

Life

10 Slices from the Cutting Edge

Can you have your cake and eat it?



by members of Llandovery Writers Group 2017

Pete Barker, Kathy Biggs, Ciaran O'Connell
Julian Dutton, Sara Fox, Jacquie Hyde
Mari Mitchell, Stella Starnes
Mary Thurgate and Mike Tomlin

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A selection of writing from authors in north-east Carmarthenshire

Jacquie Hyde, Julian Dutton, Mari Mitchell, Ciaran O'Connell, Stella Starnes,
Sara Fox, Peter Barker, Mary Thurgate, Kathy Biggs, Mike Tomlin

Edited by David Thorpe

Llandovery, Carmarthenshire, Wales

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Introduction: Life, The Universe... and Llandovery

These highly varied pieces are the work of ten out of many more students who have been coming to the **Writing for Fun and Profit** course since September 2016. Some have attended continuously and a few have jumped on board nearer the end.

They illustrate a wide range of imagination and genre.

Several are aimed at children: Jacqui Hyde's *Trials* follows the path of a boy from a Welsh hill farm wanting to be a footballer. If you've ever wondered what diarist Samuel Pepys might have got up to in the Civil War as a child, then you might get a clue from Julian Dutton's amusing, eponymous novel extract. And *Primrose* by Stella Starnes gets inside the head of a young teenager growing up in a local village under the thumb of her mother.

Two are in the genre of speculative fiction: Mike Tomlin's *Guardian* is from an ongoing published ebook series about the discovery of a hidden alien presence in our midst, while Pete Barker's *Share & Enjoy* tracks a small band of rebels in a dystopian future and is the opening of a completed novel. If you enjoy a sardonic take on life, there is nothing better in this collection than Mari Mitchell's *A Dish Best Eaten Cold*, an opening to a short story.

Four short stories are of the classic type where an unexpected twist at the end throws the whole story into a lovely new perspective: Ciaran O'Connell's *The Rose Blossom*, about a misunderstanding on holiday, *Henry's Story* by Mary Thurgate, in which a chance, trivial event has life-changing consequences, and *Assistance* by Kathy Biggs, on the theme of 'what goes around, comes around'. In *The Cunning Man's Last Day* by historian Sara Fox, a fortune teller from the upper Tywi valley in the last century seeks to escape the fate he has seen for himself.

The writing course

The writing course itself is designed to create a safe space for writers to learn about aspects of story-telling, the creation of believable characters, of a good plot and realistic dialogue, and, above all, how to make readers care and want to read on and on... Students are encouraged to offer kind, constructive criticism to each other. Each lesson studies a particular aspect, with practical exercises, often aimed at helping students create a long work, be it a short story, novel, or script. They also learn about the publishing industry, agents and marketing their work.

A new course starts for new students next September from Wednesday 13 September from 2-4pm in the afternoons in the YMCA on Market Square, Llandovery. The existing evening course will continue at 7pm on the same date and new members are welcome to join that too, but will have to catch up a bit faster with the modules! Or, you can take the course online and also find out more at this web page: <http://davidthorpe.info/online-writing-course/> or call 07901 925671.

Further copies of this collection can be downloaded at <http://davidthorpe.info/life.pdf>

May the muse be with you!

David Thorpe, July 2017, Course Tutor

www.davidthorpe.info

Trials

Excerpt from a Young Adult Novel by Jacquie Hyde

Oh God, Dad's lost it again. Why is it every time I have a big match away from home Dad can never find the ground? Some of the other kids' parents have a satnav. But not mine. We always end up having a row. All three of us. Then Dad boils up, drives like a maniac. Mam gets upset and I sit in the back feeling sick. It's the last thing you need before a big match. Believe me.

I jump out the Land Rover. My stomach's doing somersaults and my legs feel shaky like I've run a marathon. I open the boot for my bag.

'Here you go son, drink this. It'll make you feel better.' Dad hands me a bottle of juice. I take a slurp. 'There's plenty of time to warm up. Look, there's Aidan by the changing rooms. Good luck son. No pressure eh? Just enjoy the match.' He pats me on the back. 'Score a hat-trick and get us through to the final. OK?'

