather allowed it and watch the comings and goings around the lake. Emma didn't know her name but they're been waving acknowledgement of each other for the past couple of years.

Further on down the lake, not far from the end, was a patch of bulrushes. The patch had grown over the years and was now occupying a substantial number of square metres. The bulrushes had been planted by the developers to disguise a drainage gully that fed into the lake but now encroached on the land on either side and were expanding into the lake itself. Charlie had often disturbed birds in the bulrushes so Emma wasn't surprised when he headed directly to the bulrushes as they got nearer and started barking. Generally what happened was that Charlie would bark a lot and force himself between the bulrushes for a yard or so and the birds would fly out in panic squawking. Charlie would then jump out and run around for a while trying to chase the birds then give up and he and Emma would then

continue their walk.

This time was different. Instead of getting excited and rushing into the bulrushes, Charlie held back, growling, with his hackles raised. Stiff legged he then edged towards a patch of the bulrushes that his nose told him was the danger area. There was a smell coming from there that he had never experienced before. Emma was intrigued. Charlie was normally very predictable as life on this estate was very predictable. She imagined that most, if not all, the smells Charlie encountered were the same old smells of the local people and animals going about their daily business. So this time, instead of watching the sunset while Charlie did whatever he did, she decided to take a look herself. Charlie continued to stiff-lead it but seemed unwilling to actually go inside the bulrushes.

Emma tied the leash to a nearby tree and approached the bulrushes where Charlie was growling. After peering around and through the bulrushes for a while she thought she saw something move so she knelt and leaned in closer. There, about two feet in from the edge of the bulrushes and contorted so that the bases of the bulrushes formed a simple bulwark was something dark that seemed to be alive. Certainly it wasn't very big and Emma didn't feel afraid. She snapped a few of the rushes so she could see better. Although the sun hadn't quite set it was fairly dark inside the bulrushes. Still, she could make out something about the size of a smallish cat that twisted its rather strange looking head in her direction and tried to scramble away.

It was obvious as soon as it moved that it was injured. Emma sat back on her heels and considered. Most likely whatever it was had been hit by a car and had crawled down here for safety. It had probably been here a while and was now too weak to crawl much further. As if in confirmation the creature looked at her and made a rasping soft of mewl. It looked as though it was on the verge of giving up. Emma took pity on it.

"You poor thing" she murmured and made the soothing clucking sounds she always used to attract the neighbour's cat. The creature remained motionless but watched her carefully. "At least its not trying to run away" she thought. She took off her cardigan and twisted so she could lay it on the ground behind her. Turning back she slowly and

gently leaned forward, crooning all the while to reassure the creature. It watched her balefully but made no attempt to escape. Gently she touched its head and slid her hand down its neck.

“That’s funny” she thought. “That feels like feathers. Surely its not a bird.”

She slowly managed to get both hands underneath it, being extra gentle near its hindquarters since that’s where the injury seemed to be. She adjusted her balance and ever so gently she lifted it out and away from the bulrushes. It struggled, but only half-heartedly. It was clearly exhausted and terrified. She half sat as she twisted backwards and placed the creature on her outspread cardigan. Charlie, who had quietened when Emma took over, backed away. His hackles were still raised and he growled continuously in a low monotone. Emma backed out of the bulrushes and knelt over the creature. It was now too dark to make out much as the setting sun was almost below the horizon but she could see it was still on the cardigan where she had left it. She gently wrapped the cardigan around its body leaving the head free. It barely moved. She stood and untied Charlie from the tree and wrapped the end of the leash a couple of times around her wrist. Using both hands she gently lifted the cardigan bungle and settled it in the crook of her other arm.

“Come on Charlie”, she said, tugging the leash. “We’re going home.” She started walking back to Lakeside Boulevard. Suspiciously Charlie followed. Although there were still scents to be investigated, the strange new one had now merged with Emma’s familiar scent and was heading in the same direction.

On the walk home Emma gave some thought about what to do. Her father would not appreciate another animal in the house. He complained enough as it was about Charlie. Her mother understood Emma’s compassion towards animals but would be torn between Emma and her father and would continually change sides until everyone was confused. Emma decided to take the creature into the garden shed and see if she could find out how badly injured it was before deciding whether to ask her father to pay for a vet. Emma was also a realist and knew that there was a fair chance the creature was going to die anyway. At least it would have some peace in the shed to

have a chance of recovery.

Back home she made her way through the side gate and let Charlie off the leash. She went into the shed and turned on the light. Laying the creature on the seat of a garden chair she found an old cardboard box and transferred the cardigan and its contents inside. Charlie had quietened down but paced nervously outside the door, waiting for Emma to go to the house to get his dinner. She gently unwrapped the cardigan to get a good look at what was inside. She had never seen anything like it. It looked very much like a smallish cat but it seemed to have feathers on its neck and its head looked more like a bird. It was obvious what was wrong however, one of its back legs was bent at an nasty angle. It looked to be broken.

“A vet is going to be expensive” she thought. “This is much more serious than an injection and a few pills. There's no way Dad's going to pay for this. I'll have to deal with it myself.”.

She considered for a few moments then started searching the shelves in the shed. She found a roll of duct tape which she put on the chair beside the cardigan and at the back of the bottom shelf she found some thin sticks her mother sometimes used to tie back and support seedlings. She held one close to the animal's leg then broke off about the right length to use as a splint. She did the same with three other sticks. She then pulled out a length of duct tape and doubled it back on itself so the double layers had the sticky sides inside. She then turned to the creature and oh so gently straightened its leg, wincing every time it hissed. It did seem to realise that she was trying to help even though the pain must have been dreadful. When Emma was happy the bones of the leg were reasonably aligned she held the four sticks in place around the break and gently but firmly wound the duct tape around them. Finally she tore a thin strip of duct tape off the roll and secured the end of the improvised bandage. To be safe she added a couple more strips. She contemplated her handiwork for a few moments then arranged the cardigan around the creature to keep it warm.

“I wonder what it eats” she thought. She left the shed and ran into the house. Her mother was getting dinner ready.

“Dinner in 10” she called out when she saw Emma.

“Awesome” said Emma in reply and opened the fridge, scanning the contents to see if there was anything that might be suitable.

“Surely you can wait until dinner” said Emma's mother, stirring something on the stove.

“I'm looking for something to give to a hungry animal outside” said Emma

Her mother sighed. Emma was always doing this.

“Don't bring it into the house” she said. “Whatever it is.”

Emma spotted some raw mince and grabbed some in her fingers. She pulled out the milk carton as well and grabbed a saucer from the cupboard.

“Back in a minute” she called as she dashed out of the room.

Back in the shed, Emma poured some milk into the saucer and put it beside the creature's head. It regarded the milk suspiciously and made no move to try it. Emma dabbled a finger in the milk and held it near the creature's ... beak? The creature backed its head away slightly.

“OK, you don't like milk” said Emma softly. “Try this” and she held out a morsel of mince. The mince disappeared. So fast that she hadn't seen the creature's head move. She held out another morsel. That disappeared instantly as well.

“Well that was easy” said Emma. She took the saucer and threw the milk onto the lawn then replaced it in the box and put the mince in her hand on it. The creature ate hungrily.

“I have to go and have my dinner now” said Emma. “But I'll come back later and see how you are.”

She left the shed and used the bolt to lock the door shut. She wasn't worried about the creature escaping. If it went it went and that was

the end of it. It was Charlie she was more concerned about. He could be a bit of a bully at times and once he'd got used to the creature's strangeness he might well give it a hard time, especially as it was injured and weak.

After dinner she went to her room while her parents settled in for a quiet night of television. She waited for her laptop to boot then she logged in and connected to the internet. Opening Google she typed in "cat body bird head". The first result was a Hatsuibwari, a dragon-like creature with the head of a human, the body of a serpent, and the wings of a bat.

"Well that's nothing like it at all" she thought.

Further down in the "People also ask" section she saw "What do you call a lion with wings?" She clicked on it although she hadn't noticed any wings on the creature. This took her to a site of mythical creatures but none resembled hers particularly closely. She thought for a moment then closed the page and re-entered Google. This time she typed in "lion body bird head".

The first item was the Wikipedia entry for Griffin. She opened it and glanced at the first picture. This was much more like it. It was an image of a Griffin copied from a fresco in the Throne Room at the Palace of Knossos in Crete. It was dated as the Bronze Age. Emma suspected that was a long time ago. Anyway, the creature in the image looked very similar to hers and it didn't have wings. She started to read the text. "The griffin, griffon, or gryphon" she read, "is a legendary creature with the body, tail, and legs of a lion and the head and wings of an eagle."

She sat back and thought. She hadn't seen any wings but then she hadn't been looking for any. She'd been more concerned with the creature's leg. She went downstairs and back to the shed. When she turned the light on the creature blinked owlishly at her but seemed to recognise her and didn't panic. It was more or less in the same place but had rearranged itself to get more comfortable. She looked closely at its back and sure enough, there were things there that might be wings, furred tightly along its sides. She clucked comfortably at the ... griffin ... and scratched the back of its head. It did not react at all.

“This could be good” thought Emma “if it means it isn't scared, but it could be bad if it means its about to die.” She noticed all the mince was gone from the saucer. If it was going to die it probably wouldn't have eaten much.

“All you can do now is rest” she told it. “Rest and let your leg heal.”

She turned out the light and shut the shed door. Back in her room she spent the rest of the evening researching griffins. It was very frustrating because, although there were thousands of websites about them there was virtually no information. Beyond the fact that they were either legendary or mythical and had a lion's body and an eagle's head and wings there wasn't much else. Whatever else the sites said was obviously made up to fit whatever story the web site owner was trying to tell. Still, at least she knew it ate meat and that it was unlikely that a vet would know anything about them.

(3016 words)

I don't like this story. It started out OK but as I was writing it I couldn't decide what Emma was going to find in the bulrushes. A baby, dead body, injured animal, crock of gold or whatever would lead to either a lot of complications or nothing particularly interesting. When it came to that point my mind leapt to “griffin” and I followed. Then I just got too tired to write any more – it had been a busy day – and I had no immediate direction in which to go. Also I felt it was a bit childish, as in more of a children's story. In bed I thought of at least fifteen different ways the story could go forward but frankly none of them interested me. So rather than continue to develop the story the next day I intended to abandoned it.

