

Introduction

Welcome to the twenty-sixth Anthology of Abbeydale Writers. I am pleased to say that the work continues to maintain the high standards set by the group.

We are looking forward to our public reading during the launch of this Anthology in this year's "Off The Shelf" festival.

Barry J Nicholls

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Abbeydale Writers are a WEA Course and meet once a week, during term time, on Tuesdays at Totley United Reformed Church, Totley Brook Road, Sheffield, between 7 – 9 pm.

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www.abbeydale-writers.co.uk

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Contents

Poetry

With Age	Martyn J. Wraith	7
Lakins	Martyn J. Wraith	8
Circles	Owen Barber	9
Swan Lake	Owen Barber	9
Wortley Kitchen Garden 1	Owen Barber	10
Wortley Kitchen Garden 2	Owen Barber	10
Up, Down, Top, Bottom (Left, Right and Centre)	Owen Barber	11
Unknown Seascape	Owen Barber	11
Navvie Boys	Ken Windle	12
Salute of Gladiators	Ken Windle	12
Moving House	Rachel Black	13
Doggerel on t'High Seas	Ivone M. Fitzgerald	14
Mother and Daughter	Jo Zasada	14
Grief	Jo Zasada	15

Prose

Praying Hands	Ken Windle	19
Tin Badge	Ken Windle	21
Coming Alive	Tracey Cockram	24
Shell Shocked	Tracey Cockram	28
Why Do I Cycle?	Brian Hampton	31
The Picture as Sold	Brian Hampton	34
The Halloween Party	Ivone M. Fitzgerald	42
Kiki and the Magic Tree	Suzi Hithersay	47
Incident on a Bridge	David E. Sotheran	50
Satanic Retribution	David E. Sotheran	54
Thirteen	Bob Lockett	57

Poetry

With Age

Comes a sort of acceptance,
And a surprising lack of patience.
Everybody promised it would happen.

Concerns of twenty years ago have come and gone,
replaced by anxiety and dread
but most of all the scar of love lost.

Is everyone the same?
hiding behind a façade, too plucky to show pain,
a confidential private hell, close at hand.

Do dreams still come true?
not that they ever did,
or are we just longing for a day's peaceful simplicity.

The seasons seem shorter,
and winter seems colder.
The appreciation of the sunshine fills my senses and lifts my soul.

I dance, spontaneously to any passing melody.
Restricted by embarrassment I move, usually, in solitude,
but age moderates awkwardness, I dance away.

The future appears daunting and uncertain,
hand in hand with worry and apprehension,
But friends and family relieve the self-doubt and fretfulness.

Relationships ripen and mature,
understanding and tolerance blossom.
And broken hearts can sometimes mend.

God please give me the strength to express my love and understanding.
Please allow me the grace and empathy to live my life.
And please consent that I can dance through the heartaches and smiles.

Martyn J. Wraith

Lakins

School boys, brows on glass
Sweaty heads always leave marks.
The focus of obsession,
Lakin's Toy Emporium.
Fingers pointing,
In a fervent excitement.
Whitby Road is a long way away,
'Wait,' he shouts.
I'm already running,
Turning I laugh at him
Congregated in two bays,
I vie for space.

Today's the first day.
I'm not patient.
Pushing to the front, staring in awe.
'There's an Air Bomb Repeater.'
It's the first day of the fireworks,
'Bloody massive,' someone answers.
Scrum like burrowing to the front.
'Wow,' escapes in a wide eyed whisper.

Mum says Lakin's windows are always scruffy,
The window cleaner's a millionaire.
It always makes me chuckle.
Each morning four bays gleam,
Only to be smudged,
By a thousand foreheads.
Fireworks sentry like, all unique.
'That one makes an earthquake.'
'Does that one explode into a trillion stars?'
I smile at his trillion.
'That one screeches like a Capri's tyres.'
'JPS 3 litre, of course,' I say.
I don't know what it means.
Attention refocused.
123 Zeros, Cannons, Little Demons.
Bangers.
'I want 'em all.'
'Martyn, isn't Philip Lakin in your class?'
Nodding, I look puzzled.
He pauses for an eternity.
Finally.
He's a lucky bastard that Philip Lakin.

Martyn J. Wraith

Circles

Everything you see, hear, smell, touch and taste is
all but the same.
Some say I came from the wind borne as a seed
planted myself
Into this red soil, and held my arms open wide
as a tree does.
Danced round Maris red heart, breathed life
into the cold moonlit night
bathed in the sinuous paths of the stars.
Now my kin are just a few
up in this lonesome mountain range
the plains below and
beyond the horizon.
Felt stone upon stone, rock against rock
knowing life moves in circles.
Circles as the eagle
flies.
Circles to see, hear, smell, touch
and taste
all but the same.

Swan Lake

It was just as I envisioned it was, a lake
which lay at the foot of the mountains
undisturbed except for my vision. Which
in its heart leapt a swan, pure white
and free gliding, effortlessly.
Where the trees stood as cottonwood
shadows gleamed through a moon
cascading down, past me
into the wood via a stream.
Below that to my right habitation
Beckoned. My camp was on a bluff
standing out above the river, and prominent.
As a scout, my people
took me as their leader
guiding them in our own knowledge
and thinking. Sprawled out against the rock.
Scrub, mainly dust, wafted in the air
edded itself and the place
took on a wilderness like no other.

Owen Barber

Wortley Kitchen Garden 1

Three acres of land
and still I turn the soil,
sowing the seed.
Breaking the day in half
morning and afternoon.
Eight years
and still I love it.
Watching birds,
laughing with people,
breaking down compost,
picking up apples from the orchard.

Then there's finishing the tennis courts,
burning knotweed,
our place for eating sweetcorn
round a fire in autumn.
Trees hanging taller
over heads,
rooks roosting,
but no jackdaws.
Bricked those in we did,
nests lining a
eighteenth century heating system.

Wortley Kitchen Garden 2

We climbed up Winhill, Will and I,
up to the very summit
looking over towards Ladybower
and Bamford Edge.
Bamford where many trips
to the caravan were made
and passing on through
for walks.
But we were on top of Win Hill
where the sun shone
with skylarks flying over boulders,
Will and I.
Where Will proclaimed it
'Windy Will'
and I admit I had my hand
in it too. A not too bad combination.
And now I can say
I made it up there twice.

**Up, Down, Top, Bottom
(Left, Right and Centre)**

At first glance you'd never thought anyone
would walk into the telephone exchange.
Well! I did and on the outside
you think you're looking down
at the people through the gaps in the building.
But you're not.
Instead you go up the stairs
just as you do in a castle
a plastic sheeting to protect you from the drop below.
Completely safe and with someone
it harks back to the workers
who worked there – no echo of invisible footsteps.
But what you could hear
were the atoms of quark colliding with
a voice over, a room where you could play
football in, silent, dark, mysterious.
Even though you could still hear people.
I could not believe it, in one of the
most iconic buildings ever built in Sheffield.
Outside the spitting of rain
marked the streets
Up, Down, Top, Bottom (left, right and centre)

Unknown Seascape

Clinging on but still submerged is an outcrop of rock.
The sea bends it to its will
shapes it and layers can be seen
like four slices of brown bread.
The water smooths it 'til it erodes
falling over and back into a swirl.
The sea is what shapes the land
the land who shapes us
we shape back.
Once more I find it leaves inspiration
just sitting there
until a poet comes along and an artist
shaped by the sea

Navvie Boys

Laggan boys were navvie boys,
Moved from town to town.
Whiskey was their medicine.
Gallons could they down.
Tuned their fiddles daily.
Sang to larks above.
Iron made their bodies,
Pretty girls did they love.
Walked their way from Ireland,
Hordes from the west they came,
Seamus, Patrick, Michael,
Those of a Celtic vein.
Time and tides have brought you,
To those valleys green.
Labourers in their thousands.
When old Vic. Was Queen.
Railways carved through craggy cliffs,
Echo to your groans,
In the mists of morning,
To sounds of splintering bones.
Travel in your memories.
Travel in your dreams.
On your clanking engines,
When the boiler steams.
Sleep you sons of Ireland.
All your labours done
Rest in village churchyards.
Warmed by a winter's sun.

Salute of Gladiators.

Kill them all,
Bellowed the Gaul.
Fell the foe till they go.
This is the day,
All will say.
In this place,
We did race,
To slay the beast,
In a magnificent feast.
Blood and gore,
To settle the score.
Fighters dead on the ground,
Fall prey to the hound,
Who hunts us all,
Till we fall.
Emperors have ruled,
Some have drooled,
To watch us die.
This is no lie.
We take our bow,
To honour our vow.
Those about to die,
We salute you.

Ken Windle

Moving House

When I was new to this house,
Before it was actually mine,
It smelled of boiled cabbages,
Vagrant dust and grime.

The wardrobes were so ancient,
They could have held a ghost,
And every day arriving,
Another stranger's post.

The horrid, hairy carpets,
Where nasty things could grow,
Didn't need a vacuum,
They'd need a blooming mow!

Polystyrene tiles,
adorned most every ceiling,
and scraping off the glue,
had everybody screaming.

But worse than all the strangeness,
And a lethally dangerous light,
Is when it's dark and I'm alone,
And things go bump in the night.

Bump, creak, what was that?
Is anybody there?
Squeak, creak, was that the cat?
I really got a scare.

But now the carpets have all gone,
And the wardrobes are all new.
It no longer smells of cabbages,
just smells of me and you.

The creaks no longer bother me.
I got used to all of that.
And funny noises in the night?
It's probably the cat.

So now when it's dark and windy,
And I am all alone.
It isn't really scary,
'cause this is just my home.

Rachel Black

Doggerel on t'High Seas

Heigh ho! Eastwards we go!
On the waves do we sail
Timbers hold! Pegs o' wood be tight – o!
B'afear'd – o' t' Sperm Whale
The lovesome ship t' Essex – down t' Davy Jones' Locker – oh!

The glassy mirror smooth seas
b'calmed in t' Doldrums – not a drop t' drink.
Tentacles the size o' tree trunks cover t' decks in grease
The Kraken emerges, t' dhow is now flotsam, jetsam an' clink.

The old mariner peered out from behind the flames of the beach fire.

'These are only two of the dangers that t' high seas hold.
There are, at least, two more monsters
That you do not want to know about, truth b' told.'

Ivone M. FitzGerald

Mother and Daughter

Seeing you sitting there today
Making your sandwiches the same way
Remembering my years as a young mother
Wife, carer, nurturer, lover

The small unwritten rituals and tasks
Passed from mother to daughter like secret casks
Moments observed, stored but never spoken
Generations of your female blood line unbroken

Passing on ways of loving and living
Striving, thriving, always giving

There is no finer compliment for me
Than you and your girl child for all to see
Following the ways set out by those
Strong wise women who before us rose

To strike the path we now take
Living our liberated lives in their wake

Jo Zasada

Grief

Is a prison sentence with no parole date
Where a beast sits waiting to leap and howl
Where a scream sits silently at the back of the throat waiting to pour forth
Grief warps time and space
To walk forward is a skill forgotten
As static interrupts the clarity of life's signal
The haze of unreality wraps around like an autumn fog
Where deep sorrow and sadness make their home like a hibernating animal

Is a journey with no map, no guide, no clues
'Tentative steps, 'baby steps', words, words, words
Words from floundering friends
Please smile, touch me lightly
Let my tears flow for they are there always
Let my sobs come for they cannot be contained
Hold me whilst the vortex knocks me off my feet
I cannot stand alone

Take me into the bright blue days
I cannot find my own way
Take me into the warm long grass
Let my body be nourished by the beauty of the earth
It cannot be fed by food alone

Talk to me of love
I need him near
Share my remembered joy as well as my present pain
Stand by me as I stumble forward to the person I am yet to become

Jo Zasada

Prose

Praying Hands.