'Cheers Dad. Hat-trick? Hmm..' That's my Dad for you, he's ranting and raving one minute, totally stressed out, then as soon as everything's sorted he calms down. I know what he'll do now. He'll get the flask out, make Mam a cup of tea, say sorry for upsetting her and it'll be forgotten until the next time. I throw my bag over my shoulder, Mam's still in the car, face scarlet from arguing with Dad, I smile, wave and pick my way over the pot holes to the wooden shack changing room.

Parents, who'd have them? I'm supposed to be the one with hormones all over the place. I'm supposed to be the one with mood swings. Huh. I haven't got time. I've got a cup semi-final to play.

It's half time and we're 1-0 down. We huddle together on the damp turf. Beads of sweat roll down my back. I've slogged my guts out but not managed to put a shot in yet. Twice I've set Ade up and twice that bloody right back has taken him out. The rain's eased off a bit, it's more like a drizzle, a fine mist and I'm glad, it's refreshing. I slurp from my bottle, wipe the dribble from the corners of my mouth with the back of my hand. I need a breather but I'm not tired.

Drysllyn haven't got our skill, there're bigger, stronger, slower, and they play hard. That's their tactics. That's the way they win.

Gazza the gaffer paces up and down in front of us. 'Put the pressure on. Keep the ball on the ground. Quicken the pace.' He fires his orders as his long legs step out three huge strides, he spins round, and strides back again. Backwards and forwards, backwards and forwards. His jaw's set, his hands clenched into a fist. 'Jimmy, you move up to support Sam and Ade. Get it to their feet. No panicking, no booting it in the air. I want pace, control and quick feet.' Jimmy nods.

The ref walks out onto the pitch. We leap up. 'Come on boys, we've got this game in the bag. Show 'em what you're made of,' Gazza calls as he marches over to the bench.

I run into the middle of the pitch to take the kick-off. Drysllyn's centre-forward glares at me but I'm not bothered. He towers over me but he can't play footy. He's crap.

The ref blows his whistle and we're off. I tap the ball out to Jimmy on the right and run into a gap. I'm not marked. Quick, Jim. I stand there, splay my arms out, palms upwards. Jimmy sees me. I already know that I've got two passes on as the left-back closes me down. I pass to Joe, he passes to Ade, I run into the box and Ade pounds the ball to me. It bobbles but I manage to control it. I turn, strike and it flies into the top left-hand corner of the net. 'Get in!' I leap and thump the air with my fist.

I run to Ade, pat him on the back, 'Cheers mate. Great pass.' Jimmy, Joe, and Mark join in. I get mobbed. We put our arms round each other as we jump up and down. I feel like a kettle boiling over, bubbling with excitement.

'Well done boys! Excellent football. Keep the pressure on now. Focus. Don't lose it.' Gazza yells from the side-line. Mam and Dad are beaming. Dad gives a thumbs-up as I take my position for the kick-off again.

Their centre-back looks evil. As if he wants to flatten me. They kick off and I sprint up the pitch. Coppsy brings the ball down on his chest and we take control again. We're full of confidence now. I can hear Drysllyn's manager shouting and cursing. Is he screaming at us or his own players? Don't care. *Focus, Brooksy, concentrate.*

'Arghh. Watch it!' The defender that's marking me fouls me off the ball, stamping on my right foot. Pain shoots up my leg, my crushed toes go numb. I give him a filthy look. 'Yer wanna play dirty do yer mate?' I weave, leap to the left, then the right, then left again. He's a great big lout with tree-trunk legs. I lose him easily and run into the box.

The ball flies through the air from the right-hand side of the box and everyone leaps up for it. The goalie's off his line. I use the centre-back's feet as a spring-board and catapult

into the air. I'm springing up... up. I reach for his shoulders, thrust myself higher and drive his body towards the ground to stop him from jumping. I flex the muscles in my neck, twist my head to the left. Whack! A pounding force vibrates through my skull as I hammer the ball towards the net.

I'm falling and the ground crunches into me with what feels like half the team on top.

There's bodies everywhere. Arms, legs, elbows. Crack! I get a knee in my back. Smack! A boot jabs me in the head. I feel something warm trickling over my cheek. I'm spinning. Everything goes foggy. It's like I'm sinking and I can't stop. It all goes black. No noise. No pain. Nothing.