Thinking about it the following morning I realised I'd had an interesting experience. Normally with my stories I reach a point where I need a direction to head off in and I dismiss one or maybe two possibilities before continuing. With this story I had so many I couldn't make a choice.

Anyway, I'm not particularly into fantasy and mythological creatures have been done to death in the movies.

There was a time when I would have been proud of a story like this!

Day 97 ~ 6th April 2019 Words: Craftwork, Crafty, Crag

(5th April continued)

The next morning when Emma checked before school she found the griffin had not died during the night. In fact it appeared a little better since it didn't look at death's door and she got a faint sense that it knew she was trying to help. She left some more mince, hoping that her mother wouldn't notice that that evening meal would be slightly short on protein. She also left some water in a plastic dish since she had discovered on the net that both lions and eagles drink water and she didn't think the griffin would get enough fluid from just the mince. Over breakfast she decided to take some money from her Teddy Bear money box, a birthday gift from an aunt a few years before, to buy some meat on the way home. Mum would be bound to notice meat missing sooner or later and she didn't know if the griffin would eat the kebabs or curry that Mum sometimes produced as a change.

Emma usually enjoyed her lessons, except Geography because the teacher went on and on about economic production and other boring stuff rather than about the people and the culture, so she didn't spend much time thinking about her patient. During the lunch break as she sat with her friends she wondered whether she should tell them. No real opportunity came up though as the chat was mostly about boys and who was dating who and who wanted to date who and who wanted to stop dating who to date another who and who would never get a date and remain forever a virgin. Human relationship can be very complicated. About the only thing she had found out about griffins on the net was that legend had it they mated for life and never mated again if one of the pair died. From what she saw on television, one of the biggest problems humanity faced was that although people promised to mate for life, they rarely did and ended up on Dr Phil.

Emma got off the bus one stop early to go to the Lakeside Shopping Centre. At the supermarket she bought a packet of mince. She stopped at Bookworm to see if they had any books on griffins or mythological creatures but they didn't. Only fire-belching dragons and aliens with blank faces and large dark eyes. There was a book on fairies which delayed her for a few minutes but she didn't buy it. She walked the rest of the way home, pausing only to watch an elderly man throwing

bread crusts to the ducks on the lake who had converged around the shore where he stood. Back home Charlie went wild to see her. After all, she'd been gone for nine hours and anything could have happened. She patted him and pulled his ears and told him what a good boy he was.

Charlie went with her to check the shed but kept his distance when she opened the door. The water dish was empty and the morning mince had disappeared. The griffin stretched a front paw in her general direction when it saw her and showed no sign of distress. She checked the duct tape bandage which seemed to be holding up and felt the griffin's leg above and below it. The leg felt warm but not feverishly hot and there wasn't any obvious swelling. Certainly the bandage hadn't become tight. The griffin made the same raspy mewly sound it had made when she had found it and tried to pull its leg away. Emma knew from visits to the vet with Charlie and other pets that she had to be firm but gentle and at least the griffin had made no attempt to scratch or peck her. Everything was looking good. She refilled the water dish from the garden tap and put more mince in the saucer.

"I have to take Charlie for a walk but I'll pop in to see how you are doing later" she told the griffin. The griffin just stared at her, emotionlessly but she still felt that it knew she was trying to help and somehow that it was grateful to her.

The following Sunday Emma decided to take the makeshift bandage off to check on the injury. There had been no bleeding as far as she could tell but you never know what infections might have taken hold. Also the griffin was growing and she was worried the bandage might be getting too tight. She snipped off the duct tape and prised it away from the leg. It was a little swollen compared to the other leg and was still a little warm but it all seemed quite healthy. The griffin also didn't look as though there was any great problem and took the opportunity to scratch its leg with its beak. Emma had broken her arm when she was young and knew how itchy these things could get. She made a new bandage with the old splints and made sure it wasn't too tight. Just enough really to stop the bones moving between the splints. Yes, the leg was healing nicely. That wasn't the problem.

There was a problem looming however. If the griffin had visibly grown in the nearly a week it had been in her hospital, as she liked to think of it, how big was it going to get before the leg was healed? And what was she going to do then anyway? She could release it but what if it didn't want to go? And she didn't really want to release it as she felt there was already a bond between them. Not like her and Charlie, of course, Charlie was special. But even so. She'd found online a statue of a griffin that was over 10 feet tall. That didn't mean griffins grew to ten feet she realised, the statue probably wasn't life sized. But what if it was? Fortunately Dad didn't often go in the shed and Mum avoided it like the plague. But there was going to come a time soon when the griffin would be discovered and maybe it would become too big to hide anyway.

Then there was the problem of what to call it. She was tempted to call it Elijah after the boy in the Lord of the Rings movie but the griffin didn't really look like an Elijah. Legolas was cute too but she felt the reference to 'leg' was a little unfair. It would be a constant reminder. Emma didn't even know if it was a boy griffin or a girl. How do you tell? Maybe Galadriel, the Lady of the Wood, would be better. Or maybe just plain Griff. Griff was a boy at school she rather liked although he'd never spoken to her. He was in the school football team and was far too cool to talk to a mere fourteen year old even though he was only a reserve player and not in the main team. His hair kept falling into his eyes and her fingers itched to push it back again. The griffin was a boy griffin. The thought had just come into her head and she just knew it was true.

“OK, I'll call you Samwise” she announced. “After all, you're getting as fat as he is.”

The griffin sat up on its forelegs and extended its wings to touch the sides of the box. She scratched its head.

“You'll soon be well and able to get out and about again. Are you looking forward to that?” she said.

She felt a yes in her mind and smiled. Despite its rather emotionless bird's eyes she thought she was learning to read it quite well.

“Time to take Charlie for a walk.” Charlie still wouldn’t come in the shed although he had progressed to sitting beside the door, as though on guard.

She fetched his leash and he ran figures of eight around her, barking all the while as she headed for the garden gate. At the end of the drive Charlie found a fascinating new smell on the fence post and analysed it for nearly a minute. Then he scraped the flowerbed with his feet, throwing earth all over the front lawn, while he growled to show he wasn’t intimidated by whatever had left the smell. They set off down the road, Charlie deciding it was time he investigated the estate side of the lake again. The last few days he’d concentrated more on the highway end.

When they got to Lakeside Boulevard they turned right alongside the lake, heading into the sunset. The bulrushes up ahead looked as dense as ever. As they neared 137 Lakeside Boulevard, Emma was surprised to see the old lady she usually waved at wasn’t sitting in her garden. That was unusual. She always sat in the garden so long as the weather wasn’t too bad and the weather was quite nice today. She hoped the old lady wasn’t ill. Emma gazed at the sunset while Charlie inspected something that looked quite disgusting in the gutter. After he was satisfied, they moved off and Emma notice the old lady was sitting on the bench beside the lake, up near the bulrushes. She was sitting sideways, not looking at the lake but facing down the path in the direction of Emma.

As she got near, the old lady smiled and gave a wave. Emma waved back as this was part of their ritual.

“Hello” said the old lady. “I haven’t seen you for a few days”

“Charlie’s been taking us the other way,” said Emma, a little surprised the lady was talking to her. “Charlie’s my dog” she added as an afterthought, patting him on the head as though to eliminate any possible confusion over dogs.

“Ahh” said the old lady. “My name’s is Amelia, Amelia de Colac” and looked expectantly at Emma.

"I'm Emma Westward" said Emma with a smile.

"What an excellent name for a young lady" exclaimed Amelia, "Onward, ever Westward!" and laughed. Emma didn't understand but stayed quiet. Adults often said strange things she didn't understand, even though she was almost an adult too. Maybe she'd understand when she was 16.

"Come and sit by me on the bench" said Amelia, patting the bench beside her.

Emma hesitated. Mum had always said not to talk to strangers, especially not now she was nearly grown up but the old lady wasn't really a stranger was she? And Emma was pretty sure Mum was talking about men strangers not women strangers. Especially after that strange man had said "nice legs" to her when she was at the local market with Mum. She'd looked at her legs in the mirror later and supposed that they were quite nice. Much nicer than Dad's hairy knobbly ones anyway.

Emma sat down on the bench, keeping a firm grip on Charlie's leash. Charlie gave Amelia's feet a thorough inspection and went off to the end of the leash to bark at some ducks who had come to see if Emma had any food.

"I saw you the other night in the bulrushes" said Amelia. "I was doing some of my craftwork in the front garden. What was it?"

"It was an injured animal" she said. She felt reluctant to tell Amelia all the details just yet. "Some sort of cat" she added craftily. This was technically true.

"Ohh" said Amelia. "Only you want to be careful around this lake, you know".

"Why's that?" asked Emma, expecting to get the usual adult lecture about the risk of drowning and discarded hypodermic syringes in quiet places.

"It has a history" said the old lady matter of factly. "A history and a

power.” She gazed at Emma thoughtfully, wondering whether Emma would understand.

“What do you mean?” asked Emma.

Amelia was silent. She was trying to read Emma's body language and thoughts. She seemed to reach a decision and a tiny shiver ran through her.

She turned her face back to the lake.

“Its a nice lake isn't it.” she said. “Made when the developers built this estate.”

Emma nodded. She hoped this was going to get more interesting as Charlie needed his walk.

“Have you ever wondered what was here before they built the lake?” asked Amelia.

It had never crossed Emma's mind. Even though she knew in her head that the developers had built it, it just seemed timeless. Like all lakes do.

“It used to be a native tribal place. A sacred place.”

“I thought the government didn't allow people to build on tribal places” said Emma.

“They don't” replied Amelia. “Only this time the developers offered the tribal elders a lot of money. The whole area was perfect for development, being so close to town. And the tribal elders decided that the site wasn't that sacred.” Amelia snorted. People selling out their principles wasn't new to her.

“Well I suppose everyone benefited then” said Emma. Was that all? This country is littered with native sacred sites. She'd even been to some only last year, on holiday with Mum and Dad.

The old lady smiled. “I suppose they did”. Then she abruptly changed

tack.

“Have you ever heard of lay lines?” she asked.

Emma hadn't.

“Lay lines are lines of energy. A little like magnetic lines”

Emma knew about magnetic lines. They done them at school, using iron dust and magnets.