Father Patrick Dolan, now seventy-two years old, had grown up in Limerick and entered into the Roman Catholic Church as a teenager, to the delight of his parents. As a priest, prayer was of vital importance and he soaked himself in prayer. He had read of Mother Teresa of Calcutta who it was claimed prayed some ten hours a day. Prayer was a lifeline to God, thought Father Dolan, and he prayed for his parishioners on every occasion through the good times and the bad times, and always looked to God for an answer. Father Dolan spent long times in silent prayer, kneeling in the church, locally, referred to as the 'cathedral'. He began by lighting a candle and then offered his prayers to God. Outside the day would turn from light to darkness. Often it would rain hard, as was the norm in Limerick, and the wind would lash sheets of rain against the cathedral walls as if to break inside. Father Dolan prayed on, hands clasped together. People would see his bent form at the altar, locked in prayer, talking to God.

From the late sixties onwards the sectarian troubles escalated in many regions. Father Dolan never gave up on his prayers to the Lord. He prayed for an end to violence amongst the people of the political and religious divide. He agonised at the idea that men who claimed to worship the same God waged war on each other and were capable of murder. Father Dolan knew in his heart, as the Bible spelled out, 'Perfect love drives out all fear.' He prayed that the love of God would drive all fear from the hearts and minds of the men of violence.

He listened to the confessions of men with heavy consciences, from gunmen and informers, and those guilty of even darker crimes. He prayed with them, loving the men but hating the crimes they had done.

'What am I to do, Father?' they pleaded.

'Pray for mercy and forgiveness. Ask the Lord for guidance and purpose in your life. Lean on Him and trust Him to show you the way forward.'

He indicated that these men should seek out a quiet place and clasp their hands together in fervent prayer.

Over the years, Father Dolan saw many prayers answered. Men of violence became men of love through the power of God's love, their lives changed forever. Some became ambassadors for God and peace, instruments for God's will. Father Dolan caught glimpses

of these men praying. He saw hands clasped together and the cross of Jesus framing the background. He dreamt of praying hands with prayers rising up on the wings of eagles. He took this as confirmation that God answered prayer.

At the age of sixty-five he was sent to Colombia as a parish priest in a small village. He accepted that it was God's will for him and the local people received him warmly. He prayed as he always had for each and every individual. For little babies with all kinds of sickness and local farmers that their harvests should be rich and plentiful. He prayed for the government to show mercy in matters of civil rights and freedom. He was aware that Colombia was one of the most violent in the world since it was at the centre of cocaine production which was bound for America and the west.

This evil had ruined many lives and many had been killed. Drug barons became richer and the poor poorer. Fear enslaved them. The drug cartels ruled through fear and anyone who crossed them was murdered. In nineteen eighty five the fear of the drug cartels became the uppermost thought in Father Dolan's mind. He thought, as before in Ireland, that, 'Perfect love drives out all fear.' As always, he clasped his hands together in the little chapel focusing on the cross.

'Father, I pray that your love reaches all men. That you will reach out to them and show them the way forward. I pray that you put an end to drugs production in this area which threatens our village.'

Over the next six months God worked a miracle. The cartels were crushed by government troops and some of the men of violence became Christians, their lives transformed. Father Dolan thanked God in prayer. He clasped his hands together as always. His hands were becoming twisted with age and arthritis. A local boy noticed Father Dolan as he was praying. He made a sketch of his hands because he loved to draw. That drawing now hangs on the wall of the chapel.

(This is a short story based on the painting, 'Praying Hands' by Albrecht Durer.)

Ken Windle

Tin Badge

The town of Prosper beyond Casper, Wyoming had gone to the dogs. Any visitors getting off the train would immediately get back on within minutes to travel in the opposite direction towards the desert. That said a lot for the place. The local tourist board might possibly hype up a caption, "Town of interest". What they really meant was, "As lively as a dead Coyote". Tired, unwashed, falling apart, these were the buildings. The same could be said for the folks. Nothing of any glamour or excitement ever happened here. Prosper was a town going nowhere sinking into drunkenness, and gradual decay.

Colm Brady ran the local store and kept telling his sour-puss wife that if things didn't improve he would sell up. He never did. His wife cussed and moaned at him, cursing the day he brought her back to his bum town. 'If them Russians dropped one of them nookie bombs on nearby Casper, folks in Prosper would burp over the coffee table saying, "Pass them black-eyed peas."' "

Colm, smiled. 'It wasn't always like that. Something big went down here. My Pa he told me about old Red-eye, used to sit in the shades, yonder, with his liquor. Said he came in here just before he shook a six. Wanted some candy. He told Pa about the big shoot out that went down here when he was a tender-un aged five. Saw everything thru this store window.'

Colm's wife said, 'Just liquor talk. Like that day when he told the Mayor that renegades were coming up the street. Turns out it was Reverend Popes congregation singing psalms.'

Colm said, 'Pa told me this story, said it happened in 1875 as Old Redeye told it to me as clear as a running creek. He said he came into the store for candy balls when he hears Nate Clancy cursing down by the schoolhouse. Shouting at them Methodist ladies. How he'd a mind to take him a wife and began to choose one of them. He said he'd fix Marshall Brady who hid behind a tin badge. Old Red eye said women pulled their kids off the streets. And he'd never seen folks move so fast. "Like they'd got a grizzly a chompin' at their asses," Old Red eye said, while this blaspheming went on. Marshall Brady, he's playin' poker at Belles Saloon, winning as usual. Clancy started shootin'. Plugging everything that moved with lead. He shot Tom Dixie's mean rooster. Then he shot his dog. Would've shot Tom like a jackrabbit if he showed up. He shot them Ostrich feathers

off Miss Callin's new hat, afore her lanky brother pulled her inside. He kept shooting at the schoolhouse bell, shoutin' "schools out for summer." Even spooked the horses in the livery. Folks they were getting all jittery in the saloon. They spilled more liquor than they drank owin' to their shaky fingers. Then Billie Mack's boy yelled for Marshall Brady to do something. It takes a lot of courage to tell the marshal what to do. I mean he's one hard son of a whore. I heard tell he broke in an evil black horse called Lucifer. Punched it with his bare hands. That colt was so licked half its skin turned white. Brady killed a dozen injuns because they sneaked up on him while he was fishin'. He said they scared the fish away. Then he scalped 'em, cutting off some ears for his dog to lick. Outlaws they meant nothing to Brady. He shot so many that the grave-digger had to dig so many holes he fell in one himself and died. Marshall Brady was so feared in these parts, even the wolves stopped howlin' on account they might wake him at night. It all happened just so.

'Brady, he looked up from that poker table, the flames of the oil lamp flickerin' in his cold blue eyes, and said, "Dyin times here." He placed his whiskey glass over the poker hand and his cigar on top of the glass. "No peakin'. You boys better hope nobody sneezes so this cigar don't drop ash any place. Then I'll has to kill ya." Brady, he walked out of the saloon breakin' a chair. His spurs bit into them boards like a demon learnin' to waltz. As he strode into the sun, the birds stopped singin.

'Clancy turned, "Still hidin' behind that tin badge Mar..." The word stuck in his throat as Brady drew his colt revolver and let loose three shots. The first passed thru Clancy's forehead and out the back. The second and third blew away two fingers and his kneecap. Clancy bit the dust with a "whoomp" and a bull bellowed somewhere close to town.

'Brady turned and walked back to his poker game. Folks came out to look at Clancy. His face wore a stupid look. Folks talked about the shootout for years.

'What became of Marshall Brady? He tossed his badge onto the mayor's desk one day and said "I'm off into injun country." He was never seen again. Clancy? Well, the townsfolk sold his jackass carcass to a doctor who embalmed it using arsenic. Then he sold the mummy over to the owner of a travelling show called Clinton's outlaws.

'Maybe we should tell the story on local radio and bring the punters in,' said Colm.

His wife never heard him on account she was serving candy to Billy boy Lane.

At that moment Old Slim the mailman entered the store and placed an envelope containing political canvassing material into Colm's hand. Colm tore open the letter to reveal a poster of Donald Trump.

"Vote for Trump. Together we will make America great again," it boldly stated.

'I like this fella. Shoots from the hip. Don't stand for no shit. A true cowboy. The red necks round here will just love him,' said Colm.

He smiled at the realisation then went over to the window and placed the poster for all to see. Yeah, lets make America great again, thought Colm. Maybe he could build a golf course or something to bring the punters in.

Ken Windle

Coming Alive

I closed my eyes tightly, screwed them up so no light could get in. Then I started whispering to the teddies by the wall- 'Come alive, come alive and come and play.' I counted in tens up to a hundred and then again. If I open my eyes the toys will pretend they had never heard me. My toys were in neat rows under the window. My Mum said that if things were in rows they would grow up to be soldiers. I wanted to be a soldier and a fireman and Batman. Sometimes I was a dragon and I had a hat which had teeth and I could scare my brother.

I was bored and my baby brother was too small to play. I looked up and out of the window. I saw the streetlight and when I listened I could hear traffic and hubbub. If I was a fireman I could race up and down putting out fires - I would climb up my ladder to the tallest rooftop and climb on roofs and climb in through windows. I would see what was happening in next door's house and I would carry the beautiful girl next door to safety.

I picked up my backpack and started collecting important treasures to take downstairs. My rubber Spiderman, my yoyo, my ball-popping dinosaur. I spoke to my teddies again. 'I am going on an adventure: If you want to come then when I am not looking you will have to jump into the car and come with me. Otherwise, you can come alive and play when I am out.' I didn't want Mum to hear - she was downstairs making a lot of noise throwing my baby brother in his buggy. I buried my head in my coat - I could feel my breath and it was hot.

I heard Mum coming up the stairs. A lump rose in my throat and I hissed to my toys - 'Later tonight I will be Spiderman and you can come and play. You'll see.' Mum coughed. 'Are you alright Scott? Would you like some milk?' I sat on my hands and shook my head. I looked down at the wall - the toys were still in rows but Mum probably wouldn't notice. The elephant caught my eye. It had buttons down its front. It was for babies but it was big and squishy and I liked to put it next to my giraffe. I could be a zoo keeper or an African Prince, later, when Mum had gone. I could put my snake around my shoulders and go to the jungle.

Mum had her jacket over her arm - she said she was going to the shops. She asked if I would go with her and my baby brother, Ben. I grabbed my squishy elephant and shoved him in my backpack. Mum was running around shoving things in her bag too. I bounced down the stairs and hooked my backpack over the arm of the pushchair.

Mum was tugging at her hair and had a lipstick in her hand. She bundled me into my

coat which annoyed me because I could do it myself. We walked quickly to the shops and I could tell Mum was having a busy day because she was smoking cigarettes and tutting at me jumping on lines in the pavement.