I open my eyes. Where am I? A bloke dressed in a strange green jump suit is checking dials and things on a machine. A mask covers my nose, the stench of it clogs my throat, artificial like sticking my nose in a plastic bag. I try to move my head. Arghh! It feels like my skull's being crushed in a vice. Everything whirls around, the bed, the machine, the green bloke. Thump, thump, thump, my heart's leaping, trying to force its way out. Sweat drips from my forehead. I snatch the mask from my face, twist over onto my side and my whole body retches.

'Hey, steady on son. Use this.' The green bloke puts a cardboard tray by my face and I puke up into it. Can't stop. My stomach feels like it's turning inside out, my muscles cramp into a spasm and my head pounds. I try to talk but there's a lump in my throat, a thick glob and I want to puke it up. The bloke puts his arm round me. I grab him, try and sit up, cling onto him for support.

Someone prises my fingers open, takes hold of my other hand. 'It's alright darling, I'm here..' It's Mam's voice. The thumping eases off a bit. I concentrate on my breathing.

Take a deep breath through my nose and release it slowly out through my mouth. Easy does it. The dizziness eases. I try to relax but my body is thrown from one side of the bed to the other. I grab the bars at the side of the trolley to stop my world from spinning. Suddenly I'm torpedoed towards the headboard.

'Wow! Steady on mate. What's going on?' The green bloke clings onto a rack above my head. Equipment clanks as we grind to a halt and it clicks ...I'm in an ambulance.

My legs are sweating, Something's gripping them tight. Blimey, it's my shin pads. I've got my boots on. What the heck's going on?

‘Sorry Fred, it’s manic. Steady on back there, I’ll put the lights on. There’s road works up ahead. The traffic is horrendous.’

A siren rings out and the reflection of blue lights flashes on and off. On, off, on, off, on off. We start up and weave from side to side. Why can’t we be still? A surge of heat passes over me. I’m dizzy and my head’s thumping. Bang, bang, bang. Oh no, I’m going to be sick again. I lunge over and grab another cardboard dish, my stomach knots and I vomit yellow bitter bile.

‘It’s not far now, love. You’ll feel better when we get to the hospital.’ I can hear Mam but I can’t see her. I hope she’s right.

The Secret Diary of Samuel Pepys aged 10 3/4 - an extract

Julian Dutton

PREFACE

The Diaries of Samuel Pepys are famed throughout the world as being among the finest in literature, prized as a unique record of life in seventeenth century England. Little known, however, is that in addition to his adult diaries Pepys also kept a journal as a boy. He fully intended these youthful memoirs to be published, yet when he grew to manhood and rose to public office – first as Administrator of the British Navy, then as an M.P. – he made the decision to keep all his journals secret, even resorting to writing his grown-up diaries in code. As a result, his childhood memoirs have lain unread in a trunk in his family archives for several centuries.

Until now.

The surviving descendant of Samuel – Lawrence Pepys of Stevenage, Hertfordshire - contacted me in July 2016 and told me of the diaries' existence. I cannot tell you how excited I was as I held the old, leather-bound volumes in my hands, turned the pages, and read the amazing handwritten scrawl of the world's greatest diarist in his youth.

Pepys was born into tumultuous times. When he was nine years old the English Civil War broke out – a fierce, bloody conflict between those who supported King Charles I and those who were on the side of Parliament. It was a colourful world of Roundheads and Cavaliers, battles, escapes, midnight rides on horseback, family conflicts, swashbuckling, and high romance.

In this first book, Sam is having a rather hard time settling in to his new school. But when he witnesses a fellow-schoolboy plotting a secret mission with Royalists, he soon finds himself swept up in a strange quest...

July 19th

Disaster. Our cricket team being a man short, I am dragooned into playing against Alconbury. Dear reader, I would be uttering an untruth of the highest magnitude if I claimed that cricket is a sport at which Samuel Pepys excels. Nor any sport, for that matter. For a start, my eyesight is hardly what one might describe as pin-sharp, and in truth I prefer an afternoon of book-reading than the rough-and-tumble of the playing-field. My family sent me to Huntingdon to try and 'wean me off my bookish ways,' so for their sake I strive to make an

effort. But I fear their hopes will not bear fruit, for deep down I feel destined for other avenues of greatness than that achieved via the cricket ball, the bow, or the racquet.