“Lay lines are more important than magnetism though. Thousands and thousands of years ago the ancient masters realised the power of lay lines and built their sacred places on them. The most sacred places of all are where lay lines cross. The power of lay lines is such that they can change the nature of time and space. That's why they are important. Its not just religious mumbo jumbo. Lay lines are part of the natural system of forces that go beyond human beliefs. They are part of the fundamental nature of the universe.”

“Interesting” Emma thought. “So you're saying this wasn't just a native sacred place? It was a crossing of two lay lines?”

Amelia laughed a dry little laugh. “No” she said. “There is no crossing of lay lines here. The elders were right that this place isn't that sacred. But one lay line does. It runs exactly down the line of that drain over there, where the bulrushes are, goes through the lake and connects directly to the Baptist Church on the edge of town. I have a map which shows all the religious and sacred sites that lie on the line. I'll show you one day if you are interested. If you follow it far enough it connects to sacred sites in Iraq, which used to be Persia”

She leaned forward and patted Emma on the knee.

“But you must be careful around this lake, particularly around the lay line. Strange things happen here sometimes. Best be careful dear.”

Emma sat back thoughtfully. Charlie had more or less given up on the walk and was lying beside the bench, energetically licking his bottom.

“What sort of strange things?” she asked after a few moments. It could be worth listening to Amelia as she might know something that would help with Samwise. After all, finding a living mythical creature would surely be counted as strange and she'd found him in the bulrushes, right where the lay line was. She wondered if she should tell Amelia about Samwise, as she might have some ideas on what to do about him. “Best not yet” she thought, “adults can be very unpredictable.”

“Ohh, moving lights, unusual noises, things being found” said Amelia. “Apparently a group of white men who were hunting natives in the early 1800 came this way. They massacred a tribe, ohh 20 or 30 miles back that way then headed over here looking for survivors. They were all found dead. Every single one of the white men. With no injuries or any signs of a fight. None of their guns had been fired and their horses were found still saddled wandering nearby.”

“What sort of things?” asked Emma. She'd learned about the massacres at school. She was more interested in whether Samwise might be a 'strange thing found here'.

Amelia ignored her question. “Its getting quite dark” she said “we'd best be going to out homes.” Then she turned and looked intently in Emma's eyes and grasped Emma's left hand tightly. Emma squirmed a little at the unexpected touch but she felt the intensity of the old, knowing eyes.

“You must tell me if you find something strange” said Amelia. “You must come and tell me immediately”.

She dropped Emma's hand and glanced away, as if embarrassed by her sudden display. “I'm at 137 Lakeside Boulevard” she added brightly. “I'm always in. Don't be a stranger.”

Emma nodded. She felt a little uncomfortable about not telling Amelia about Samwise. She jumped to her feet and tugged Charlie 's leash. “Come on Charlie, time to go home.” She said goodbye to Amelia and headed back along the path, Charlie once more in the lead, perhaps even smelling is dinner at this distance.

In the twilight, Amelia stared thoughtfully after Emma, her softly

wrinkled old lady's face looking hard and craggy in the gloom. Etched with the wear of many lifetimes.

"You've been a long time" said Mum as Charlie and Emma burst into the kitchen. Charlie headed straight for his food bowl and started slurping from it. Dad was in the lounge watching the news on TV.

"I was talking to an old lady we met by the lake. She lives in Lakesde Boulevard. She was telling me about a massacre here around 1800."

"Did she remember it then?" called Dad from the lounge.

"Da-ad, she's not that old" called back Emma. "She was just telling me stuff about the history of the area. She might be useful for a school project". Emma knew that mentioning a school project would kill off any further questions. Teachers had no idea how involved families got in school projects and how much time they took up. No one wanted to even think about a possible school project.

Mum broke the silence by telling them dinner was ready. Charlie's was long gone, of course.

After dinner and a soap on TV with her parents, Emma went to check on Samwise.

"I was talking to an old lady about the history of the lake" she replied. Emma started slightly and peered around the shed door but couldn't see anyone in the darkness. Lights spilled out from the house and she could see her parents in the lounge through the windows. How very strange. She could have sworn she'd heard someone ask what she'd been doing at the lake. Samwise was ignoring her as he pecked at his mince. He was able to stand on all four legs now, although he was favouring his broken leg. "Its probably still a bit sore" thought Emma,

"Yes it is"

Emma leapt through the shed door. There was no one outside. She went round behind the shed but there was no one next to the window either. How very very strange. Charlie barked as he discovered the trail of a rat on the other side of the garden. "I must be going mad"

thought Emma. She had another look around the garden bit could see nothing. Charlie was a deeper shade of black against the colourbond fence but that was all. Back inside the shed Emma busied herself checking Samwise's bandages and generally tidying up, all her senses alert. She heard no more voices. She joined her parents in the lounge and tried to watch whatever show they were watching but they were bickering about whether or not the lawn needed cutting and that Dad had had the time to do it that day and that it was his weekend too and needed a break. Same old, same old. She went to her room,

Checking Facebook in case anything had happened that she needed to know about to one of her friends that she didn't know, Emma was surprised to see a new friend request from someone called Amelia. It was accompanied by a message that read "Don't forget your promise.". Emma was puzzled. Did she know an Amelia and what had she promised? Then she realised it must be the old lady from 137 Lakeside Boulevard. Amelia had pronounced her name as 'Emilya' and it was an unusual name that Emma had never seen written down. 'Amelia' looked as though it shouldn't be pronounced 'Emilya'. She laughed at herself then frowned and said out loud

"I didn't promise anything. She didn't ask me to promise anything. How did she find me on Facebook anyway?".

She sat back in her chair and started thoughtfully at the screen. Ohhhhhh, she'd told Amelia her name so Amelia had searched for an Emma Westward and found one in the same town. It would be very unlikely that there would be two Emma Westwards in this town. That didn't explain the promise though.

She accepted the friend request and clicked Reply on the message. She typed in "hi amelia what promise idk wat u mean" then hesitated before sending it. She actually had a pretty good idea of what Amelia was talking about. After all, she had seen her find something by the lake. But did she really want to keep the strange conversation going?

"You need to talk to Amelia"

Emma spun round in her chair but there was no one there. The door to her room was shut and the voice she'd heard wasn't Mum or Dad's.

The voice she'd heard? Heard?

Had she actually 'heard' anything or had she imagined it?

Inside her head?

Emma stared out of the window into the darkness.

Slowly she turned back to her computer and deleted the message to Amelia.

"I need 2 talk 2 u" she typed. And clicked Send.

(3709 words)

The more I thought about it, the more I realised I had the opportunity to work on something longer than just 1 evening. Writing creatively is a lot more tiring and time consuming than I expected! I had figured it was just sitting down typing for a while, no big deal. I have a new respect for writers.

OK, I may not particularly like this story but it's good practice and while the story idea may not be particularly creative (I could see it turning into something like the movie Eragon, which I wanted to avoid), delivering it in a credible way was certainly challenging my creativity. There were still a lot of different ways of developing the story and I realised also that being able to choose between different possible pathways is also a creative task, as is maintaining a story-line over several sessions.

My wife liked the story but at one point thought that I'd left something out – the bit where Emma replies to a question that hasn't been asked when she's back in the shed after talking with Amelia.. What I was trying to get at was that Emma replied to a question automatically, without thinking about it, and then realises there was no one there to have asked it. I was trying to convey her surprise but not reveal yet that the griffin was talking directly in her mind. That part could do with a rethink.

Something I'm not conveying here is the sheer awesomeness of how I was feeling. The two griffin stories combined are around 7000 words with

plenty of scope for development. When I started this three word exercise such a thing was beyond my grasp. If anyone had said I'd be writing 7000 words I would have laughed at them. Back then sustaining something for 300 words was a major achievement and stretched my abilities.

Day 98 ~ 7th April 2019 Words: Natter Jack, Natty, Natural

I was going to get my driver's licence back in 4 days. I'd been looking forward to it for months. For the last 361 days I'd been chauffeured everywhere by my wife which wasn't convenient for either of us. It's not until you lose your freedom that you start to appreciate it and at one minute past midnight I was going to get in the car and drive somewhere. Anywhere.

So, with my mind filled with plans of all the wonderful places I was going to go – such as to the shops *on my own*, ohh how wonderful! – I was taking the dog for his evening walkies. He enjoys it and it got me out of the house. I worked from home so I hadn't even had the luxury of commuting to work by train. Anyway, I digress. I was walking the dog. It was early evening, as I recall, at any rate it was dark because we always went after dark. Tyson doesn't mind either way since he lives in a world of smell, not sight, but I prefer the dark. I've always been a night person since the darkness hides a lot of the ugliness of the world like the rubbish blowing around or the dried up and desiccated gardens of the neighbours, and reveals some of its beauties like the silhouette of a tree backlit by a street lamp or the glow of family life from behind curtains. Its even better in the rain because the street lights and occasional passing car make glorious abstract reflections in puddles although Tyson, being a bit of a wimp, doesn't like getting wet. Me, I love it. The sting of hard rain on my face, the softness of gentle rain pattering down, the smell of wet roads and the faint splashing of my footsteps. It makes me feel somehow more alive. I guess that's because water is such an elemental part of life.

That night it wasn't raining. It was autumn but not yet cold so I was in just shirtsleeves, not being much of a natty dresser. Tyson wore his normal fur coat. I use a piece of rope to extend his leash so he has more freedom to run ahead or hang back or veer sideways than he would with a normal length leash although if we meet a stranger, I haul in the rope so the stranger doesn't get nervous. Some people don't like dogs for some reason. We were heading towards town, on our usual route past the creek where the natter jacks croak noisily at each other, when a car drove past which startled me. Well, it wasn't actually the car that startled me as we get a lot of cars around here. It was what it was doing. In this part of town its quite common for cars

to drive around with music blaring out and they invariably play something with a loud beat. Boom, Boom, Boom. In fact that's all you can hear, just the bass beat and none of the melody. Maybe there isn't a melody. Maybe the people who drive these cars buy CDs that just have the boom, boom, boom. I've no idea.

Anyway, this car, as I said, startled me because although it was playing loud music it was classical music. I'm no expert and I didn't recognise the piece but it was definitely a piano concerto of some kind. Not a single boom to be heard. And that's what startled me. I've never heard anyone driving round with classical music blasting out. And then I heard the boom.