When we got there Mum put the buggy next to the front door and grabbed my hand. 'He'll be alright,' she muttered and pulled me into the shop. She sometimes did this - left my brother outside. I walked around the shop looking down the tins of beans until I saw the window and Ben's buggy with my elephant attached to it. I was pulling at her coat. 'Mum, Mum, look outside,' but she didn't stop. There was a big man in a grubby overcoat looking at Ben. 'Mum...' She tutted and grabbed my hand. 'Mum!' I started getting upset. She wasn't listening 'Mum!' The man was bending over Ben and was leaning forward so I couldn't see what he was doing. I was choked and shouting at Mum to stop when I saw her drop her shopping basket and send the beans and the milk flying onto the floor. She started running down the aisle and then I saw the man outside the shop, holding Ben in his arms and getting on the bus. I started crying trying to catch up. Mum was screaming but the bus had pulled away and Ben and the man were on it. Mum staggered forward - I knew she was going to fall over so I turned to a man on the street and said, 'My little brother has been stolen - can you help us get him back please?' The man put his shopping bag on the floor and helped my Mum up. The pushchair was in the middle of the road and people were gathering around. Horrified faces held their hands over their mouths and my Mum slumped to the floor weeping and moaning, saying Ben's name over and over again.

I grabbed my elephant and followed Mum back into the shop where there was a storekeeper who was on the phone to the police. The road was not very busy but there were cars and bikes speeding past us and as I looked it seemed as though life had swallowed Ben up and was carrying on without him. The man in the overcoat was big - as big as a giant and dirty like a giant and he would probably eat Ben up if we didn't catch him.

We were allowed to go behind the counter, under the hatch and into the office behind the tills. There was no food in here, Mum was on the phone saying, 'Oh my God, help me, they're on the 199. You will have to stop them. They could get off.' There was a lady with a cup of tea and a man I had seen serving us before. He had ginger hair and he kept looking through the glass at the front door. A few minutes later a policeman and a policewoman arrived and they asked Mum to describe the man. I knew I could describe the man better than Mum - he had a hunchback and whiskers near his nose and he was ugly

like a monster. But Mum just said he had staring eyes and an old overcoat and he had taken Ben before she had got to the door. The police both had radios which kept buzzing on their jackets and they kept talking into them. They were sending a car. I imagined myself as Batman flying along in the Batmobile to save Ben - would the police have a Batmobile? I started feeling sad about Ben - what if he had gone forever to live with the giant with the whiskers and the hunchback? I would never see him again and his bedroom would be empty and there would be no crying at night. Mum was still crying - her eyes were red. The policeman was saying they would follow the bus.

After Mum had finished her tea the police said they would take us home. The police woman put her arms around Mum's shoulder and helped her with the buggy. I was going in a police car but I wasn't wearing my Batman suit and I was feeling like the tears behind my eyes were burning. I grabbed my elephant and sat in the back hearing the radios crackle and beep. I couldn't tell anything they were saying. It might have been code or it might have been a special signal because in a second we started racing down the street in the same direction that Ben had disappeared. I imagined that I was Batman in a suit and was pressing all the flashing lights and sirens. Whoosh! I was driving above the road and we flew along next to blurred shop signs and faster than even a motorbike. We were zigzagging above cars. We were swaying from side to side. Mum was holding her head and everything outside was whizzing and wobbling. I couldn't even see where we were - it wasn't my normal way home. My heart was thumping and I felt a bit car sick but suddenly, we saw the bus at the side of the road next to two more police cars with flashing lights.

Mum fell out of the car and ran, in slow motion, to the police cars. There was a police lady holding Ben. The giant in the overcoat was standing with his head hanging down. He had broken down shoes on and his hands were in handcuffs. The Police were talking to Mum - 'He's a bit simple. He doesn't know why he did it. You will have to come down to the Police station with us but I am sure Ben is ok.' I walked up to them staying behind my Mum's skirt. I could see that Ben was ok and Mum was sort of breathing funnily, up and down, like she had been running. I was thinking of our big adventure and our high speed chase and the bus just waiting there for us to catch it. This man couldn't be very good at stealing because he hadn't even managed to escape after ten minutes. I looked at my elephant and whispered to it, 'You are going to have an adventure. If I close my eyes I will imagine you are in my room but you are going to be friends with someone very sad. You will be my best friend forever if you can do that.' I stepped forward and gave the man in the

overcoat the elephant. The policeman frowned and stared at me. 'He's my favourite elephant,' I explained, 'I want you to have him.' The big man had a twisted half smile half frown but he took the elephant as the policeman led him towards the car. My Mum was being told off and was crying again. I hung my head. I wondered if my animal safari or my Spiderman or my dinosaur were missing me. Ben could play and we could all rescue the girl next door.

Tracey Cockram

Shell-Shocked

We were driving for days, through roads and roads of traffic, service station after service station. Goodbye Tooting Beck and five hundred people passing us by without looking up, milling in and out of the Tube on their way home. Hello, lady on Sat Nav, who lies. Lies about London, never mind France. Lies in a polite way. Lies happily, and frequently, and watches as Dad gets progressively madder and more irate. Goodbye Dover, across blank grey/blue waters with seagulls. With the family mostly together, and recovered from the arcades, we find the car. Goodbye Paris, and hello hay bales, and miles and miles of sunflowers. We drove over Richard Roger's suspension bridge hung over the Pyrenees like a giant spider's web. We stopped for Croque Monsieur and a burger and let the children find their feet. The days driving were long and we were all tired. Sandwiches were curling at my feet; the children were hurling missiles at one another; Dad was about to kill the Sat Nav. Tear her throat out Dad.

We found it, though, a yellow, rustic townhouse set in a village above the sea. James (Dad), myself and the children all filled the fridge with wine from the supermarket and sat under a gazebo in the blazing sun. James's Mum had found this place on the Net - her Swedish origins were our ticket here, linking with other Swedish friends nearby. The Band B owners were also Swedish and their pool had an aromatic Scandinavian surround which stood proudly looking like it had forgotten to be finished. The rules were intricately and immediately explained - the Swedish, apparently, didn't really like children in the pool; the steps could only be touched by an adult and could we please try not to make any noise. Easier said than done with two children five and under. Still burning rubber under our feet we noticed that the B and B owner doesn't smile. A sour faced Swede with no interest in the family invading his new house. His lap top took most of his attention while the house began to accommodate us - we wished for his sake that he could click a button to quieten the excited, little ones. The place was still under construction and the builders were from South London, muscles tearing holes in their t-shirts, happy with their tans and their summer work. The owner tutted under his pristine awning while rippling, brown bodies wandered nonchalantly around our white selves, spread-eagled on sunbeds. The children compounded the injury pulling the B and B paddling pool over the rockery and ripping it. Under her sunhat, and behind her shades, Daisy's cheeky grin was immutable. Instead, she dragged the blow up dingy up the pool steps and into the pristine pool. Lots of sticky tape and no word from the Swedish.

We met up with another group of Swedes living in the South of France - James's Mum and her Sri Lankan partner flew out to meet us. Our internationally, eclectic group were impressed as an older couple boasted touring through Europe on their motorbike. Finally, a barbeque sizzled with roast beef as we sat drinking and playing archery on a balmy evening, rosy with success. A quiet and foreign evening of French ex-pats reminded us where we were - slightly dislocated but somewhere near a beautiful coastline and in countryside dotted with castles and vineyards. The children didn't break anything and the conversation was only lacking because we weren't Swedish and couldn't understand a word.

Two fabulous weeks in the sunshine ensued- skies like crystal and seas only dotted with fellow bathers. The wind kept us on our toes - our umbrella dug deep into the sand tethered by the pushchair and the blow-up dingy filled with sand. There were armfuls of bags to carry and dragging a push chair along the beach was not always what the designers had in mind but we were able to picnic, happily, while Spanish girls in tiny bikinis made their statements of less is more. Daisy learnt a few French words while trying to approach children to play - her salt encrusted hair hung jauntily down her back and her first bikini joined the throngs of gorgeous sun worshippers splashing happily - the international language of sea water and body board was a more visual success than a verbal one. We tried to leave the beach under our accoutrements and, usually, managed to grab five minutes or more in the sea. Towards the end of the second week a hurricane fog of swirling sand arrived just as we arrived on the beach- a freak weather condition which we ignored although the lifeguards immediately closed the beach but, as we couldn't see well enough to leave, the kids continued to chase their beachball and bob about on their boogie boards.

The return trip started in a mountain village where we filled the boot with boxes of cheap vin rouge and champagne. We left the Swedish contingent with only a little trouble over the bill which, fortunately, didn't come to blows although we were unceremoniously invited to get on our way and genuinely pleased to have survived.

We left feeling as though we had ticked a big box. We drove with an after-burn up to the same hotel we had found on the way down, a little quaint building in a town illuminated by night with light pictures on the historic walls. I drank a beer as James took the children around town in the buggy. The French evening was warm and the children

were filled with excitement at the thought of getting home - they ate as they toured the light display and, shell-shocked and happy to be alone for five minutes, never had Mummy's beer tasted so delicious. It was a safe journey - no migrants at the border only cars full of children all waiting to get on the ferry and play in the games room. As we drove up to Buxton my head started to calculate the miles we had travelled and the relief I felt at the safety of our journey. Will we go back? There's some pink champagne on the shelf promising great things!

Tracey Cockram

Why do I cycle?

Several years ago I was surprisingly confronted by this question and found it difficult to answer because until then, I had just accepted it was something I just did.

At the time I was on holiday in Devon, staying in a small hotel in the lea of Dartmoor; a hotel with grounds that overlooked a distant Plymouth. Pam, my wife, is not a morning person, and is, usually happy to start the holiday day somewhere near 11ish. This means I normally have the first couple of hours of each day to do my own thing i.e. cycle.

On this occasion I was on my lightest bike heading up onto Dartmoor via very small and quite roads but, as I approached Merrivale, it started to rain. It rained enough for me to unfurl my light waterproof, prudently stowed in one of the back pockets of my lycra top. The original intention had been to ride a circuit by turning right as I came into this small town, skirt the famous prison, descend and return to the hotel via the valley roads. As I emerged on to the main road, from the lane I had been on and I got my first view of Merrivale, the weather took a turn for the worse. It was a veritable deluge; it was making a river of the road and I was prompted me to seek shelter. To my right I could see a bus gathering in assorted children, obviously heading to school. There were also a few damp mothers struggling with pushchairs and bags.

What luck, an empty bus shelter to keep me and my cycle out of the elements. Merrivale is sufficiently rural and isolated I did not anticipate this shelter being needed by anyone else for at least half an hour. But I was wrong in this assumption; one old gentleman remained seated. He was suitably dressed for the weather and comfortably nursing his walking stick. The rain persisted and we continued to shelter together. He was the traditional "twirley", happy be out from under his wife's' feet heading towards the city by bus but with a pass not valid for at least another half hour.

He liked this bus shelter, which was situated on the edge of the green, with a view of the local shops and garage, with a church clock tower for him to keep tabs on the time. Plenty to keep the mind of this aged "twirley" interested but, today, he had the bonus of a slightly, sodden cyclist.

We chatted about this and that, both of us with plenty of time. His bus was a long way off and I was still hoping the sky would brighten but I already knew I would not be heading across the moors that day to complete the planned circuit.

We were both curious people. "How long of you lived here?". "What did you do for a living?"

All the usual forgettable things that pass for a pleasant chat amongst strangers. We talked of the weather and the virtues of living rural and the benefits of living in a city. Then, out of the blue, he asked what turned out to be a very revealing question.

“Why do you cycle?”

I stumbled to find a reply because I had been rocked by the question.

Why did I cycle?

It was something, one way or another, I had done for the best part of 70 years and had never thought to ask this question of myself.

“Is it the excitement of descending?”

This was clearly not the answer because if anything I prefer the incline to the decline.