I attempted to plead illness, citing my gallstone (I suffer regular bouts of pain from this affliction and occasionally employ it as an excuse) but on this occasion I was unsuccessful, so it was with heavy heart that I traipsed out to the crease, bat under my arm, to face the opposition.

Reader, I am assured a ball was bowled at me, but I must take their word for it, for I never saw it. All I recall is a faint red blur, the sound of bails being scattered from the stumps, and a cry of ‘owzat!’

I trudged off the pitch to the scowls and head-shakes of my team-mates, and retired to the changing-rooms to lick my wounds and catch up on my *Memoirs of Walter Raleigh*.

The changing-rooms often provide a quiet refuge from the hurly-burly of school life, and I sank gratefully onto the bench to tuck in to my book. I was half-way through the chapter on Raleigh’s first voyage to the Americas when I was distracted by the sound of sniffing.

I peered around the corner to see Constant Bickwell, slumped on a bench, looking the very picture of dejection.

Bickwell is in my form, a short, stout fellow of a rather sensitive nature, and the fact that he too is regularly picked on by Higgins has bonded us in mutual victimhood. I had taken him under my wing, and though I was as harassed as he by the sundry brutes in our school, he looked up to me for occasional protection.

I elicited that he’d just been chucked out of the archery team.

‘Why, pray?’ I inquired.

‘Because I’m utterly hopeless, Pepys, that’s why.’

‘Nonsense, you’re a fine bowman! Little unsure of yourself, that’s all.’ I tried to cheer him up by bidding him take up his bow and attempt a few shots.

‘We can’t fire indoors.’

‘Course you can. Aim for that cap on the hook over there.’

He took aim, wobbled like an uncooked pudding, and fired.

Not only did the arrow not strike the cap, it didn’t even leave his bow. It merely hung there, dismally, while Bickwell nursed a sore thumb.

Sadly I had to conclude he was right - he was hopeless.

I consoled him by offering him my bag of sugared almonds. We sat there sucking on them gloomily. He’d just dipped his hand in for another when –

Bang!!

We both sprang up like jack-rabbits, and when the smoke cleared saw that the cause of our rapid ascent was none other than Higgins – or to be precise, one of his wretched firecrackers.

Higgins loved firecrackers. He was forever creeping up on people and giving them heart seizures. He'd sent three people to the infirmary to my knowledge.

'I'll take those, ta very much!'

Grinning, he snatched the bag of sweets from my hand, popped one in his mouth, and stuffed the remaining goodies in his pocket.

He crunched. And grinned. Grinned. And crunched.

'Wot you two doin' skulking in 'ere anyways?' he growled, his mouth full of the delicious sweetmeats. 'When yer getting married?'

He spotted Bickwell's bow.

'Ha! Robin Hood!'

He grabbed it up and played a mock battle, jumping about and firing invisible arrows all over the changing-room.

'Give it back!' cried Bickwell.

'Why? You can't use it!' jeered Higgins. 'You couldn't hit a dragon at three yards!'

He stood and stared at us, then suddenly seemed to grow bored. He chucked the bow on the floor and turned on his heel, but before he left he shot me a dark look.

'And when I've finished *these*,' he snarled, patting my sugared almonds, 'I'll be back for some more, Mr. Grocer Pepys! So *keep the comestibles comin'*! Ha ha...'

And swaggered out.

Bickwell and I pondered.

Of course, we should have tackled him. We could easily have tackled him. We went through scenarios where we variously rushed him from different directions, pinned him to the wall and gave him a good pummelling. We even concocted a scene where by some means we'd got hold of some chains, and we fastened him to a cell wall and threw itching powder over him.

We then formed an Anti-Higgins League, drew up a simple constitution – I was appointed Secretary and Bickwell Treasurer - and both agreed that one day Higgins would get his come-uppance, and that we were the ones to do it. We swore allegiance to each other, devoted our lives to the downfall of said Higgins, shook hands, and then went to tea.

A Dish Best Eaten Cold – opening of a novel

Mari Mitchell

Sioned rages down the narrow corridor clutching a brown paper bag to her chest. The school secretary flattens herself against the wall as she passes. Pupils stare or scatter – something in the teacher's face frightens them. Barely pausing outside the deputy head's office door, she kicks it open with some force and charges in. The door slams behind her.