Perhaps 200 yards further down the road, the car ran into a tree. There's a gentle curve to the right there so I guessed the driver had been thinking of something else and had carried straight on, straight into a tree. I hoped the crash hadn't been too bad. The car certainly hadn't been speeding but the sound of a car hitting a tree is quite unmistakable and there is something eerily final about it. There's the engine noise, the sound of the tyres on the road, a boom and ... silence. Although I could still hear a piano playing. I gave Tyson a jerk on his leash and said "come on boy" and set off at a jog down the road.

The car had gone head first into the tree and one headlight was still working but was shining up into the tree rather than straight ahead. The tree itself was embedded almost entirely in the front of the car, perhaps two thirds of the way over to the passenger side. A branch of the tree had come off and was lying across the car's bonnet. I could see someone in the driver's seat, their head resting on the steering wheel. I pulled out my phone and called the emergency services, giving them the name of the street and getting the number of the house the other side of the tree from their letter box. The nice lady at the other end assured me that the police were already on their way and would be there within minutes and that an ambulance wouldn't be far behind. She asked me if I had any First Aid training and I admitted that I didn't. She then said to try to open the car door and to reassure the driver that help was on its way but under no circumstances try to get the driver out or to deal with any injuries. "Leave it to the professionals" she said "you could unknowingly make

things worse.”

I'd actually read something about that recently in the papers. Someone had helped someone in a crash and had laid them on the ground. Unfortunately, the injured person had suffered a cracked skull and by laying him on the ground the fluid around his brain had leaked out which had caused his death. I didn't want to be the cause of anyone's death so I intended to take the lady's advice. I tugged quite hard on the driver's door but it wouldn't open. I figured that it must have concertina'd in the crash and was jammed but the police or someone would have cutting tools. Then I realised that the door was locked. The little knob that locks and unlocks the door was down. The window was half down so I reached my arm in and pulled the little knob up. I should have mentioned that I'd tied Tyson the letter box post of the house behind the tree. There were no lights on and no one had come out so I figured that the residents were out or away.

I'm digressing again. I have a tendency to do that. I am a graphic designer for advertising and so my mind often wanders while it explores ideas for new and exciting ways to portray old and unexciting products. The long and the short of it is that after I'd unlocked the door it opened quite easily. A couple of creaks but nothing serious. The driver was still lying across the steering wheel. She was obviously female because she had long hair which also lay across the steering wheel and a loose blouse of the kind rarely worn by men although I have heard that some men do like to dress up in women's clothes although personally I think they look better on women. They have the roght body shape to start with. Anyway, there was also a pair of high heeled shoes in the footwell, clogging up the foot pedals. She herself was barefoot. I guessed either the shoes had slid forward with the impact or that they'd been tucked under the seat and one had come forward and lodged under the brake pedal, causing the crash. Or perhaps not since she'd still have been able to steer wouldn't she?

She seemed to be unconscious so I was about to step back and not interfere, not having any First Aid training, when she groaned loudly and lurched backwards. The tree suddenly lit up brightly, making Tyson bark. She must have snagged the main beam stalk with her blouse, causing the one remaining headlight to go to full power. Certainly there was a rip in her blouse and I could see a part of a pale

pink brassiere through it. I leaned forward and said "Are you hurt? Can you hear me?" a couple of times. She shook her head, her hair straggling across her face, and lifted an arm to pull her hair away from her face. I could see a gash on the side of her head and blood trickling. It didn't look too bad. A trickle of blood never hurt anyone, it's when its gushing you have to worry.

She groaned again and muttered "I'm going to be sick" and lurched forward. She was right but fortunately she had lurched a little to the left so it went over the gear-stick and not me. I noticed she wasn't wearing a seat belt. She slumped back and groggily looked at me. "Who're you?" she muttered. "I'm Charlie" I said. "You've crashed your car and an ambulance will be here any moment." As if on cue I heard the faint sirens as an emergency vehicle in the distance. "Just sit quietly and everything will be alright." She made no attempt to argue and shut her eyes. She touched the side of her face and winced.

A moment later a police car pulled up and turned off its siren. Two policemen got out, leaving their lights on to illuminate the scene and came over. One of them gestured to me to join him on the pavement while the other bent over the girl. He then called over to his partner "Doesn't look too bad. Ambulance on its way. No other occupants" in that staccato officialese the police use to convey important information quickly. He walked back to his police car and started setting out traffic cones. His colleague, the one standing with me on the pavement, asked me who I was and what had happened. I gave him a quick overview as the ambulance arrived and pulled in just past the tree and the wrecked car. The two ambulancemen, actually one of them was a woman, jumped out and one quickly conferred with the policeman laying put cones. The other inspected the girl and decided that there was nothing immediately life threatening but they'd take her to hospital anyway. She called this over to the cone policeman and he went to the front of his police car and started to radio in an update. The male ambulanceman opened the back of the ambulance and pulled out a stretcher and left it beside the crashed car. He then also radioed to whoever ambulances radio to then told the police which hospital he'd been told to take the girl to.

Meanwhile I'd been standing there watching all this with interest. Part of my mind was taking it all in and devising a way of using the scene

to promote a local radio station which had recently commissioned me as part of a marketing push. The policeman with me was making notes on what the ambulancemen had said. Then he turned to me and asked for my full name and address. I gave him the details which he noted.

“Is that your dog sir?” he asked, in that special way the police have of saying “sir” in a way that makes you seem like a criminal. To tell the truth I'd forgotten about Tyson in the excitement of the police arriving. There's something about the appearance of the police that makes you anxious, even when you haven't been speeding and are facing losing your licence. I confessed he was indeed my dog. Tyson was sitting on his backside watching everything with great interest. His nose was twitching at all the new smells. He wasn't much of a barker, he generally was content to smell the world go by.

I spend the next ten minutes going over the events in as much detail as I could remember. The policeman told me, when I apologised for my poor recall, that this was quite normal. “You'll remember a lot more over the next day or two” he told me and that someone would come around to take a full statement later in the week. Meanwhile the two ambulancemen had gently extracted the girl and put her in the ambulance. They were preparing to leave. The other policeman was inspecting the crashed car. He looked underneath it several times, I imagine to see if there were any leaks of fuel or brake fluid.

My policeman finished noting down my memoirs and asked if I needed a lift home. I explained that I lived just down the road and he checked the address he'd written down then gazed down the road and nodded. “Well that's all for now Sir”, he said, seemingly happy that I did not appear to be criminally involved, at least for the moment. “We'll be contacting you later.” I half expected him to warn me not to leave town but he didn't. I've watched too many cop shows on TV. I retrieved Tyson, who gave the tree a final watering, and returned home.

“Did you get lost?” my wife said. “You've been ages.”

I told her what had happened, remembering a couple of details I hadn't told the policeman. She was quite interested and wished she'd

come with us as excitement doesn't happen very often in our lives.

The day before I got my licence back a policeman came round and I invited him in. He leisurely took a cup of coffee with me as we discussed the accident. I was the only witness and I'd witnessed the whole thing from start to finish. He clearly was in no great hurry to get back to solving the vast amount of crimes I'm sure he had to deal with, although thinking about it he was probably a traffic cop and not a detective and traffic cops tend to deal more with body parts strewn over the road than they do with breakins and fraud. I'd probably stay talking to me as well if the alternative was extracting a bloody corpse from a shattered windscreen. As the policeman at the time had said, I remembered a lot more details, such as the high heeled shoes in the footwell and the absence of a seatbelt. He made copious notes and eventually thanked me for the coffee. I presumed I'd hear no more about it. After all, there weren't even any serious injuries so it was probably more about the insurance claim than anything.

At one minute past midnight that night I was legally allowed to drive a car again. Frankly it turned out to be an anti-climax so I'd gone to bed rather than wait up so as to go for a rather pointless drive. Maybe it would be more exciting if the licensing authority sent a stripper-gram to help you celebrate. Anyway, mid morning I was working on a graphic to encourage more people to enrol their little darlings at a child-care centre in town when I reached for a cigarette and discovered there was only one left in the packet. I had a minor panic attack before realising *I could go get some more!* Yay.

I dug my car keys from the drawer where I'd left them and headed out to the garage. We have two cars, one for my wife and one for me. She uses hers to go to work and whatever else she needs a car for and mine had sat quietly in the garage. It had only been used occasionally when my wife's car was off the road for some reason. Still, the tyres seemed reasonably inflated and it started first time. I gingerly pulled out of the garage and paused at the edge of the road. I figured I had probably forgotten how to drive and ought to take it easy for a while. Actually I ought to take it easy for quite a while as the court order had been that I could resume driving on this day but that if I was caught committing any other offence within the next two years I'd lose my licence again and may go to prison. I decided to take it easy. Bit of a

no brainer really.

I waited for a couple of cars to pass then pulled out and headed off into town. I passed the tree where the car had crashed the other night. I was surprised to see that, apart from missing a branch, which had been neatly left beside the fence, the tree appeared to be undamaged. As far as I could tell at the time the car had been a write off. I headed for the nearby shopping centre as I could get smokes at the supermarket. I could also get a bar of chocolate, I realised, as my wife couldn't watch my weight *when she wasn't there*. Awesome. I pulled into the centre car park and parked the car. I hadn't forgotten how to drive after all. It was very natural and normal. As though I'd driven only the day before.

As I walked through the shopping centre on the way to the supermarket, I saw a head of hair that looked familiar. When she stopped to look in a shop window I saw she had a black eye and a large sticking plaster on the side of her face. I tried not to look to see if she was wearing a pale pink brassiere. She saw me out of the corner of her eye and then turned her face to look at me. She frowned as though I was familiar but not immediately recognisable. As I'd only talked to my wife and policemen for several days I smiled at her and said

“Hello, I hope you've recovered from your accident.” It seemed a natural enough thing to say.

She looked puzzled.

“I saw you crash”, I said. “I'm the one who called the ambulance”.

Her face cleared.

“Yes” she said “I remember you leaning over me.” she paused “didn't I throw up over you?”

I laughed and said no. “You went the other way, over the gear stick”

She looked faintly relieved. Actually she looked quite good, apart from the bandage. The bruise made her seem vulnerable and defenceless.

My male protectiveness surged. Or was it just testosterone?

“Look”, I said, “If you're not doing anything at the moment can I buy you a coffee?” I hadn't invited a women for a drink since I'd met my wife and it felt strange, but good. Exciting and illicit.