“Do you do it to keep fit?”

Maybe, I thought, but I was aware I could not claim this to be the motivating force. By now my companion had to be aware that I was struggling to come up with a coherent answer.

“Is it being out in the fresh air?”

“It has to be a factor” I conceded but I still knew this was not the complete answer.

“Is it the freedom?”

“OH YES! - THAT IS IT!”

It is the freedom that two wheels has always provided, from the earliest of times, through adult hood and into the latter years. Oh yes, it is the freedom.

Cycling enlarged my horizon when I was young, travelling miles away from home on traffic free roads when I was, supposedly, within hailing distance of mother, although somehow, back on local roads when due to be called in for dinner.

The racing had been exciting and character forming but there had also been the freedom associated with riding there and back, either on the day of the race, or for more distant events staying in digs. This had been a joyful time, a competitive time, a way of life that created lifelong friendships. There were the daily stress relieving rides to and from the workplace, a freedom to think and reflect. There has always been the joy of cycling in company or just by myself, the freedom to choose The freedom to quietly explore new places. The freedom to revisit known places.

The freedom is why I cycle!

The freedom to do my own thing without being beholden to anyone.

The rain had eased but not stopped when his bus appeared. We did not shake hands

but departed friends, friends unlikely to meet again. He to be about the business of the day. Me with this new found knowledge choosing to turn about and, drift back to the hotel, knowing I had the freedom to do it all again tomorrow, if I chose. The trees, the hedges, the sky, the birdsongs, the usual and the unusual always there for me, a cyclist, to find each time I put a leg over a cross bar and clip into the pedals.

Since that bus shelter encounter, Olympic successes, Bradley Wiggins, Chris Frome, Mark Cavendish etc. have moved cycle sport, that had always been a minority sport, into a televised mainstream attraction. They have been responsible for bringing the joys of cycling to many more people. Competing and aiming to win may well be the start point for this new and enlarged group of people who are now recognised as cyclists but, in the longer term, it will be the freedom that keeps them to this way of life. It is the freedom to nip into town without parking worries, the freedom to slip into the country side for three or four hours or more, whenever an opportunity arises, that will keep more than just me cycling.

Brian Hampton

The Picture as Sold

'You can't afford that,' he said.

'How would you know?' Julien replied, with just a hint of arrogance.

It was true that Julien had spent much of the day working on his vintage BMW and was rather scruffily dressed, with little cash and no cheque book on him, and could easily have been mistaken for an opportunist student.

It was a magnificent picture, full of action, rich in colours. It had to be a copy but the exquisite brush strokes reflected the quality of this artist. The original artist was known for his gift of capturing action but this copy would stand close scrutiny. The asking price reflected the quality of both artists and there had been no skimping on the framing. For Julien the picture simply shouted at him, 'Buy me.'

It was a whim purchase that he could easily afford and, in the moment, he felt his life would not be complete without it.

As Julien left the gallery, Charles, the gallery owner, turned to his younger partner, Phillip, and wryly observed, 'He'll be back. I told him he couldn't afford it. I think it is the colour as much as the action that draws them in.'

Sure enough, the following day, Julien was back, more appropriately dressed, intent on making the purchase.

The atmosphere in the gallery took on a much more deferential air. A choice of pictures was offered all showing similar nineteenth century action, glory and stupidity rolled together but this was not a time for choice, the commitment had been made yesterday. No amount of freshly ground coffee or close attention by Charles and Phillip was going to affect this purchase and they knew it but the charade had to be played out.

A few phone calls were made and the sizeable cheque that had been taken to the bank was cleared and accepted and, on cue, a green smocked porter appeared with the picture suitably wrapped and crated. The purchase had then been directed to the waiting black cab escorted by Charles, with Julien and Phillip trailing behind.

Before Julien could join his picture in the cab, he was encouraged to remember the comments made by Charles when they were still in the warmth of the plushly furnished London gallery.

'Don't forget, sir, the crate and the wrapping can be returned to us – just phone us at your convenience once you have unwrapped and hung your picture – all part of the service, sir. Just phone for a black cab when it suits you, they will bring it to us and we will

pay the taxi driver when he gets here.’ He added, ‘Enjoy your purchase sir,’ as he closed the cab door.

Julien could barely contain himself once in his apartment; he could barely wait to open the crate and gloat over the picture which, he was sure, would enhance the image he had fostered amongst his work colleagues and friends. He had alluded to the idea that he and his family were related to Alfred Lord Tennyson. It was an affectation he had begun to acquire in his last years at school. These days he expected to be addressed as Julien Tennyson-Smythe. Even the Smythe had only happened as the family’s fortunes improved just one generation previously. Not surprisingly, if you were to peruse the Smith family tree you would have been very hard put to find any connection to a Tennyson.

He liked creating envy amongst his equally wealthy friends and associates. This was not difficult with his choice of cars, and a large apartment that was high enough up in the block of flats, and facing the right direction, to be sure of a constant and clear view of the ever changing Thames. There was always something interesting to see, day or night, and was available to view no matter which room was in use. Julien was not noted for gazing out of windows. He was well known as a show off and risk taker and this left him with something of a dilemma. Should the picture be hung in the ample hallway? This would ensure that everyone arriving at the flat would see it and provide a first class opportunity to gloat. On the other hand, this was something of a personal purchase and he was inclined to keep this piece of art just for himself. If it was not for sharing, it could not be hung in the lounge and it would be out of place in the dining room where his more sedate works of art were already on display. He was aware, also, that it would have provoked way too much obtuse discussion when he dined there with his friends and associates. Such gatherings needed to be focused on expanding the interests of Julien and his contacts, and the picture would have been a constant distraction.

The lounge with its large, picture window was where he kept his more exquisite purchases and, clearly, advertised his wealth. It was a wealth built on income; he was self-assured and quick to read a situation, always looking to turn opportunities into profit. He had an office and some of his income depended upon him being there a few hours each day. The rest of the day he was free to pursue his other interests. Always the focus was on profit. The BMW, once complete, would be worth substantially more than he had paid, even after including the labour costs for the specialists needed to complete the restoration.

What a contrast. Here was a man who knew his own mind and was very much in

control of his life but here was a picture that was bought on a whim with no thought of cost and no clear image of financial benefit. What had been the attraction that provoked the 'must have' response? Was it the suggestion of risk so well portrayed in such a violent picture? There was, of course, its tenuous association and depiction of the most famous Tennyson poem and the implied glory of battle but it was, also, a scene that could be interpreted as a costly blunder.

Nevertheless, the multiple array of colours were there, some red, some white and some brown, mostly associated with the horses. There was no suggestion of the big guns that turned this famous charge into a folly. The wide eyed fear of the horses, as they dipped and leaped into the charge, had been captured with clarity and was awe inspiring, there may have been doubt in those same eyes but the only way was forward.

He did, of course, hang the picture in every room of this spacious apartment, except the kitchen and, then, decided, for the moment, he would have the picture in his bedroom. It would be a private joy that he could experience by himself whenever he chose to indulge his senses in all that colour and action.

Showing off could wait a week or three. A champagne celebration? – maybe.

The picture was hung so that it could be seen from his pillow on waking. The moment he sat on the foot of his bed, looking into this magnificent painting, he could almost smell the horses. He could almost feel the excitement of the riders with their sabres and lances at the ready. He was able to ignore the implied roar of cannon as onward they rode.

His reverie suddenly collapsed when he became aware of someone ringing his door bell. This was most unusual because the concierge usually called up on the intercom to advise of him of callers he did not know. His friends knew to buzz gently. They knew that Julien would be ready and waiting to greet them, ready to leave with them or entertain them. His awareness shifted as he realised it was late evening with very little natural light percolating into his private domain.

The ringing had not ceased and, somewhat befuddled, he made his way to the door, putting on lights as he went.

He was confronted by a concerned concierge, and his friend Peter. 'Are you all right, sir?' was the first thing he heard when he opened the door. He had to think for a moment. A comment like that he had not heard since his school days. His head cleared and he realised it was much later than he had any reason to expect. As they stood there, Peter was

aware that Julien appeared very pasty. Fortunately, some colour had begun to reappear and slowly Julien appeared more able to communicate. The picture had robbed Julien of his early evening; he had not been to the gym as planned. He could have missed a socialising evening. Such evenings were an essential element to his life style, wheeling and dealing was a way of life for them all.

Julien was not used to apologising but, on this occasion, it was his best ploy. As the concierge left to go back to his reception point downstairs, he stressed he was always available to deal with emergencies. All that was needed was a phone call.

Peter came into the apartment and sat in the lounge whilst Julien got ready to leave with him. No mention was made of the recent purchase. Peter and Julien had been friends for many years. Peter made no comment about his friend's aberrant behaviour and Julien offered none as they left together to meet their cronies in the West End, albeit just a little later than planned.

It was late when he returned to the apartment. In the kitchen the discarded crate and bubble wrap looked out of place parked near the Aga. In the morning he planned to return this to the gallery. That had been a conscious decision made earlier because he felt it would have looked a little juvenile and just a tad over enthusiastic to have returned it on the same day as completing the purchase.

All that remained to do that night was to drink his cocoa, that he knew helped him to sleep better, whilst he had a brief look at his computer. All his investments looked sound so nothing should disturb his sleep.

He stripped off and climbed into bed just after midnight, without turning on the light, knowing the first thing he would see on waking was his own version of *The Charge Of The Light Brigade*.

Somewhere around two o'clock he woke with a start, offended by the odour of sweat, the odour of horse. The latter odour in the past had rekindled thoughts of his childhood that had been so dominated by horses. There had been the joy of learning to trot when he was very young followed by the exciting years of steeplechasing on much larger horses. He had enjoyed developing the skills that meant he could confidently avoid being thrown each time a hedge or ditch had been reached whilst travelling at speed. There had been that feeling of exhilaration and growing confidence each time he could feel that all four of the horse's hooves were briefly back on the ground with no slackening of pace. Horses and perspiration were known odours but, that night, there was the stronger odour

of fear mixed in with the familiar. The odour was so pervasive that he felt the need to shower. This he did without allowing his attention to switch to the picture. He returned to bed and a restless night followed and, on waking, the first thing he saw was the dipping and leaping faces of the horses as they charged headlong into the Valley of Death.

The fear remained with him and he felt the need to shower again. He hoped it would help to remove the unusual feeling of dread that seemed to have entered his very soul. Normally, a shower was needed to get the day started by washing away the clinging shroud of sleepiness that tended to remain with him, even at the breakfast table. That day he was on high alert and action was calling.

Occasionally, he thought about his latest purchase during the day, between negotiations and began to wonder if he may need to hang it somewhere other than the bedroom. He had read an article in a supplement of 'The Times' that had suggested the best way to achieve good quality sleep was to avoid stimulating colours and stimulating objects in the bedroom. Julien had been sufficiently impressed by the article that the bedroom had been redecorated with more pastel colours a few weeks previously. He had, also, followed the advice to remove the laptop and the television screen. He felt that this action and upheaval of redecoration had been a good investment because his quality of sleep had improved and his income had risen, simply because he had been able to make quicker and sounder judgements in the work place.

That morning, despite being obviously wide awake, he felt slow and mildly confused and he was beginning to dread facing up to buying and selling. He struggled through the day and made the least number of commitments he felt he could get away with, and he cancelled the planned get together scheduled for the evening. At home, he removed the picture to the lounge and he was pleased to find that it did not conflict with his view of the Thames. It was on the wall opposite the window and seemed even brighter and more exciting in its new position.