Elinor looks up in shock from where she is bending over her desk, checking data. Papers cover its entire surface. Sioned tips up the brown bag; a large bloody goblet of red meat spills out over the pristine papers.

'There! There it is – your pound of flesh! Your bloody pound of flesh! Is that enough? Is that what you wanted? Or do you want more from me?' From her coat pocket, Sioned extracts a scalpel.

'Blood? Perhaps you want more blood! Do you?' Sioned waves the sharp instrument in Elinor's direction.

Elinor flinches, looking for a way out.

Sioned sways, then braces herself against the desk. 'I'll give you blood! I'll give you the blood you want! You don't care who you hurt on your way up the ladder!' She flames with fury, she's ferocious. 'Blood, I'll give you blood,' she repeats, 'You know how to cut, do you? I do.' Sioned holds the blade against her wrist. 'Not across, you know, but down the arm from the wrist. Like this.' Matching action to words, the blade slices flesh.

The spurt of blood shocks them both. Sioned's hysteria diminishes, the blood-letting a catharsis. She sits on the floor, suddenly, staring at what she's accomplished. Elinor retreats further.

The Rose Blossom

Ciaran O'Connell

The Rose Blossom, in the heart of Pape'ete, capital of Tahiti was famous for two things. One of these was food. The very best of French cuisine was served up to its patrons night after night. It was the only restaurant in the South Seas with two Michelin stars. Actually it was the only one to hold any stars. It was to be found down a short but narrow street, with a single streetlamp, not half a mile from the big port where all the cruise ships docked and disgorged their guests.

But it wasn't somewhere the tourists visited. Most of them didn't even know about its existence. The Rose Blossom Restaurant chose not to advertise its presence. It didn't see the need.

And that might have something to do with its other claim to fame - its women. The Rose Blossom was where Pape'ete's elite, the men who made everything tick in French Polynesia, dined every evening with their mistresses, while their wives and children stayed at home in the air-conditioned mansions that lined the wide boulevards to the South of the City.

These guys didn't have one mistress. Three or four was the norm. The more they could afford, the more successful they appeared to their peers. Polynesian women were generally very beautiful, but these girls were all of them absolute stunners. Which is not something you could ever say about their boyfriends.

So when Ed and Melanie Weaver from Camden Town, North London, pushed through the heavy wooden doors at five minutes to nine last Thursday night there was surprise all round. Surprise from Ed, who couldn't keep his eyes off the wall to wall gallery of beautiful young women spread out before him, each one trying to outdo the other in the smouldering stakes. Surprise from Melanie. And surprise from the other men, all of them short, ancient and seriously overweight. In an instant she felt frumpy, bitterly regretted her choice of dress for the evening and hated Ed for allowing her to bring them here on the last night of their holidays.

‘But you booked it,’ he said, reading the look on her face with uncanny accuracy.

The locals clearly felt outrage that a couple of bloody tourists had invaded their private space. So there they stood, the middle aged couple from North London, shock and anger all around them.

Ed and Melanie were not from a cruise ship. But they were tourists. Melanie had tracked the place down while researching their holiday two months earlier in their first floor flat.

The holiday was her idea. The South Seas, Gauguin, lush forests, idyllic beaches. Ed had desperately needed a break. His work had been eating him up.

‘Ed, we’ve got to book this for our last night. It’s not in any of the travel books, but it’s got two Michelin stars.’ She knew how much he loved great food.

Ed’s day had not been great. His proposed media campaign for the agency’s biggest account had been rejected by the client as ‘unadventurous’.

‘Please Mel. If you think it’s so great then just book it.’ His feet were already stretched out on the coffee table, glass in hand as he reached for the bottle of Jameson’s. They had been planning this dream trip for weeks. Well, Melanie had been planning it. ‘I’ve had a lousy day. Can we have just one evening without talking about this damned holiday.’

‘But let me just show you this fantastic outing I’ve found.’

Mel was a freelance writer. She was supposed to have spent the day on the Internet, researching the death of bees throughout Europe. Her article was due in two days’ time. Instead she had managed to uncover the restaurant and a day trip described as a ‘traditional Tahitian experience’.