She turned to look back in the shop window then glanced down the mall the other way. The silence started to get uncomfortable.

“OK” she said turning back to me. “I can spare a few minutes”.

“Well thanks for nothing” I thought. Then I realised she was just playing it safe in case I turned out to be a weirdo and she needed a quick escape.

“I think there's a coffee shop just up there to the left.” I said waving my hand in roughly the right direction. “I'm Charlie” and proffered my hand.

“Jeanette” she replied, turning in the direction of the coffee shop and not noticing my hand. “I remember seeing your name on the police report.”

We walked towards the coffee shop. “I told you my name in the car” I said “but you were groggy and wouldn't remember”.

Inside the coffee shop I asked her what she fancied and placed the order at the counter. She wandered over to grab an empty table. I met her there, carrying a flag on a metal pole that read 31.

“Same age as me” she said as I sat down. She didn't seem to be happy to be 31. I didn't mention my age. After all, I was half trying to impress her and my age wouldn't help.

We chatted “get to know you” stuff until the coffees arrived. She was beginning to relax. Either I wasn't the weirdo she'd half expected or I seemed to be no threat at all. Maybe she knew I was married? Could have been in the police report but it could also be my body language.

As I poured a sachet of sugar into my coffee and stirred it I asked if

she had any idea about why she'd crashed into the tree. "Maybe there was something wrong with the car" I suggested when she didn't offer an immediate reply.

She ignored the question and instead asked if I was married. Oh well, it had to come out sooner or later. I admitted I was and expected her to then ask why I was trying to pick her up. I confess I had no ready answer. I wasn't even sure I was trying to pick her up. It was just nice to talk to someone who wasn't a policeman. Instead she surprised me by saying

"So you know how it is then, being married."

I had no idea what she meant but I kept that to myself. Instead I just gave a half nod and raised an eyebrow to encourage her to expand upon her remark.

She gazed intently at a menu trapped in the jaws of a chrome plated thingy on the table.

"I was married" she said. "Happily married."

I noted the past tense but stayed silent. Somehow saying something seemed to be ... inappropriate.

"We'd been married three years or near enough."

She tore her eyes away from the menu and looked me directly in the eyes. I could see tears begin to well up but there was also an icy coldness there, just behind the surface of her blue eyes.

"He was killed in a car crash on the motorway 5 months ago."

I said "Oh god, I'm so sorry." but she ignored me.

"His secretary survived" she continued. Her eyes boring into mine but I could see that she wasn't looking at me. She was looking at her own desolation.

"They'd been lovers since before we got married. They were going

away for a dirty weekend. He told me it was an extended training seminar.”

The welling tears were trickling down her cheeks now. I offered her my paper napkin which had come with the coffee but for her, I wasn't there.

“The bastard had been shagging her all the time we were married and I'd been so fucking stupid I thought we were happy and all the time he was shagging her and that bitch survived and ...” she subsided into sobs.

I sat there unmoving and silent. What on earth could I do or say to help her?

She calmed down after a few moments and blew her nose into her paper napkin. A couple at another table nearby looked reprovingly at me as though I had made her cry. I shrugged slightly at them and they looked away.

She looked at me again, blankly.

“There was nothing wrong with the car”, she said in a low voice. “I drove into the tree. I wanted to end it all. I wish I had.”

(3914 words)

I mentioned in my comments for the last story about the sheer awesomeness of what was happening but I didn't mention the fear. On the one hand I was getting more confident every day but at the same time I was getting increasingly fearful. After 7000 words of the griffin story, I can remember sitting down on the 7^h of April and getting my laptop out to do the day's story and feeling scared that nothing was going to come along. Very scared. Yes, I could continue the griffin story but I didn't want to – partly because I didn't find it that interesting but partly also because, in total honesty, I didn't feel up to writing the conversation Emma was going to have with Emilia and inventing wonderful abilities for the griffin. But if I didn't continue I'd have to write something else. After a 7000 word 2 parter, I was having major misgivings about whether I'd reached the end and run out of ideas. I guess logically that doesn't make sense but we're talking

about emotions here, not logic. It's almost like having a reputation to live up to, although my reputation existed only within myself, and to an extent, my wife.

When I started this activity it was something of an intellectual exercise, a little challenge to pass 20 minutes. And here's the thing – if that's all it was then I could give up any time. For crying out loud, keeping it going for 3 months was a hell of an achievement in its own right. But, at some point on the way it became personal. Somehow it was becoming a part of my identity. My wife also told me earlier in the day that the day before she'd told her best friend what I was doing and had left her some of my stories to read. Talk about pressure, my readership had just doubled!

So, here on Sunday 7^h April, 2019, 4 days away from getting my drivers licence back, I was having a major crisis of confidence. Looking back, I think that I was only at that moment realising that I was not someone trying to write naff short stories as a creative exercise but that I was beginning to think of myself as a “writer”. It scared the shit out of me. A writer with no ideas and nothing to write about. Not so cool, huh.

This story was an exercise in sheer bloodymindedness. I was sorely tempted to not bother, to have a break. Maybe even abandon the writing. But I didn't. And that I think is the whole point of this book. Fear of something isn't the something itself, it's only your imagination. Face the fear and do it anyway. No one else cares so it's down to you.

This story starts with me having 4 days until I get my licence back, which was actually the case. It had been on my mind as you can probably imagine. But writing it down didn't inspire me with anywhere to go so I took the dog for a walk (metaphorically speaking) to see where that went. That led me to a car crash and I did wonder if maybe the hero of the story should fall in love with the girl but I think that idea has already been done. I also wondered if I should kill the girl but she seemed quite nice so I gave her a sad tragedy instead. I was tempted to have her fall in love with him as well and they have an affair as a counterpoint to her own husband's affair but I think that probably been done before too.

The only thing I'm not happy with in this story is I think Jeanette should be more emotional at the end but as I was writing it I visualised a girl more or less talking to herself, not really aware of the man opposite.

Almost icy calm as she looked inwards. Perhaps even admitting to herself for the first time that the crash was no accident. However, my wife thinks I did that bit quite well and she is more emotionally knowledgeable than I am so I accept that.

Day 99 ~ 8th April 2019 Words: Villa, Village, Villain

My girlfriend and I had been talking about going away together for a holiday. We'd been together for over a year and stayed at each other's flat's from time to time but we'd never been away some where different together. We thought it would be a nice idea, a way of bonding through shared experiences and memories. A "Remember that time we went to ..." kind of thing. Money wasn't a major issue. I was getting plenty of work as a session musician and Miranda was doing fairly well as a hollistic guidance counsellor. She'd tried to explain her work to me a few times but it made as much sense to me as the key of B^b minor did to her so she stopped bothering after a while. Still, plenty of people could relate to it and her consultancy was coming along nicely.

We briefly toyed with somewhere conventional like Majorca but neither of us could face the sort of people we thought went there. You know, the type that goes away on holiday to spend 2 weeks being drunk. Miranda thought it would be good to spend some time in India on a spiritual exploration but I pointed out that neither of us liked curry so that idea fell by the wayside. America was out of the question as neither of us fancied getting shot and they would never let me in anyway as I had a conviction for drug offences dating back to the time when I was a young rocker confidently expecting stardom to arrive within a few months and practising the lifestyle. I'm older now and my dreams have contracted with experience. Australia was simply too far. So, after two or three weeks of ideas and travel brochure consulting and internet querying we gave up on the exotic ideas and settled on a villa in the Lake District.

We settled on some dates and started looking for somewhere nice to rent and discovered that the Lake District is about the worst place to visit in the summer. Not because of the weather but because everyone else goes there in the summer. Apart from some back-packer type hostels absolutely nothing was available, most of the decent stuff having been booked a year or more earlier. So we talked some more and thought of other places – Israel was quite nice I'd been told, maybe a bit of diving in the Red Sea – but to be honest we'd both rather fallen in love with the idea of an old weather-beaten cottage with ivy growing all over it and a spectacular view over Lake

Windermere.

So, we rethought our dates and decided on the autumn, when the kids are back at school. Not having any kids it had never occurred to either of us that people plan their holidays around their kid's school dates. I plan around my session bookings which are rarely more than two weeks in advance and Miranda plans around her clients' angst so it really made no practical difference when we went. After the disappointment of our earlier attempts at finding somewhere we were a little angst-ridden ourselves but looked at AirBnB places and tourist brochures and searched the net. Autumn is a good time to go for a holiday we discovered. Almost nothing is booked. So we decided to go for a month and booked a place called Millock Grange, overlooking Lake Ullswater. OK it had 4 bedrooms but we figured if we were there a month we might have some family or friends come up to visit.

I told my agent and Miranda drew a thick black line through several pages of her appointments diary and sent an email to the nerd who manages her website and Facebook pages. He needed to do complicated things so no one could book a session online during our holiday period. Miranda spent some of the time while we waited for the time to pass trying to teach me about tantric sex but I kept losing the plot and reverting back to old-fashioned sex. Old habits die hard but she didn't seem to mind much and we laughed a lot.

Over the summer Miranda explored clothes shops and bought quite a few outfits that she thought would suit the ambience of the Lake District. Mostly long flowing dresses and some wide brimmed hats. I bought a new pair of jeans and some shorts in case we went swimming. I also got some hiking boots so I could leave them outside the door so it looked like I went hiking. I figured I could muddy them up some in a puddle or something. Hey, I'm a musician, image is important!

A couple of weeks before we were due to leave Miranda started packing and repacking, trying to decide what to take and how to fit it all in her bags. She gave up after a while and bought another suitcase. I did my packing the night before, as three pairs of jeans, shorts, five t-shirts, a thick jumper and undies doesn't take long to pack. The boots I was going to carry loose in case anyone saw us. I took two of

my saxophones as well as I'd need to practice some while away. A month without practice is too long in this industry. All my stuff fitted onto the back seat of the car, leaving room for a hitch-hiker if needed. Miranda's filled the boot. Wasn't a problem as the Grange had 4 bedrooms so it wasn't short of space.