Peter phoned suggesting a drink in the absence of the get together and Julien accepted, making sure he was ready go out when Peter arrived just after eight o'clock. He was in the hallway and ready to leave as soon as he heard the first buzz at the door. Everything seemed normal.

A quiet evening with just one friend was just what Julien needed. Well before midnight, they shared a taxi back to St Catherine's Dock and each went to their own apartments in adjacent blocks.

Julien, conscious of his disturbed night, avoided looking at his computer and drank his cocoa in the kitchen. The redundant packaging remained by the cold Aga. As he climbed into bed he felt some vibration and put it down to noisy neighbours, probably a celebration party. Sometime before two o'clock he found himself wide awake. The disturbance sounded explosive and seemed to be coming from the lounge. He put on the lights and checked the lounge. The noise was less distinct but it seemed to echo around where he stood. He could see nothing untoward and his magnificent picture benignly glowed back at him. Another disturbed night, another shower to relieve fear and tension.

The next day and the next night were very much a repeat of the previous ones and, with that, came the realisation he could not live with his recent purchase. The picture had to go.

He avoided many of his work commitments. He avoided making too many serious decisions. By mid-day he had escaped from his office and had some lunch in a back street where he knew he was unlikely to meet up with any of his friends and associates.

At home he had deliberately allowed time to slip to about three o'clock. He thought that this would be the best time to phone the gallery. Three rings and the connection was made, 'Is that Charles?'

'No, sir, it's Phillip. What can I do for you?'

'It's about the picture I bought from you recently, The Charge Of The Light Brigade. I am afraid to say it does not suit me and my apartment in the way I had anticipated and I am hoping you will take it back.'

There was no delay before Phillip replied, 'I don't think we will be able to help you.' He sounded quite curt and Julien was aware that he was no longer, 'Sir.' Phillip added in the same curt manner, 'We do not normally buy second hand works of art,' but he paused as he was about to ring off and added without any indication of confidence, 'it could be worth talking to Mr Charles tomorrow.'

Julien felt troubled and decided it was time to visit his parents who still lived in the family home near Sevenoaks, just off the M25. It was a place where he had always felt secure. He enjoyed the reunion and made an excuse to stay overnight.

Next morning, feeling much refreshed, he succeeded in waiting until ten o'clock before phoning the gallery. This time he made contact with Mr. Charles who, initially, seemed as unhelpful as Phillip but, eventually, conceded that they did on rare occasions, in fact, buy pieces from unauthorised sources. Julien had already pointed out that the gallery was very

familiar with the provenance of this particular picture.

Initially, Charles suggested that he could return the picture to them, after paying for professional crating, and paying for a secure delivery service and insurance against loss or damage. There would, also, be a hefty fee for an independent assessment of the picture once it was in the gallery. 'After all, we have to be certain you are returning to our premises the picture we, actually, sold and delivered to you.' Mr Charles sounded almost reasonable.

There was a pause whilst Julien realised he was beginning to accumulate substantial costs in his endeavours to return the picture. He was further alarmed when Charles added that in a situation like this they did not, actually, buy the picture but provided hanging space within the gallery so that the picture could be sold. In other words, Julien would still own the picture until a buyer could be found and he would be paying a weekly rental to the gallery for the hanging space. Julien quickly realised the gallery would have no incentive to pursue a sale and his costs would continue to accumulate.

The silence on the phone had become embarrassingly long. One of them had to break the silence. Julien, who was long used to negotiations and well aware this was not their final offer, remained silent, listening.

'Are you still there, sir?'

'I am,' replied Julien and added. 'I am sure we can come to some more amenable arrangement than just renting me wall space.'

Mr Charles agreed that there could be some movement on their position and suggested he needed to discuss the situation with his partner, Phillip. Julien smiled to himself knowing it was unlikely the younger, so called junior partner, was likely to influence the outcome of this deliberation. Nevertheless, Charles said he would do this and said he would ring Julien back once they had reached a decision.

It was three o'clock before the return call came and the upshot was the gallery would take back the picture for little over half the price Julian had paid and Phillip and their porter would call at the apartment at midday, the following day, with confirmation of payment by bank transfer and with the intention of crating up the picture. He was assured that they would take responsibility for the safe return of the picture to the gallery. Julien made some more phone calls and much to the delight of his mother arranged to stay a further night in the family home.

The next day it was close to eleven o'clock when Julien let himself back into his flat and sharp on twelve o'clock Phillip and his assistant arrived to retrieve the work of art.

Whilst they were crating up, Julien checked with his bank that the bank transfer had been completed successfully.

Julien smiled to himself as they left because he knew his friends and associates would never know of this financial loss. He had always been able to camouflage his reckless side by boasting of his successes. Maybe it was the reckless image depicted in the picture that had drawn him to it. He was certain that he would always remember the vivid colours and action that had shouted to him, 'Buy Me.'

Soon after two o'clock, the picture had been removed from its crate and it was again hanging on display. Charles, with some satisfaction, was saying to Phillip, 'That must be the tenth time we have sold that picture.'

'Twelve,' said Phillip, without even looking at the accounts. 'But five days must be close on a record for it to be back on our wall.'

Charles said, 'If ever someone decides to keep it we will need to work harder to cover our overheads. I am sure it's the colours that draw these young men to that picture and they just have to buy it! Long may it continue to traverse back and forth.'

'I don't imagine we will ever know what prompts them to send it back,' observed Phillip.

Brian Hampton

The Halloween Party

The massive castle built out of black, heavily weathered basalt rose craggily out of the rock strewn Argilard Pass, beyond which the snow and glacier capped Ronstard Range stabbed into the cloud and snow laden sky. Arcing over the steep, slate roof of the castle swept a bat, fully four metres in wingspan. The huge bat spied an open window and swooped down towards it. The window was not wide enough to accommodate the bat's wing span but it drew in its wings and tipped sideways and letterboxed into the cavernous hall of Argilard Castle.

Spreading its wings wide again, it circled over the heads of the assorted guests who had as much resemblance to each other as the sweets in a bag of Liquorice Allsorts. The guests noticed that the creature had in its claws a large pumpkin. A clumping Frankenstein's Monster made a show of ducking, which bumped a courtly lord, carrying his talkative head under his arm, making him stagger and nearly drop his head. He was steadied by a very tall (the loftiest in the hall, in fact) sylphlike, white-faced, black and white haired woman who looked like a cross between Morticia and Lily Munster. A disembodied hand scuttled up the light stand. A shapeless cloud hurriedly swept out of the bat's way.

The bat flew very low over the party-goers' heads and levelled out. The pumpkin fell from the bat's claws like a dam-buster bomb and exploded as it hit the floor in a cloud of white flour. As the cloud cleared, it revealed a woman in a red dress. The bat banked round and reversed its wings to kill its momentum. The moment it touched the ground the sweep of its wings turned into the voluminous, black cape of Count Dracula into whose arms the woman swooned. Dracula then tilted the woman backwards and bit her on the neck. She fainted as bright, red blood flowed from her neck amidst the crowd's piercing screams.

A high and wide, white wall extended along an open-plan plaza. A grey door, lined with black along its edges, suddenly, swung open as the party goers spilled out.

'That was scary and funny at the same time,' Sandra laughed, as they left the Sheffield nightclub.

'Yep, you were brill as the Morticia - Lily Munster type,' John replied. 'It had me fooled.'

'Everybody was doing the same to everyone else,' said John. They both loped,

athletically, down the street moving fluidly. They were extremely skinny, defined by long, steel hard, constantly sliding muscles. Their bodies were multi-coloured, with Sandra a light blue, lined with black along her sides and limbs and etching her facial features. As for John, his body was black, lined with red.

It was night as they emerged from Fitzwilliam Street and turned left into Glossop Rd. They turned into Upper Hanover Street, and stopped at the corner with Broomspring Lane.

'Well, John,' said Sandra, 'I enjoyed that "scary" Halloween party. See you soon.' They parted, and Sandra walked up the lane, turned left and finished up at 14 Havelock Street. She raised her hand to the door, it clicked open and she slid in. As she moved along the hallway, square panels turned on and slowly brightened. They were the same white colour as the walls; they just glowed. She entered the living room and sat on the light grey-white, faux leather sofa.

She sat not because she felt tired; it was just a cultural hangover from decades past when she had a body of flesh and blood. Just then, a message popped up in her vision. She mentally fixed her attention on it and she heard it as if she was being spoken to. It was Richard, a colleague in the Biotech industry.

'Come see me on Mars,' it said. 'I'll pay for the trip.' It was ages since Sandra had last seen Richard. But she'd had a good time with John. She vaguely remembered Richard's voice, but not where or when she last heard it. She shivered as something unconscious stirred within her.

Damn it, she thought, I'll go, even if it is Mars.

The red sky with a blue-black zenith, shrunken sun and near vacuum, loomed over Sandra as she stood in the Martian plain, lined with an old, red sandstone-like cliff in the background. She marvelled that she could withstand the planet's harsh, radiation pummelled environment. Richard fluidly strode up to Sandra. They hugged.

'Well, Richard,' Sandra said, 'what got you to call me out here?'

'I've got a message from John,' Richard said, communicating via interlink due to the thin air.

'John?' Sandra frowned. She brightened. 'Yes, the guy who partied with me last night. What of him? Where is he?'

Richard leaned back. 'It seemed you and John, though you don't know each other well, had met before. He realised that he wanted to get in touch but had forgotten to exchange contact details. He knows me and knew that I knew you.'

Sandra pressed, 'But...'

Richard continued. 'I'll put you in contact with him, if you wish.'

Sandra reflected. She didn't have to. 'Do it,' she said. 'Get in touch,' despite feeling just a faint unease.

Richard turned to Sandra. 'Um, you realise he is on Gliese 581d?'

She whipped round in shock. 'What? Only last night he and I were having a party! He's twenty light years out. Still, distances mean nothing these days, so, yeah, I'll go faster than light travel which was discovered late 2011 in Geneva.'

The soft orange - yellow glow of the red, dwarf sun, Gliese 581, about the intensity and colour of a moderately, bright, light bulb, glinted off the rippling water, splashing against the sides of the pontoon bridge. At the far end of the bridge was a broad platform on which was a glass-sided bungalow with a white roof. Sandra walked up to it, raised her hand to the door... and waited.

A tall, featureless rectangle opened up in front of Sandra, framing John. He wore the appearance as the last time they met, black lined with red. His hair was blond and crew-cut, in contrast to Sandra's which was black, lined with a few strips of white and utterly straight and soft, extending to her waist. Silently, John motioned to Sandra to enter. The door opening vanished behind them as Sandra followed John into the front room, which was really a porch surrounded with glass. The floor was tiled in black and white squares, with the sunlight providing a yellowish cast, more noticeable than on Earth.

Sandra looked out beyond John to the waterscape beyond the platform and noted how the sea in the far distance merged with the sky. Her eyes met John's. 'Let's read each other's stories,' said Sandra. 'Get to know each other better.' John, standing, straightened so that his visitor could get a better view of his black and red torso. Sandra also stood with her palms on the table and back turned to it, so her abdominal muscles stood out.

Etched on each of their stomachs, there was what appeared to be a single large monochrome tattoo. They were delicately shaded, so they gave the impression of depth and were not in the slightest cartoonish. The image on Sandra's six pack started to move.