‘Just book them Mel,’ he said, switching on the television.

They had flown to Tahiti and spent most of that time on a tiny atoll, in their very own cabin with stilts over the pale blue waters. They were well chilled out by now. At least Mel was. She wasn’t sure about Ed.

And here they were on their last night. They had returned to Pape’ete on Wednesday and were staying two nights in the city’s most luxurious hotel.

When they approached the doors to the restaurant the sound of laughter and chatter had been deafening. Now there was silence. Faces frowned. Some of the girls giggled.

‘We’ve booked,’ said Ed. ‘The name’s Weaver.’

The waiter stared hard at his clipboard hoping to be unable to find their names. But Ed was right there, leaning over his shoulder.

‘Look, there we are.’ He tapped on the first line of the list. It read 9pm, Weaver, table for two.

‘You’re Mr Weaver?’ The waiter sounded incredulous.

‘Yes, I am.’ Ed replied. ‘Do you need some sort of ID?’

The waiter looked him up and down. He turned sharply on his heels.

‘Follow me.’ He headed off in the direction of a small table at the rear. As they walked behind him the silence continued.

‘Are we in the right place?’ Mel whispered.

‘Yes, of course we are,’ Ed hissed back, holding her hand in a tight grip. Mel felt the stress levels rising up inside him. All eyes followed them as they followed the waiter. They passed close to a table of two elderly men and four beautiful girls.

‘Nice shorts!’ one of the girls said to Ed. Mel had bought them for him in Marks & Spencer’s. He hated them. He was only wearing them because she had pleaded with him. They could best be described as floral with added floral.

Ed looked at the stunning creature. The man beside her puffed hard on a large cigar and frowned at him. The girl giggled up at Ed.

‘Yes, very nice shorts,’ the girl next to her added. A wave of tittering trickled through the restaurant. Mel looked at Ed and started to say something. But she was too late. Ed Weaver had heard enough.

‘Why don’t you fuck off?’

The tittering gave way to more silence.

‘Big mistake my friend. Big mistake.’ Cigar man spoke in a thick French accent. ‘Now say you are sorry to the young lady. Then bugger off out of here and maybe I’ll forget about it.’

It was a humid night but Ed felt an icy chill down his back. Mel tugged at his sleeve.

‘Come on Ed. Let’s try somewhere else.’ She had given up all thoughts of eating at the Rose Blossom now. She wanted out.

‘Shut up Mel. We booked.’

A voice from behind made him jump. It was low and rumbling.

‘Why don’t you listen to your little lady friend?’ It was another cigar puffer. ‘Apologise now and take your leave. It’s a long way back to your ship. And the streets are not too well lit around here.’

Ed spun around. He was sweating now.

‘We’re not from any ship,’ he said, looking out across the restaurant. It was a sea of grinning faces. The waiter standing at their table seemed miles away. He held on to the back of the chair and stared at the floor.

Ed's feet were stuck to the carpet. Mel looked longingly at the door.

‘Ed, come on. Let’s go,’ she whispered.

Mel felt a sharp tug at the hem of her dress and let out a short scream.

‘Lovely dress, darling.’ A young girl held on to it and laughed.

Mel was wearing a loose summer dress with a print of bright yellow sunbursts all over. She had bought it in Camden Market. At the time she had thought it ideal for their exotic adventure.

Ed’s mouth was open but he couldn’t make any words come out. Suddenly number one cigar man stood up.

‘We are still waiting for your apology, man.’ He spoke quietly. As he rose he clicked his fingers once. Out of the shadows at the far end of the room a tall stocky young man, squeezed into a dark suit, walked towards them.

Ed found his voice. ‘What’s the matter with you all?’ he cried. ‘We’ve booked a table. We’ve come here to enjoy the food. We’re on our holidays. Why are you all behaving like this?’

‘My name is Tammy Boss.’ Cigar man said. ‘What’s your name, man, and where are you from?’

‘Ed Weaver.’ He replied in a quiet voice. ‘We’re from London.’