The big day came and we left London in the rain and headed up the M1 motorway. About 6 hours later we swapped onto the M6 to bypass Preston – I grew up in Preston so bypassing it was pretty important to me – and followed the signs to Kendal. Kendal is a small town but is probably the biggest in the Lake District. We'd booked a room at a pub so we didn't have to find the Grange in the dark. Miranda wanted to see it in the daylight before we got the keys because if we arrived in the dark we'd be living in it before we found out what it looked like for real and that would make it less of an adventure. She wanted to be surprised when she first saw it and to savour the anticipation. I kind of understood but I was more concerned about turning on the electricity in the dark without a torch. We'd both been pretty quiet on the drive up. We were both excited and Miranda had been singing “I'm gonna be a country girl again” for the last few days but I think we were both also a little worried about how a month away would affect our livelihoods. The music industry has a short memory and if you're not there you get forgotten surprisingly quickly and people needing wellness counselling can be touchy.

We arrived in Kendal around sunset and found the pub easily. It was one of those squat buildings painted white with black timbers and big pots of cheerfully colourful flowers hanging all over the front. Inside the bar was low and the walls were a deep nutty brown from a hundred years or more of smokers. It was almost empty and the barman took us up the creaky stairs to our room. There were only two rooms and he said the other was going to be empty that night. He showed us where the bathroom was and warned us that if we wanted a bath to allow plenty of time as it filled very slowly. He also showed us how to flush the old fashioned toilet. Although there was a chain you had to pull in the right direction and not too hard otherwise the ballcock fell out or something or other. Miranda couldn't stop giggling and we found the bed was quite comfortable even though it was narrow and had about 6 quilts on it. It squeaked a lot too. Just as well there was no one in the other room.

We got up late the next morning. Driving all that way was quite tiring and the heavy local beer we had with our dinner had been very relaxing. Miranda tried to have a bath but gave up when she couldn't get any hot water and settled for washing herself with a cloth and cold water. She said it was all part of the experience and modern conveniences would have ruined it. We wandered round town for a while and had some breakfast in a little cafe before driving over to

(1443 words)

I gave up on this one which is why it isn't even 1500 words long and uses only one of the three dictionary words. It felt flat and downbeat whereas I'd wanted it fairly upbeat. To be honest neither character interested me so I just gave up and abandoned it, mid sentence. It started off fairly boring and got worse. Who cares which motorway they took? And getting the guy to buy hiking boots to impress other people made him seem like a tosser. I went to bed feeling quite low after this effort. That's two I'd abandoned in three days, which didn't seem very creative to me.

“Hey babe, look, a rainbow, over there” I nudged her and pointed to the west.

We were sitting on the back verandah of our rented house south of London and had been watching the rain falling. It had started quite heavily with a thunder crack that had rattled the windows but had subsided quickly into soft droplets. Miranda liked to watch storms and rain as it helped her feel more in touch with nature since our lives were surrounded by brick and concrete. I went along with it as I liked to touch Miranda and be surrounded by her. Sometimes she would run out into the rain and stand there in the garden, face lifted to the sky and arms outstretched, slowly rotating and getting soaked. If it wasn't for the neighbours she would probably do that naked.

We'd been living together for over a year and a couple of weeks before Miranda had suggested we go away on holiday together. We'd never done that and she felt it would be exciting and Miranda's excitement was contagious. So we ummed and ahed and talked about where to go. The usual places for British holiday makers like Majorca filled us with horror since they had a reputation for endless drunken clubbing. Miranda got all excited about India and all the opportunities for spiritual exploration until I ruined it by pointing out we both hated curries. She also suggested America, more I think to get the idea out of the way than because she wanted to go there but I can't go there. Some years back when I was a budding rock musician expecting stardom to arrive at any moment I was caught practising my anticipated new lifestyle and had a conviction for drug offences. The American immigration people don't like that. Africa was out as neither of us fancied it really although it would have been nice to look at the animals in the wild. Some diving in the Red Sea? Maybe. Prague, Vienna? Miranda thought they'd be better for when we were older. We weren't going anywhere, literally.

Miranda looked at the rainbow and went still. She did that sometimes when she came across things that were in tune with her. She'd go still and somehow absorb them, take them within and experience them totally. She stood up and leaned over the verandah and inhaled deeply. I heard her softly whisper “Richard Of York Gained Battle In

Vain” as she ticked off the colours on her fingers. That's Red, Orange, Yellow, Green, Blue, Indigo and Violet if you don't know the mnemonic. “I can't see the Indigo,, ohh there it is.”. Then she whirled round, her long hair flying. Her face was shining with excitement as she said, with emphasis on every word

“We must go to the end of the rainbow. Its a sign. We-Must-Go-To-The-End-Of-The-Rainbow.”

So it was decided then. Cool.

I'm Mr Practical in our relationship. OK I couldn't organise a piss-up in a brewery but I was better at seeing possible problems than Miranda who was one of those glorious people who can never see any downsides and for whom other people fix problems without them even being aware of it. I exaggerate but Miranda did have a magnificent innocence which was one of the many things I loved about her. I didn't particularly like the way she kept trying to teach me tantric sex as I kind of preferred the old fashioned way but I can live with that. Tantric sex is way better than no sex at all in my book. So I went inside and found my old schoolboy atlas and brought it out to the verandah.

“So which end of the rainbow?” asked Mr Practical. She was back leaning over the verandah balustrade – which sounds a lot more ornate than it actually was – and pointed firmly to the end right in front of her. That was roughly north so I opened my atlas to where it had a double page spread of the UK and surrounds and looked to see what was north of London. “Anywhere in particular?” I asked. She jumped over and stabbed her finger blindly at the page. I looked where her finger had landed and heaved a sigh of relief. I really hadn't wanted to go to the North Pole or the middle of the Arctic Ocean. Fortunately she'd landed on Scotland. I could handle that. I looked more closely and found she'd pointed just south of Scotland, somewhere around the Lake District.

When I'd finally come to terms with not even being a minor rock personality let alone a megastar I became a session musician so taking a holiday was easy. I just phoned my agent and told her the dates and she said “no problem, have fun”. It was more complicated for Miranda

as she was a Holistic Guidance Counsellor. Don't ask me what that is. She tried to explain once but it made as much sense to me as changing chord sequences in a minor key did to her. Not that I've ever tried to explain that, come to think of it. Anyway, she had to phone her website nerd so that the website wouldn't make any bookings for when she wouldn't be around. From where I sat I could only hear her speaking and I sat back and wondered at her patience.

"Hi Clark, Its Miranda"

"Miranda Dennison"

"The holistic guidance counsellor"

"Yes, that's me"

"Hi"

"Yes, look, I need you to update my website, I'm taking a holiday"

"Yes, a holiday"

"Because I fancy a break"

"No a popup's not enough"

"Yes I'm sure I want a holiday"

"No you can't come too"

"You need to stop it taking bookings for when I'm away"

"No, I still want it to take bookings when I'm away, just not book anything for when I won't be there"

"It's not that complicated Clark, I need it to take bookings anytime just not to schedule anything for when I'm not there."

"OK I'm glad about that."

"14th September to 12th October"

"No I won't be around anytime between those dates."

"No not even in the mornings."

"The 14th, its a Saturday"

"Better make that the 14th too because the 12th is a Saturday"

"Yes I'll be there on the 14th"

"The 14th of October, I won't be there on the 14th of September"

"Good."

Then there was a long pause.

"I have no idea what that means but I'm sure you can do it."

"The 14th"

"Well make it the 16th of September then."

"OK I'll send you an email."

"Yes I'll send you a postcard too"

"OK bye now"

"I'll leave that up to you"

"OK"

"So we're all good?"

Another long pause.

"That's so sweet of you Clarke"

"Byeee"

"I'm going with my boyfriend"

"I've never watched Star Trek so I don't know if they took holidays"

"Yes I do like him otherwise I wouldn't be going with him"

"That's right"

"Yes, bye"

"Yes"

"I know you do"

"Bye"

"Bye"

"Oh Clark, Facebook too"

"I gave you the login details last time"

"OK I'll email them again"

"I'm sure we'll get some nice photos to post"

"Thank you sweetie"

"Bye"

"mmm, bye"

"Byee"

The patience of an angel, my Miranda.

Even though our holiday was still a couple of months away, Miranda started visiting clothes shops and browsing online. She had a romantic image in her head of what the house and the area would be like and wanted to dress like Kate Bush did for her song Wuthering Heights. You know the one "Heathcliffe, it's me your Cathy, I've come home now" although I don't think the Lake District has any "wiley windy moors". I've never read the book, not being much of a reader. Lots of long, billowy dresses and flat ankle boots and broad-brimmed hats. Mind you she looked gorgeous in them, Miranda I mean not Kate Bush although Kate was nice too. But then Miranda looked gorgeous in anything. Hell, she looked gorgeous in nothing. Being me, I just bought a new pair of jeans and a fleece jacket in case it turned out to be cold. Every now and then she'd start singing lines from "Somewhere Over The Rainbow" and "I'm Gonna Be A Country Girl

Again". She seemed pretty excited.

We drove up on the Saturday, taking the motorway to bypass Preston. I'd grown up in Preston so I always bypassed it at every opportunity as I had no great fondness for the place. We spent the night in Kendal, which is on the edge of the Lake District, in an old pub which had quirky plumbing and the noisiest beds I'd ever slept in. The walls and ceiling in the low bar were a rich light brown from a hundred years or more of tobacco smoke and the whole place reeked of history and atmosphere. We could have driven straight to the house but Miranda wanted to see it in daylight before going inside. She said that if we arrived in the dark we'd already be occupants when we saw the outside and that would feel wrong. It would be like an anonymous hotel room and she wanted to experience the place completely so when she went inside she'd already know its face and how it fitted in with the landscape. I'd found the house through a friend of a friend of drummer who's gran had been born near Lake Windermere so we knew very little about it other than it had 4 bedrooms, electricity from a generator, cooking from gas cylinders, a fireplace and a "view". A view of what I didn't know. Hopefully it wasn't a neighbouring farmer's cowsheds. The friend of a ... called it a villa, which seemed a little out of place for the Lake District. To me villas were in the South of France or Greece. Still, at a grand a week it should be pretty cool.