It showed a black woman, neatly dressed in white and perfectly turned out, in contrast to the loud, English girls running along the dock. She held in her hand the arm of a boy aged ten. Towering above her, with black, straightened, braided hair and jet black skin, was the cream prow of the *Empire Windrush*. The ship was disembarking the

first mass influx of Jamaicans after the war in 1948. The image switched to the same woman being abused and told off for something a white colleague had done in a dingy shop in West Street, Sheffield. There were scenes showing the woman supporting her son so that he grew up to be a steel worker. He then met his wife through an *Empire Windrush*, Veteran's Memorial Meeting, and they had Sandra in nineteen sixty-one. Sandra became a biomed student in Liverpool, living in digs in Toxteth in nineteen eighty-one. She could be seen walking along the junction of Granby Street and Cawdor Street. Suddenly, she was caught up in a huge crowd. The moving image showed Sandra, suddenly, breaking into a run with a policeman trying to catch up. Sandra jumped over a fallen policeman enabling her pursuer to catch her. The image became very shaky. The policeman attempted to grab hold of the woman's left shoulder, missed, but sent his truncheon crashing onto Sandra's head. The juddering movie went blue for several moments. Then, the blue and black film started up again with Granby Street in ruins.

Sandra was watching with growing horror the unfolding events on John's front. Her eyes grew wide as she saw herself come into view concurrently with the image on her own stomach.

'For God's sake I'm not the one you want,' Sandra in the film yelled.

'Just doing my job,' the film John replied.

'So it's your job to smash people up for the hell of it, is it?'

'It's my job if they're breaking up the peace. Yes.'

'You... ' and Sandra fell silent.

The film on John's torso continued. Two rioters were thrown into cells and one was found dead shortly afterwards. Sandra put the table between herself and John.

'You are evil, you know that,' Sandra declaimed. 'That is institutional racism. '

'It was so long ago,' John replied.

'Not if the events are recorded in detail on our respective psyches, no it's not.'

John then transformed into his natural body which he had not done for decades. He was blond, with blue eyes.

Sandra, also reverted to her original form but she'd had done so more frequently in the past. She was a statuesque, black woman. She braided and tucked back her frizzy hair which had no white in it.

'As a Biophysicist, I helped contribute to the radical physical transformation of humanity and the freeing from the racial straitjacket was something I hoped would happen. I can see that in your case that isn't true.'

'I'm no longer with the police.'

'In your mind and deepest psyche, you are.' More specifically the Liverpool police force that then existed. They've changed; you haven't.'

'Well, I guess, when the Human Rights thing came in, I left the force. It wasn't what it was.'

'Exactly. You wanted an official racist body to rough up those not in British norms and, when that ceased to exist, you bunked off.'

'I - look what about all those blacks who do in whites? I saw that year in year out. It's why I joined the police.'

'Racism versus racism only fans the flames. The same flames that have left Granby Street and Cawdor Street in ruins even to this day.

The flames that leave scars on the souls of the participants long after the reason for them have ceased to exist.

This applies just as much if not more so in these days of unfixed physical forms and settlement of near space.'

John attempted to come around the table.

Sandra went round the far corner.

'All I wanted was to socialise,' John said.

'Well, until this came up. I'm the black girl you coshed.'

Hate etched John's face. 'You're a tease!' He leaped.

The unmoving large pale orange - yellow sun of Gliese 581d, forever fixed in its dark blue sky, etched sharp shadows on the light blue and black face of Sandra, as she walked briskly along the pontoon.

Ivone M. Fitzgerald

Kiki and the Magic Tree

(For Sophie)

Way up high in the mountains, as far away as the eye could see, the grey road disappeared and the land touched the sky. The wind was so strong it blew the trees sideways. This made strange patterns across the landscape that mingled with the giant, yellow flowers that grew there. This was a beautiful place. In summer, the sun shone for hours on end. In winter, the clouds looked like they had fallen and lost their way. While a cold, swirling mist would sweep right through the hills and wrap itself around the small village of Aphri.

The mist swooped around ragged, grey rocks; it lifted over the mountain spring; it even tickled the tiny, white church and, finally, drifted down to a very special place. Here a strange sound echoed through the hills, like a squeaky gate singing. What was it? What was it? 'Heehaw Heehaw, Heh errrrr ahhhhhj.' The noise seemed to carry through the wind, singing and humming. Again, 'Heehaw heehhhhhhhhaaaa ehhhhhhhhaaaw, mmmmm.' The noise got louder. Was it the rocks creaking? Was it an old gate squeaking? What was this strange sound? 'Heehaw.' No, it wasn't a gate. In fact, this sound was coming from something much nicer, it was Mr Ned, a singing donkey! Yes, often he sang. He had worked next door to a singer, an opera singer, and how he loved to sing his heart out and then hear the echo in the mountains come back to him.

Sometimes, he would even do a sort of a yodel! Yes a yodel. Mr Ned would throw back his head, show his teeth, his tongue would roll and, believe it or not, a yodel would come. 'Yogeleeeee, yogeleeeee, yogeleeeeeeee, mmmmmmmmm.

Mr Ned lived with two other donkeys, Kiki and Nicolas. Now Nicolas was a golden brown, soft eared donkey, with the most beautiful eyes that melted your heart. His fur was different shades of brown but it was patchy from the hot sun. Nicolas often had an itch, so he was always trying to find the best scratching post to relieve it. In the very same stable was a smaller donkey, dark, rich brown and white in colour. She had the smallest of noses and deep, thoughtful, bright eyes that twinkled in the light. Her legs were a funny shape as she had worked hard up in the steepest mountains but, when she smiled, the whole world lit up. She was a very special donkey and her name was Kiki.

The sun was so very hot that day. Mr Ned wore a veil to keep the flies from biting his face. Mr Ned had a lovely, grey coat and a long, floppy, wild mane that soon got very tangled.

Also, he had very large teeth, as most donkeys do, and every time he sang, he flashed them for the world to see. He certainly was in full voice that day. He was singing to Kiki to come out of the stable.

'Come out Kiki, Hehhhaw haaaa Kikeeeee Kikeee. Come out.'

'Okay, Okay, I'm coming, I'm coming,' she said, shaking her head. She slowly walked out of the stable. She looked up and saw Nicolas scratching himself on a nearby rock.

'Oh, that's good,' he said.

Kiki walked farther and looked up at the sun and sighed. 'Ah, it's so hot today. It's burning my nose already.' Nicholas continued rubbing his side on a nearby rock. 'Ah, just put your nose in the shade,' he said.

'But,' said Kiki, 'there is no shade, only in my stable and my poor nose is swollen. I look like that reindeer, Rudolph.'

Mr Ned burst out laughing, 'Eh, eh, eh.'

Kiki's nostrils flared, 'Well, I do,' but, then, she too began to laugh. 'Haha, eh eh!' Her head shook as she giggled. 'Oh, I do wish I had a tree to shade beneath,' she said. She looked very thoughtful. 'Do you know? What I'd wish for is a tree right here.' She pointed with her hoof. 'So the branches would sway in the breeze and I could be cool beneath the leaves.' Her eyes shone as she imagined the tree.

'I once heard a human say, that if you wish when there is a new moon in the sky, then your wish will come true,' said Mr Ned.

'Really?' said Kiki, looking very thoughtful and screwing her little nose up.

'Yes,' said Mr Ned, flicking his veil.

'I heard that, too,' said Nicolas, who was trying to catch a fly with his tongue but, unsuccessful.

'Oh,' said Kiki, 'I may try it.' She felt excited and was very deep in thought as she plodded down the field to get a drink from the trough. She thought very hard. Wouldn't it be wonderful if we had a tree?? We could watch the birds in it and we could all shelter from the sun, and even the rain, and we could have good chats underneath. Ah, how nice it would be!

So, that very night, Kiki looked out through the gaps in the stable. The sky was a beautiful, midnight blue and the moon was round, a full moon. Every night she looked out to the sky to check the moon. Ah, how long does it take? she thought. But the moon, very slowly, began to shrink each night. So, every night, she peered through the gaps again, and

again, sighing, 'Ah.' But, just when she was about to give up, she looked up and saw a tiny, thin, slice of silver moon. Oh, this must be it! A new moon at last! So then, Kiki began to concentrate really, really hard. and stared at the moon. For a long, long time she wished and wished for a shady tree to shelter herself and her friends from the sun. Then she fell into a deep, dreamy sleep, her eyelashes flickering as she slept.

Kiki awoke to a tapping noise on her roof. Tap tap, tap tap, tap tap. She yawned, wide, showing her teeth and she walked outside to see what was going on. Forgetting her wish the night before, she prepared her eyes for the bright sun. She blinked and blinked again and couldn't believe her eyes! She saw a tree, a tree right next to the stable. A wonderful, green tree with leaves so soft and light that they danced in the breeze. Ah, and a brown trunk for Nicolas to scratch upon!

'Ah,' she shouted. 'Nicolas, Mr Ned, come look, look we have a tree! We have a tree!' She began to dance around it. 'Yippee! Ylpee! We have a tree.' She darted underneath it and began to sing, 'We have a tree, we have a tree, no more burny nose for me. We have a treeeeeh,'

Mr Ned ran out and burst into song. 'Heh haaaawww, a tree for you, a tree for me. Hehhhaw heehaw, a tree for you, a tree for me mmmmmmmmm. He always ended with an Mmmmmmmmm. He did love to show off his talent.

'What's all the fuss about?' shouted Nicolas, as he, slowly, came down the hill, stopping to rub his back on a rock. Then he saw the tree. He rubbed his back again. 'Oh, lovely. Oh, my, look, look at it. It looks like a magic tree.' He came close and sniffed it. 'Ah, it smells good too.' Then he rubbed his side on the branches. 'That'll do me just fine,' he said, smiling.

Kiki laughed, still dancing around the tree, her mane blowing back from her face.

"It'll do,' she said. 'It will certainly do.' She put her head under the leaves and kissed them.

'Thank you,' she whispered. 'You are a magic tree, thank you.' She was sure that the tree whispered back.

'It's my pleasure Kiki.' For this tree was a very special tree indeed.

Suzi Hithersay

Incident on a Bridge

The pathway hadn't changed very much over the years. There was still the section of hard standing that separated it from the main road but this was, mostly, obscured now by overgrown weeds so that its *limestone* ballast surface was barely as visible as it had been when it was laid years ago to support haulage vehicles. But that had been at a time when the old, iron forge had been in operation; when its manufacturing was at its height; when there had been a regular and frequent transporting of metal products from the works. There were still dilapidated remnants of the brick based buildings forming regular, angular patterns among the weeds and sapling trees that were, in silent deliberation, slowly establishing themselves. A number of remaining crooked, rusting, steel supports reared up above the greying grasses in the autumn mist, like a forlorn testimony to the area's once industrious past. The footpath from the main road had been constructed of now rotting, railway, sleeper edgings back filled with ashes from a nearby, also gone, coke plant. Wilson was surprised to find that the footpath was, because it had been partly and,, occasionally used, still relatively easy to negotiate through the tangle of yellowing brambles and purple tainted Elder trees down toward the bridge over the railway line. He hadn't been down here in years, not since he used to,, regularly walk his mother's dog but the area was still so familiar to him that he knew, almost by instinct, every bend and fluctuation in the path's surface. Since the dog had gone, and his mother for that matter, he had not had reason to come down here but now, on this damp, misty morning, he was here for a specific purpose. He wasn't going far but, certainly, he had no intention of going back to that empty house, lonely and quiet now that his wife had gone; gone sometime now; gone long before he had come out of prison.