The house, I didn't like calling it a villa, was on Buttermere, a lake on the other side of the Lake District from Kendal. The map said it was about 40 miles and we had to stop off on the way in Ambleside to pick up the keys so so I figured it would take an hour or maybe an hour and a half to get there. It ended up taking almost 6 hours because we were forever stopping to admire the scenery around Lakes Windermere, Thirlmere and Derwentwater and high up on the hills between them. Miranda was in awe and she kept saying she'd never felt so close to nature. Even I, Mr Practical City Boy, had to admit the scenery was beyond incredible. The owner gave us the keys and directions to the house. Apparently it was the only house around Buttermere and we could get there easily down a dirt track about 2 miles south of the village of Buttermere. We bought some food and some odds and ends in Ambleside to last a few days.

We pulled off the road onto a dirt track we found roughly 2 miles out

of Buttermere village. The road was in a valley between crags so the dirt track wound up and over the crag before descending to the valley where the lake was. As we rounded a corner, the whole vista opened up and we could see almost the whole lake, grey and dramatic under the cloud cover, surrounded by high crags rolling around the lake, all green with grasses and trees. The rocky tops of the crags towered over the lake and made it seem secure and protected. I stopped the car and we got out, breathless from the sheer beauty of wildness, untouched by humanity, raw and vital since time began. Miranda hugged herself with sheer excitement and wanted to touch everything. She settled for hugging me and said something about the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow and here it was.

After a while we got back in the car and continued driving slowly over its rutted uneven surface. Rounding a couple more corners, Miranda squealed with excitement and delight when we saw the house for the first time. It was on a flat piece of land at the head of the lake and had a timeless solidity about it. It was so beautifully an integral part of the landscape, as though created by nature herself, not the hand of mortal man. It was built from solid blocks of grey stone and ivy dripped liberally from every wall. From where we were we could see the squat, rectangular windows surrounding the front door. There was a dry stone wall, maybe 3 or 4 feet high, running around it and the front yard was filled with roses and a vivid array of brightly coloured flowers. There was a break in the clouds and the early autumn sun highlighted the house against the background of the lake and the crags and glinted off the tiled roof.

We drove up to the house and stood by the gate in the stone wall looking at it. Miranda said it was smiling, it was a happy house, safe and happy knowing its place in the world. I knew what she meant. It had "Welcome" written all over it. Undoubtedly people had lived and died in the generations that had lived there but there was no sense of catastrophe, no angst or anger or pain stored in those walls. Opening the front door I could see the stone was at least a foot thick. Solid and secure, hand carved and built to last. Unlike the mass produced and cheaply made "Executive Lifestyle" house we were currently living in. We slowly toured the house, Miranda touching everything, and admiring the charm and ambience. The walls were covered with very tick plaster, cracking with age but you could still see the marks where

it had been applied by hand.

The main living room blew our minds. Unlike the front which had smallish rectangular windows, the living room was the full width of the house and the wall overlooking the lake was almost entire one huge window. How they got the glass there I couldn't begin to imagine but it was simply stunning. Beyond the window was the back garden, filled with flowers and nooks and crannies and beyond the stone wall was a patch of grassland and the lake, laid out in its full glory, stretching its full length with the woodlands and towering crags on either side. Magnificent doesn't begin to describe it.

The four bedrooms were upstairs, two at the front and two at the back with the staircase and a corridor between them. Miranda went from room to room feeling each's character and ambience and selecting the one we would sleep in. It had a narrow double bed and a solid wardrobe which creaked when you opened it and the windows looked over the lake. Over the bed was a crucifix made from straw stalks. It looked pagan despite being a crucifix. I found some instructions on a sheet of paper in the kitchen and went out to start the generator. It was in a small outhouse separated from the house by a covered log pile. The generator started surprisingly easily and I carried in an armful of logs for the fireplace in the living room. That didn't start so easily even though I'd been a boy scout back in Preston but I got it going. We didn't leave the house for three days, except to explore the garden. There was something about the place that softly murmured "you are home, relax" and we spent our time relaxing and making love with a gentle unhurried pace and simply being. There was a large stone table in the garden, cracked and stained with age and with moss growing up its supporting legs. It was off to one side so you could get a clear view of the lake around a tree.

It was on the Tuesday that we ventured out to find food. That being one of the prerequisites of a fulfilling life. We went into the village of Buttermere and found a small store which had a reasonable selection of the basics. If we wanted anything fancy like wine or fresh garlic or sweet potatoes we'd have to go to Ambleside or even even Kendal but we didn't want anything fancy. We were going back to basics and basic but good food was sheer delight.

We walked around the village after shopping and that took all of 2 minutes. It was not at all touristy as few tourists ever got this far and they spent most of their time at Windermere, which is the most famous, or Coniston, where Donald Campbell died trying to break the water speed record. There's a museum to him there which we visited on the last weekend. I know its a bit of a slur but the village really was "quaint". There is no other word to describe it although quaint has such an artificial styled-for-tourists taint these days. Apart from the shop there was a car mechanic, a pub and a small church and perhaps 15 houses. We decided to go in the pub for a pub lunch before going home. It was called The Crag Inn and was basically a large 2 storey cottage with whitewashed walls and a thatched roof. It was empty when we went in except for the barman who was reading a book of poetry. We exchanged view on the weather and he asked if we were tourists.

"We're renting the Grange" I told him "over the hill, in the next valley"

He conceded that he knew the place and that the owner, "a damned nice fella", used to come in to "this very pub" to drink "the best damned beer in the Lakes" before he took ill and went down south. He made "going down south" seem like a more serious affliction than the illness. Having been there a few days we were inclined to agree with him. Miranda kept giggling and seemed unusually shy. Perhaps she didn't feel the barman, whose name was Ted, would benefit from Holistic Guidance Counselling. After a while we were permitted to order something and I had a chicken salad and Miranda went for the cheese version. We both had some of "the best damned beer in the Lakes" which was made, apparently, not that far away by a brewery in the bay at Whitehaven.

We'd started munching our salads when the door opened and one of the regulars came in and stomped up to the bar. He was wearing dirty dungarees, a thick sweater and some heavy wellington boots. The barman poured him a beer and he paid with neither of them saying a word. The man looked to be in his sixties or even seventies and he leaned on the bar and regarded us with interest.

"Tourists are you?" he called over quietly.

“We're renting the Grange” I told him.

“Oh aye” he said and gazed thoughtfully at us. Miranda got another fit of the giggles and nearly choked on a slice of tomato.

“Used to know old man Darrowby” he said after a while then slurped his beer. “knew the 'ole family one time”.

I smiled but didn't say anything. He prised himself away from the bar and plonked himself down heavily on a seat at our table and introduced himself.

“Name's Ned, how'd you do”

Without waiting to hear our names he proceeded to give us the entire history of the Darrowby family from the Boer War onwards. It was pretty obvious he was the local villain, it was something in his eyes, but as he regaled us with his tales it was also obvious that he was a character, a stereotypical lovable old rogue. We ended up spending much of the afternoon there, buying him endless drinks as his stories got wilder and wilder. More regulars dropped in from time to time, some for a quick drink, others more leisurely and he disregarded all of them although judging by the occasional head nodding in his direction and the short laughs that followed he was well known for playing the tourists. Miranda barely spoke, she just leaned against me, peaceful and relaxed, and absorbed the experience. I'd never felt so close to anyone before and she filled my heart and mind even though I was listening to Ned.

The following morning I woke up alone in bed. The early sun was streaming in through the window and I went downstairs hoping Miranda had made some coffee. She hadn't so I made myself some and wandered through to the living room to see where she was. She was sitting on the stone table, wearing nothing but one of my t-shirts with her legs folded and her hands outstretched on her knees meditating. She sometimes did this back in London. She liked to experience the dawn. Frankly I was surprised it had taken her this long to start seeing as how we were so embedded in the natural world up here. I just sat and watched her, serene and beautiful in the early light, barely moving with each breath, waiting patiently until she

returned to me.

I made some more coffee for us both when she came off the table. My t-shirt was big enough for her to use as a short dress but the early morning chill had made her nipples deliciously prominent. She was totally relaxed. In fact I'd never seen her so relaxed, and she had a glow that she'd never had in suburban London. She radiated serenity. It was almost like an aura that surrounded her.

"I feel so grounded here" she said after a few sips of coffee. "So in touch with the world. Its so peaceful I can hear the flowers growing and the trees singing. I'm becoming so aware of things."

I smiled. She was happy which was all I cared about.

"What sort of things?" I asked. I knew a little about mindfulness but she was something of an expert which is probably what had led her into Holistic Guidance.

"Ohh, the sounds, the smells" she said. "The taste of the wind, things like that."

She paused for a moment.

"And the stillness, the solitude and peace, I can feel within myself, within my mind and my body."

She stopped and looked at me reflectively. She seemed about to say something then changed her mind.

"What would you like to do today?" she asked, "go talk to Ned again?"

We shared a laugh. Ned was a character but you felt he would be best in small doses. An occasional treat rather than a daily staple.

"Why don't we explore around here? We haven't really left the house since we got here."

"Yes but its such a lovely house, I don't ever want to leave."

We decided to walk down to the lake and take a picnic with us to have on the shore. There was a vast grandeur to the place that captured us both. Over the next few days this became our general pattern. Miranda would meditate on the stone table then join me for breakfast and we would decide where we were going to go that day, which part of heaven we would experience next. Then we'd come home after a day of climbing crags or wandering through woods or simply listening to the wind blowing small waves against the shore of the lake.

A couple of times I found myself wondering if we could afford to move up here forever. Unfortunately it was impossible. As a session musician I had to be where the bands were and although it was a god enough living as I was quite in demand it wasn't possible to be forever going to London or Manchester from here. Miranda was in the same position. With such elemental countryside as this, no one round here could possibly want her services. She was as much trapped by the city as I was. Only in a city, cut off from reality, did people need the healing power of music or holistic guidance.

We'd been there a week and a half or thereabouts when Miranda came in from her meditation and said we needed to talk. Yeah. I've had the 'we need to talk' talks before. They're never good. I braced myself. The first and only girl I'd ever fallen totally in love with and 'we need to talk'. She could at least have waited until we got back to the concrete again.

She sat cross-legged on the couch beside me, damp from the mist that had rolled in from the lake during the night. I twisted around so that we faced each other. She hesitated, seeming to not know how to start.

"You know I've been meditating in the mornings."

I nodded, unable to speak.

"You remember I said I was becoming more alive, more aware?"

Yes, I remembered her saying that.

"I've been looking deep within myself. I could feel something had changed and I've been looking for it."

“And now you've found it?” I asked with a slight choke in my voice. Obviously she had found that she didn't love me anymore.

“Yes”, she said. She reached out and took my hands in hers.

“I'll need to check with a doctor but I'm convinced I'm pregnant.” She said softly.

Why would she need to check with a doctor to leave me? Then it sunk in. She was pregnant. Oh boy.

Well, that explained the glow I'd noticed. I'd thought it was just the fresh air.

We sat in silence for a while. Holding hands.

She broke the silence. “Are you pleased?”

Being a guy I'd never really thought about the consequences of all the sex we'd been having, tantric or otherwise but it slowly dawned on me. She was having a baby. My baby. She wasn't dumping me after all. In fact she wanted to have my baby. She loved me.

I won't tell you how soppy I got then. Please, leave me some shred of dignity. Us guys get embarrassed by exposing our feeling. Lets just say that by lunchtime we'd phoned a doctor in Kendal and made an appointment to confirm her pregnancy and had decided to get married. It suddenly seemed to be something we both wanted to do. There were tears on both sides, mostly mine I'm ashamed to say. But we added deep love to the memories stored in the walls of the house.

Later that week we saw the doctor and he took some blood and urine to do the various tests. Miranda was certain but we have to go through formalities in this modern world of ours. We made an appointment to go back a week later to get the results. We even went back to the pub in Buttermere to see Ned and we decided he'd be the first we'd tell when it was confirmed. That was a silly decision since we'd already decided that Miranda's mother would be the first we'd tell as well as Miranda's sister, my mum and my agent. Ned was now the 5th person we'd be the first to tell. Really, we just wanted to tell everyone. Except

perhaps Miranda's website nerd.

We went back the following week to see the doctor. I'd spent the week on tenterhooks but Miranda was quite, quite certain. Dr Mason was a nice man, going grey but a clear advertisement for the benefits of healthy rural living, and he was delighted to confirm that the test results were positive. Miranda was clearly deeply aware of her body and its rhythms. She wasn't due for her next period for another few days which, I'm told, is usually the first sign. We celebrated at a restaurant in Kendal and spent the night at a local motel as I'd had a few drinks and there was no way I was risking her and the baby, my baby, by driving under the influence. Its irrelevant but that Saturday was the day we visited the Donald Campbell museum on the way back to Buttermere.

We were due to go back to London the following Saturday and resume our interrupted careers. I sent a text message to my agent to remind her as I was going to need to stay in work for a few more years. We decided not to tell anyone about the baby, our baby, until we got back so we could do it in person rather than over the phone. After all, we had plenty of time. Babies don't appear in just a few days. We spent our time talking about weddings and baby names, you know how it is. Even wannabee rock stars have their softer side now and then. Miranda continued her morning meditations, watching our baby slowly grow, one step at a time. We continued our excursions and walks and picnics and joyful appreciation of the lake and the crags and the trees and the birds and animals and the occasional rain. We were very much on love and totally absorbed with each other.

It was on the Tuesday that we were walking back to the house. We'd been exploring the high ground round Robinson's Peak although we were too lazy to climb all the way to the top. Its difficult too to climb a mountain when you're holding hands. We were crossing Honnister Pass, which was the road that goes down the side of Buttermere Lake, just about where the dirt track to the house was when a car came round the bend a little too fast. Miranda was a step or so ahead of me and I felt the rush of air as the car flew by as her hand was wrenched from mine. The next thing I saw was the car skidding to a halt and Miranda, my lovely angel Miranda, lying in a heap on the other side of the road. I rushed over but she was unconscious, her long blond

hair in disarray and already turning red. I screamed at the gods, swearing eternal hatred of them as I dropped to my knees and gently, oh do gently, reached out to touch her face. The man in the car had come to a halt and was running up the road towards us, his face contorted with panic and repeating “Oh god Oh god” with every ragged breath. With tears streaming down my face I screamed at him to phone for an ambulance and eventually he did.

The next twenty minutes were a living hell. I knew she was dead and my heart and soul writhed. My wife to be, my soulmate, my love, my spirit, my angel, my life, my Miranda. Lying there in a bloody heap. Then an ambulance arrived, its siren ripping the air and echoing off the crags. An ambulanceman ran to her and checked her. He looked up at me and said

“She alive, we’ll take care of her” then yelled at his partner for a stretcher. They manhandled the stretcher into the ambulance and pushed me inside before slamming the door. One of the ambulance men fussed over her as she drove to a hospital. She was alive! For minutes my mind clung on to that, hope slowly forcing some semblance of sense into my head. Then I remembered. I said to the ambulanceman

“She’s pregnant”.

He tensed, his eyes going to Miranda’s midriff, then

“How far along?”

“A couple of weeks, maybe three. It was only confirmed a few days ago.”

“OK” he said. “I’ll make sure the hospital knows”.

Many years later a doctor came to see me in the hospital waiting room. He looked tired.

“Miranda has a broken femur, that’s the thigh, and extensive contusions, that is to say bruising, to the upper torso. She also had a minor laceration or cut on her head which is what caused all the

bleeding. Scalp would always bleed a lot but this one wasn't serious. It only needed a couple of stitches. She'll be fine. We'll keep her in for a few days to be sure but there were no complications. She was lucky."

"And the baby?"

"Oh the baby will be fine. No problems there at all."

A policeman gave me a lift back to the house. He told me the driver of the car was going to be charged with careless driving. The house smiled at me. "You are home" it said. "Relax".

(5537 words)

I got up at the usual time on this day and had my coffee and morning cigarettes staring out the window feeling bad. I didn't know why I had felt the way I had about last night's story but I was certain it wasn't a good story and I had no intention of finishing it. I was still tired so I went back to bed and woke up again three hours later. I made some coffee and had a ciggie and half way through the ciggie I decided not to abandon the story, just start again from scratch. By the end of the ciggie I'd pulled out my laptop and started writing. It was the same basic idea but this one turned out completely differently. I suspect it's to do with the opening line about a rainbow which changes the flavour of everything that follows. I also felt very differently about it. The one sided phone conversation between Miranda and her IT nerd made me laugh as I wrote it because I've known plenty of such nerds and could easily imagine what he (it had to be a 'he', female nerds are quite different) was saying. This story felt good and positive rather than negative and it just goes to show that getting a decent sleep can work wonders. I still don't know what a Holistic Guidance Counsellor is but I gave Miranda her name first and thought it sounded like the sort of job she would do. I had a lovely holiday in the Lake District 40 odd years ago which was the main source of inspiration for this one.

There is also quite an important little point here. This is the first story I've even wanted to rewrite. All the others I've accepted after finishing as finished and the griffon stories could have been continued; certainly I didn't feel they needed rewriting. Although many of my stories have been bad, this was the first one that I even thought of rewriting and,

interestingly, I also had a need to rewrite it as I didn't wait until my usual evening time to write. I started almost as soon as I got up.

On reflection I think this story shows two key points. Firstly that I was thinking like a writer – the first attempt was bad so rather than give up and move on to something else I chose to rewrite it. Secondly, I had become sufficiently creative to rewrite essentially the same story in a very different way.

It was a good day.

Here's a little snippet of information I didn't know until I started preparing this book. According to a website I found on the internet, short stories are up to about 7500 words. Below 1000 words they're called 'flash fiction' and below 500 words they're called 'micro-flash' or 'micro-fiction'. So most of what I've written aren't short stories after all, they're micro-flash stories. I find that rather disheartening. I don't want to be a micro-flasher.

(<https://bookriot.com/2018/03/20/how-long-is-a-short-story/>)

So did it work?

According to my trusty dictionary⁶, “Creative” means:

“*adjective* **1** involving the use of the imagination or original ideas in order to create something. **2** having good imagination or original ideas.”

I don't suppose a single one of the ideas in my stories are original. I'm fairly certain that someone else has at some time written about dogs digging up bones, people stressing at airports or even aliens trading in dreams. But they're all original to me, even the ones where I've used someone else's idea as a starting point. How the story developed from their idea was my own thinking. Certainly I have used my imagination. In fact, with the later and longer stories, I tended to sit back and describe what I visualised happening inside my head which I'm pretty sure is using my imagination.

But, if you remember the opening to this book, being creative wasn't the objective. It was to be *more* creative. I'm a human being who has survived, although admittedly only just, on his wits for what sometimes feels far too long so there must be some creativity inherent within me. The question is, over the time of this Three Little Words exercise (and it's only a hundred days by chance) has that creativity increased? Am I, in the last few stories, being more creative than I was in the first few? Or have I just become more practised at writing? Then again, does the whole work need to be creative or just an

6 Compact Oxford English Dictionary Third Edition, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2005

element within it? For example, if I paint a conventional landscape but paint one plant blue instead of green, am I being creative? I think most would say yes to that, so by extension if I write a story that is based on someone else's theme but use my own original elements, that must be creative too.

Well, I imagine if I ask 100 people that question I'll get 120 different answers. Creativity is subjective as anyone who has been to a Modern Art Exhibition will know. I feel I have become more creative and I think that is being reflected in other areas of my life. On the other hand all this could merely be the early stages of senile dementia. As someone who has determinedly ploughed their way through this book from beginning to end, I admire your tenacity and leave the question for you to answer.

Even if my creativity has not improved, this book can help to show you that garbage happens and by embracing your garbage – metaphorically, I mean, don't go out and start hugging your garbage bins (or anyone else's) – you can improve. So maybe you won't be another Shakespeare, but who wants to be Shakespeare anyway? He's dead. Be yourself since being yourself is truly original and imaginative whereas thinking you're Shakespeare will land you in the asylum.

My story is ongoing; the 100 days are over but it'll be a while before I die and I don't plan to stop writing just yet. I'm intrigued to see what else my brain can come up with.

Can you do this? Well, I'll be the first to admit that I've had two advantages over a lot of people who try this. Firstly, I'm unemployed (or 'retired' as I like to say so I don't look such a loser) so I have plenty of time. If you're working full time and raising a family then finding 4 hours in which to write a story will be difficult. The other is that I am 60 and have a lot of life experience to draw on. No matter how talented you are, at 20 you almost certainly don't have that much experience. This isn't a criticism, just a matter of fact. But, and this is a big but, so what? The secret to most things, I think, is to do what you can with what you've got. So, here's really the only real piece of advice I can give you:

Go write some stories of your own. It's time.