The railway bridge was not too far down the path, he remembered, so that,, in a few minutes, he came to the crumbling, brick built buttress that abutted, at an angle, the bridge itself. As he moved around the buttress he came into view of the, bridge with its riveted, paint flaked, rusting, steel plates running down either side of it. The parallel walls had been constructed in a way that,, because of their height, it was not possible see the branch line of the railway that still operated below, without scrambling on to the top of either of them to look over.

He stopped suddenly. There was a man sitting halfway along on the broad parapet looking, intently, down at the mist dampened track below him. He was leaning forward slightly with his hands loosely gripping the metalwork on either side of his body, so that his

upper part was out at an angle from the vertical steel walls and his feet dangled, unsupported, over the rails twenty feet or more below.

He must have heard Wilson as he had approached because, without altering his intense gaze, he was obviously aware of his presence. He said menacingly, 'Don't come any nearer'. Wilson stayed where he was.

'I don't intend to, if that's what you want,' he told him.

'Yeah? Well just carry on to where you're going or go back the way you came. This has nothing to do with you.' The stranger's knuckles whitened as, involuntarily, he tightened his grip on the cold steel. 'Just keep going.'

Wilson stood still, by now having made an assumption about what was happening and, having never come across this situation, was not sure what to do.

'You been here long?' he asked, for no reason other than it was the first thought that came to him.

'I don't know. Why should I know how long I've been here? You heard what I said, just go. Leave me alone'.

But Wilson had already assessed the seriousness of the situation and decided that he was not going to go anywhere, whatever the outcome of this strange encounter. Casually, he put his hands into his jacket pockets then moved slightly sideways to lean, as nonchalantly as possible, against the rivet studded metal.

'Perhaps I don't have anywhere to go. Has that occurred to you?'

The man turned his head slightly toward Wilson, glanced at him, then sneered, sarcastically. 'Everybody's got somewhere to go,' he answered.

'It doesn't look as if you have,' Wilson forced a smile back. There was a pause and the man turned his face away to look back at the track. Wilson waited a minute then asked, 'What's your name, anyway?'

'What's it matter to you what my name is?'

'Well, I figured that if we're going to talk to each other, I thought it might be just a courtesy.'

'What makes you think that we're going to be talking to each other?' Wilson didn't answer but, instead, shuffled surreptitiously closer to the stranger. Near enough, he guessed, so as to make a quick move to drag the man off the parapet when he could. The man stared again at the line below. Neither of them said anything for what seemed like a long time.

'This won't solve whatever your problems are, you know that, don't you? Whatever you think, however bad you feel, you know, there's going to be somebody worse off than you are.' Wilson stood up straight. 'What do you think this is going to prove anyway?'

Without saying a word, the stranger, suddenly, swung his legs over the parapet and dropped down onto the ground to face Wilson.

'Yeah, don't worry, you're right', he said. 'I've been sitting up there a long time, thinking, and that's exactly the conclusion I've come to - it's not going to prove anything to anybody, is it?' He shook his head. 'And, you're right, it's just not worth it. It won't prove a thing'. Surprised, but secretly pleased, by this sudden turn of events Wilson put out his hand, smiling at the man. They shook hands.

'Well done.' Wilson patted the man on the shoulder.

'Look.' The man hesitated, 'I've got to go,' and then he turned and began to walk back up the path.

'Mind if I walk a little way with you?' Wilson asked the quickly retreating figure.

There was no audible reply, just a slight, indifferent shrug of the shoulders. Wilson caught up with him and they walked up the path together in silence, toward the main road at the top of the steep climb. The autumn mist had by now, gradually, developed into a fine drizzle, leaving a coating of beaded moisture over everything. Wilson pulled the collar of his coat up and held it tight together across his neck against the penetrating damp. Neither of them spoke until they reached the area of hard standing at the beginning of the ash path. They stopped by the roadside.

'I'll be okay. I can get a bus from here.' the man nodded toward a bus stop a little way up on the other side of the road. 'You? What about you?'

'I'm just going to carry on where I left off,' Wilson answered, gesturing in the direction that they had walked. 'Just taking a stroll over old ground. Not going far.'

'Not a good day for walking.' The stranger looked up at the opaque sky. 'Going to rain later, I reckon.' Then, giving a brief wave, he set off, quickly, in the direction of the bus stop. 'See you around,' he called back.

Wilson nodded. 'Possibly, but I doubt it', he said, almost to himself. And he stood motionless to watch the stranger head for the bus stop, where he waited until the bus arrived to pick up its solitary passenger. After the bus had gone, into the mist, Wilson turned to resume his slow progress down the overgrown path.

What if it did rain? He carried on to where he had intended to go before he had

come across the stranger on the parapet of the old, steel ,railway bridge. When, again, he reached the weathered, brick buttress he stopped to look back up the path but he knew that the man had gone now and wouldn't be coming back. It was unlikely, too, that on this cold, damp and miserable morning there would be anyone else around either. He leaned again against the steel of the bridge watching the fine rain forming rivulets down the cold steel while reflecting about what he had said to the unfortunate stranger, that what he had intended wouldn't solve whatever problems he had, that what he intended wouldn't prove anything either, or make any difference to anyone and, however bad things seemed, there would always be somebody else worse off than he was. But, before Wilson had met him and, despite their brief conversation, the stranger had already decided the outcome of his previous intention without outside interference or advice from anybody else.

As he stood in contemplation, Wilson heard, some way off, the faint, diesel rumblings of a goods train, labouring along the track below. He shook his head.

'Always somebody worse off?' he said to himself, assessing the distance of the nearing train. 'Maybe, but that's their problem. I'm not somebody else', he whispered, then, as the train approached, he heaved himself onto the parapet.

David E. Sotheran

Satanic Retribution

When he got to sixty nine years old, Eric Melior eased himself into a semi-upright position in his hospice bed, coughed the remnants of his cancerous lungs onto his chest, then lay back on the blood spattered pillows to die. It might have been a lifetime of Capstan Full Strength, with their extra tar content, or his younger years working at Heaton's Bath Works that had filled his lungs with poisonous substances until his body could no longer cope. It might well have been a combination of both. Either of them, individually, would, ultimately, have solicited the same finality, but the concentrated, obnoxious cocktail of industrial filth and tobacco worked diligently in tandem to secure the fate of Eric Melior's health.

The black powder that he had, for years, expertly ground from the rough edges of the cast iron that formed Heaton's baths, daily covered him and his fellow workers with a fine dust that was difficult to clean off and virtually impossible to clear from the mouth, throat and bronchial tubes however much coughing and spitting was applied, so that, from his mid- twenties he developed the consistent, laboured wheezing, that was his breathing, which persisted growing progressively worse, for the rest of his life. Development of polymer baths, eventually, sealed the fate of production at Heaton's foundry, whose taciturn management refused to embrace the changes of the times, so that the company, ultimately, suffered financial degradation until it was forced into liquidation and inevitable ignominy. In the aftermath, health wise, Eric was never able to secure another long-term employment position, forcing him to live the rest of his life on social and sickness benefits.

The night nurses cleaned his corpse, tugged the bed sheets over his face then, quietly, pulled the long, plastic curtains around his bed to protect his dignity until the porter came to ease him onto a trolley then wheel him, as silently as possible so as not to agitate the forlorn thoughts of other patients, along the black and white, tiled corridor to the furthest part of the building where he was left in the mortuary while the senior staff informed and sought instructions from his nearest family.

His eldest sister, Marjory, had the obligation of dealing with the unpalatable but necessary task of making arrangements for his funeral and the disposal of his effects from the house that he had shared with his mother until her death some years before. The same eldest sister who, as a small girl, had come home all those years ago to find him sitting on a stool in front of the Yorkshire range in the kitchen gloomily peering into the flames and, spasmodically, sobbing to himself. Standing at the kitchen table his mother, pounding and

kneading with her fat fists, a large consistency of bread dough in an earthenware puncheon, informed the girl on her query, 'He knows what he's done, and he'll be punished for it.' But the girl didn't know and persisted. 'Tell her what you've done,' the woman said to the boy. He shook his head in reply.

'Well, I'll tell her then.' She broke off pieces of dough and settled them into individual bread tins. 'He's only gone and killed the cat and he'll be punished. Oh, he'll be punished, all right. The Devil will see to that!' Marjory's eyes glanced down to the hearth to see, laid on a spread out newspaper, pockmarked with brown, ash burns, the cat, its head held by bloody strings of lacerated flesh and persistent sinews, almost separated from its body.

The girl knelt to look into the boy's face, at the amber glow of the fire reflecting on his glasses. 'Whatever have you done?' she asked him, softly.

Without deviating from the concentration of her domestic activity their mother answered for him. 'You can see what he's done. He's gone and chopped its head off with the meat cleaver, that's what he's gone and done. Chopped its head off! And he's going to sit there and look at it all day.'

The girl put an affectionate arm around her little brother's shuddering shoulder. 'Oh, Eric,' she asked, softly, 'whatever have you done that for?'

He put his head against his sister, lifted up a hand with a loosely tied, blood stained handkerchief wrapped around it, 'It scratched me,' he whispered.

Occasionally, and usually, on Sundays, Blind Uncle Norman invited himself to tea bringing family news from his pit village, two bus rides away. And, after, he would sit in the gloomy sitting room at the console of the ancient Dominion parlour organ, enthusiastically, but awkwardly, pumping the carpet covered pedals with his club-foot to coax a selection of once popular tunes from the instrument's recalcitrant reeds. In the fading evening light the family sat around the fireplace singing to the instruments mournful sounds that hung around the house like a tactile presence. But young Eric, despite enthusiastic encouragement from the family congregation, didn't sing on these occasions. Instead, invariably, he squatted on the floor close to Blind Uncle Norman's rhythmically, pulsing knees, watching intently as the old man's spindly, blue veined, skeletal fingers roamed expertly along the ebony and ivory keyboard, pushing and pulling necessary stops to execute changes in key and a multitude of instrumental sounds. It was in this habitual fashion that Eric learned the technique of mastering the mysterious controls of the

instrument's abilities so that he was able to implement his knowledge by practicing, on his own, until he was capable of playing, mostly by ear, any number of tunes. After Blind Uncle Norman had passed away, Eric was reluctantly relegated as accompanist at the regular family Sunday soirees that persisted, for many years, until their welcome demise when old Mrs Melior died.

Eric never married but there had been brief courtship with an Irish girl, Mavis Tasker, who, for a time, worked in a local greengrocer's shop where he made occasional forays to purchase items, clutching the shopping list that his mother had scribbled out in her tentative, uneducated, hand writing. The two youngsters shared great amusement while attempting to decipher any logic in the random attempts at phonetic spelling that made up the hap-hazard words of Mrs Melior's laboriously produced, spidery handwriting. Their relationship developed so that, contrary to Mrs Melior's approval, Mavis would become a frequent visitor to the house where, in the oppressive sitting room, Eric entertained the girl with his self-taught musical prowess by playing selections of the latest popular songs. However, Mrs Melior's archaic, inbred suspicion of who she looked upon as 'foreigners' soon terminated the rendezvous, dogmatically insisting to Eric and his sisters that 'No good ever came of associating with Irish gypsies,' so that, after a short time, she refused to let the innocent girl into the house despite pleas on Eric's behalf from her family. Dejected and forlorn, Eric, as always adhered to his mothers' wishes, and, as clandestine assignations were never considered, stoically he suffered the heartfelt effects of his unfortunate circumstances without complaint. Sometime after, he learned from his visits to the grocer's shop that Mavis had, in her confused melancholy, left to return to her native country and to be with her own family so that she and Eric never saw each other again.

These fleeting reminiscences occupied Eric Melior's thoughts as he lay in his hospice bed studying the vague opacity of the overhead night light until a sudden and severe pain terminated his reverie. Gasping with Herculean effort he eased himself into a semi-upright position and, before he coughed, he remembered his mother's grim prediction that 'The Devil will see to that!' as he looked down at the four long, fine, scars on the back of his hand.

David E. Sotheran

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Thirteen

Extract from a novel. Eric and Duncan have just escaped from a work gang in Spain. Their friend, Pete, a Geordie, was with them but their captors caught up with them and murdered him. They have escaped again but Duncan is in a bad way emotionally.

Eric had to let Duncan sit on a low wall behind what he guessed to be a small bar. Steel kegs were scattered about with bright red and yellow plastic crates holding empty beer bottles. Duncan couldn't seem to get a hold on himself.

'I'm sorry, I don't know what the fuck's wrong with me. Cryin' like a bairn.'

Eric had his hand on the Scot's shoulder. 'It's shock. It's perfectly normal.'

'So why aren't you in a state, posh boy?' Duncan sniffed. 'Sorry, I promised not to call you that.'

'It's okay. To be honest, I was starting to miss it.'

'No, it's not okay. I was only doing it to aggravate you and now I owe you.'

'You don't owe me anything, Duncan.'

'You got me out of that prison and you saved me from drowning. I owe you for that. Though, to be honest, I think I'd rather have gone under the water. After what just happened to Geordie, I don't know, it doesn't seem right to carry on now.'

Duncan dropped his head as his shoulders started to hitch up and down. Eric pulled the big man in close to him. He hadn't a clue what to say. He was as shocked as Duncan by what had just happened but that was no reason to give up. Eric felt like fighting now, not lying down. How could he get Duncan to feel the same way?

The sun was just starting to lift off the horizon and more heat was beginning to fill the day. Eric was starving. They had to start making decisions but Duncan's state was a massive problem. He glanced up and down the street. There were a few people emerging out of the buildings but no-one showed any interest in the two soaking scruffs sitting together. Nevertheless, he felt exposed, especially with the level of emotion Duncan was showing. They might not be attracting attention now but they soon would be. He grabbed the big guy's hand. 'Come on. We need to move away from here. Find somewhere more comfortable.'

Duncan resisted slightly but then got to his feet. He shuffled at the side of Eric like an old man, mumbling about how he didn't understand anything anymore.

At the end of the road they turned left and walked past a few bars and shops. All

shuttered up for now but with chairs and tables stacked outside or just inside the windows, ready for the new day. About fifty yards along there was a break in the buildings where a small, ornamental garden could be entered beneath an old iron archway. Eric led Duncan inside and steered him towards one of the benches that were placed around the perimeter. He chose a seat over on the left where it was lit warmly by the early sun.

He guessed it was some kind of memorial garden or something. It was very peaceful, very tranquil. The sun was getting higher and the traffic noise was increasing. Even so, within the confines of that small space, Eric felt protected from it all. Their own little private retreat.

‘Sit down here for a while. We need to get food and drink but we need to get you straight first. We’ll just attract attention if you’re like this. It wouldn’t hurt to try and dry out a bit, either.’

Duncan eased himself onto the bench, his shoulders not yet quite still. ‘I don’t think I could eat a thing. I feel fuckin’ sick.’

‘It’ll pass. Take deep breaths and try to think of something else.’

Duncan’s head snapped around. ‘Think o’ something else? Did you see what they did to the poor fucker. He was burning alive...’ Duncan’s voice cracked. He put his head in his hands. ‘Burning alive. Who - the - fuck - would - do - that?’

‘There are bad people everywhere.’

‘Bad people? They’re not bad people, Eric. They’re fuckin’ evil. What did Geordie ever do to deserve that?’

Eric sat on a bench to the left of the one Duncan was on and watched him carefully. He worried that Duncan’s anger would take over when the shock passed. He wasn’t at all stable. The last thing they needed was an angry Scot marauding around the town. Everything was looking so good when they climbed into that boat. Well, everything except Pete’s face. But that would have healed, eventually. He’d have been as ugly as chuff, obviously, but Pete wouldn’t have minded that. He would probably have been proud of the scars.

Duncan was still crying. He’d started to rock slowly backwards and forwards. ‘Duncan, sit back and try to relax. Breathe like I told you.’

Duncan mumbled into his hands.

‘What?’

He mumbled again. Eric couldn't tell what he was saying. He stood up and walked over, stooped down and put his hand on the Scot's shoulder again. There was a high frequency tremor running through his body. 'Can't hear what you're saying, buddy.'

Duncan looked up. His face was red and puffy. His eyes didn't look right, sort of unfocused. 'No point, Eric.'

'What do you mean, no point? What are you on about? No point in what?'

'No point in anything. No reason to carry on. I think I'm just going to lie down now.'

'No! Duncan, come on, man.'

'No point. Just no point.'

Duncan pulled his feet up from the ground and let his body sag to the right. He put his left arm across his face and lay still.

'Duncan!'

Eric reached out to touch him but didn't dare. He felt panic rising in his own body then. How the hell were they going to survive like this? Thinking that Pete would be a burden was already too much guilt to deal with but the idea of leaving the Scot on his own was appalling. A high-pitched, buzzing noise started in Eric's head. He began to feel disoriented and afraid. The temperature dropped significantly. The traffic noise became muffled and the light began to intensify. Eric staggered back to his own bench and sat down, worried that he was about to either pass out or have a stroke. The light got brighter and brighter and the sounds all around him became quieter and quieter. The buzzing increased and his heart started pounding. He closed his eyes and put his hands to his ears then suddenly the sound stopped. The light was still blinding but the noise had gone. He took his hands away from his ears and looked across at Duncan. He could see the rise and fall of his body as he breathed but there was no other sound. The whole scene was overexposed. The light was beginning to hurt his eyes. He put his head down and squeezed his eyes shut.

'How are you doing, Eric?'

Familiar.

'How are you? How are you doing?'

Eric raised his head and opened his eyes. There, sitting on a bench at the top of the garden, was his father.

'Dad?'

'Yup.'

'But... you're...'

'Dead?'

'Well, yeah.'

His dad laughed. Put both hands on his knees and leaned forwards. 'It's all about perspective, Eric.'

'And yours is?'

'Well... omniscient, I suppose.'

They looked at each other without speaking for several seconds. His dad was dressed in the same cut-off jeans and lumberjack shirt that Eric wore but they were faded. Washed out. Maybe by the light. He was smiling. Eric felt no fear at all.

'Is this... is this real?'

'What do you think, Eric?'

'Well, it can't be. You died nearly ten years ago. You can't be sitting there. It's impossible.'

'Then I'm not.'

'But, I can see you... and hear...'

'Like I said, son, it's all about perspective.'

Eric stared, convinced that something serious had gone wrong in his head.

'Why... why are you here?'

His dad leaned back on the bench, still smiling. 'I've been worried about you, Eric.'

'Yeah?'

'Yeah. I know things haven't been great. You've had a lot to deal with and I know it wasn't so long ago that you were pretty much in the same state as your Scotch friend there.' He nodded towards Duncan. 'But you came through. Not unscathed, of course. No-one survives anything unscathed. But you survived it. It's just that you've made a few poor decisions recently and found yourself in this situation.'

'I... I... I know. I don't know how...'

His dad leaned forwards again. 'I just want to tell you, Eric, that this is not nearly as bad as what you went through with Margaret. Not even close. You can deal with this, and so can your friend here. You just have to believe in yourself and keep going. No giving up. Giving up's for losers and my son was never a loser.'

'But I don't know what to do.'

'You do whatever it is you need to do.'

'But I don't know what I need to do.'

'Yes, you do. You just don't want to think about it. Look, I can't stay. I have to leave...'

'No! I mean, just wait a little while. Maybe you could help me talk to Duncan.'

His dad was shaking his head. 'You know that's not possible, Eric. None of this is possible.'

'But...'

'No buts, son.' His dad stood up. 'I just wanted to let you know that if you just keep moving, just keep making decisions and acting on them, that you'll come out of this. Both of you.'

'But... Pete, he was...'

'Pete was a tragedy. And Pete was never going to get through this. You know that. You've known that all along. But don't let his fate affect you. You have to be strong. Be strong for yourself and be strong for your friend and everything will work out.' His dad started walking across the garden towards the iron archway.

'Where are you going?'

His dad turned and looked at him. 'I'm going away, Eric. I have to.' He started walking again towards the archway. Just before he went through he stopped again, turned and faced Eric once more. He'd lost the smile and had now become a little sad. His shoulders slumped. 'You have your mother's eyes, Eric.' He walked through the archway without looking back.

As soon as he'd gone the street noise started to increase and the intensity of light began to reduce. Eric felt a mixture of elation and confusion. What the hell had just happened? He felt the heat of the sun on his arm. There were voices somewhere nearby. Eric rubbed his face with his hands. Ran his fingers through his hair. His stomach rumbled. The day slowly became normal again. A couple were sitting on a bench across the way, chatting, sharing a bottle of water and some bread. Eric looked to his left. Duncan was sitting upright. He, too, was pushing his fingers through his red, wiry hair. He stopped, turned to face Eric. His features crumpled into something between a grimace and a smile.

'I've been a bit of a wee shite, haven't I?'

Eric got up and moved across to his friend's bench. 'You've been fine.'

'No, I haven't. Don't lie to me, Eric. It must have been like dragging a spoiled wee bairn around.'

'You were upset.'

'Ah'm still fuckin' upset. That doesn't mean I haven't been a royal pain in the arse.'

'Friends have to stick together.'

Duncan raised an eyebrow. 'Friends?'

'Aye,' Eric said, in his best attempt at a Scottish accent.

Duncan laughed. 'No had a friend before. Not since I was wee, anyway.'

'I'm sure you have.'

'No, I'd have remembered. Friends, eh?'

'Yes, friends. There are some things we need to do, Duncan. We need to eat and we need water and then we need to get ourselves organised.'

'I've not been organised since my ma stopped wiping my bum.'

'Well, that's what I'm here for.'

Duncan turned so that he could see Eric better. He frowned slightly. 'Are you alright?'

'What do you mean?'

'I don't know.'

Eric raised his eyebrows.

Duncan waved his hands at Eric. 'Ach, it's probably nothing. So, do we have a plan?'

Eric looked towards the entrance to the garden. 'I'm working on my perspective, that's all.'

'Thought that was what they made visors out of.'

'That's perspex, you fool.'

Duncan laughed. Long and loud. He dropped his hand onto Eric's shoulder. 'I certainly am that. Just an old fool. But I'll try not to be from now on.' He breathed slowly out of his nose. Stared down at his feet and then up again into Eric's eyes. 'I still feel shite, you know? And I think I could still just give up. I'm not sure that I want to live in a world where people set fire to each other. But I know how hard you've worked to get us here and I thank you for that, Eric.' Duncan looked across to his left. 'Thank you for

helping me out there.'

Eric smiled. 'That's okay, Duncan. It's what friends do. Now come on. We've stuff to deal with and I haven't the faintest idea where to start. We need food, money and we need to decide what we're going to do about that fat bastard.'

They walked together through the iron archway.

'Do you think there is anything we can do?' said Duncan.

'I sincerely hope so. And if not, I'm happy to die trying.'

Bob Lockett