‘Well Mr Ed Weaver.’ The man was smiling at Ed as he spoke. ‘You’ve sworn at this young lady, disturbed my dinner and upset all my friends.’ He waved his cigar towards the rest of the room. ‘Now if you don’t apologise you won’t be walking out of here tonight. Your fatty lady friend will be carrying you. Come to think of it, she looks like she needs the exercise. Why are you here?’ He lifted his hand to the air, holding back the young body builder who seemed ready to pounce on Ed. ‘And why did you have to go and swear at my girl?’

‘You were all laughing at me and my wife,’ Ed spoke with fear now. As he did so, he put his hand into his inside jacket pocket. The young man leapt forward, knocked him to the ground and grabbed his hand tightly.

‘My God. You think I’ve got a gun!’ Ed shouted just before the man’s other fist connected with his jaw.

Mel was screaming. Everybody else in the restaurant stood up. Some of the girls even climbed onto their chairs to get a better view.

‘Okay Danny, enough!’ said cigar man, kicking at his henchman who was now kneeling over Ed, doling out blow after blow.

The young man stopped. Ed was still conscious, his face covered blood. Mel sat on a chair, head in hands, sobbing.

It was ten past nine. They had been there for fifteen minutes. The Rose Blossom Restaurant ordered them a cab. The waiter stood holding the doors open as Mel helped him towards the waiting car.

Ed managed to get one question out through his broken lips and teeth. ‘Why did you accept our booking?’

‘We’ve already got a Mr Weaver. He comes in about once a year,’ said the waiter. ‘Lives over on Bora Bora, owns most of the island. Thought you were him.’

The doors shut silently behind them.

Primrose - extract from a novel

Stella Starnes

Primrose Matthews sat slumped on the sofa, her arms and legs folded so tightly it didn't look as if she would unravel them for several years. She looked blankly down at her black and white cat Bobby who lay in a patch of sunlight on the sheep's wool rug below the living room window. Primrose was not feeling the warmth of the sun herself. She shivered, and rubbed her hands up and down her arms, as if doing so was as much of a good old hug as it was an act of withdrawal.

Looking at the bright pink and purple scarf that her older sister had left as a gift, Primrose sighed. She wished Charlene hadn't left just like that to live with her fiancé. She would like to share her sister's happiness. She would like to have gone with them. *But I'd probably be more of a hindrance than anything else*, Primrose thought, and in her head, as if in confirmation of this, she heard her sister's clear voice.

You're only twelve years old, it said.

Yeah, Primrose responded, *but so what?*

So, you're not old enough to grasp what it is for me to be in a relationship, Charlene's imagined voice continued, sounding as firm and yet gentle as she had done before she'd finally left.

Well, you've got that right, Primrose agreed silently. *I can see your point, even if I don't like it.*

The worst of hearing voices inside her head, however, was that next up was her mother's as if it felt some need to paint a black stain over Charlene's words.

Yes you're only twelve years old, it repeated. *So that means you're just a child, a silly, useless child! Don't you forget it!*

Primrose kept her arms firmly folded, while a surge of anger rose up inside her like a wild wave of water. However, the only response that seemed to offer itself to her mother's inner voice was, *yeah, you're right. What use would I be to a sister who's madly in love?*

The fact that Charlene and Rupert were going to be married didn't stop Primrose from feeling upset. They would be living a fairy tale ending all the way up in Scotland, and where

was she? Would she ever be invited? What was Primrose's use to anyone? She knew that her mother treated her like a trained poodle just so she could brag about having a child who did as she was told, and this was what she was expected to be here at home, in Wales. The woman was such a constant control freak! Primrose wanted to cry as readily as the sky right now, with her deep blue eyes and the sobs breaking from her mouth for as long as she needed to, knowing that she would still be living all on her own with her mother

Who right then poked her head through the open door. No way could she cry now..

"Moping about are we?" she said toying with her wooden mixing spoon. "Well, I'm sorry, but it's tough luck. Sulking won't bring Charlene back".

She disappeared into the red paneled, shining kitchen full of stark white cupboards and drawers and the bone-white fridge that stood against the cold wall.

Primrose lived in a house called Y Bont in a small Welsh village called Cilycwm.. It was painted milky white all over, with six fairly large square windows. It stood just beside a grey stone bridge that bent over the ripples of a grey blue river, which cut a straight path underneath it before meandering off again through the fresh green fields and beyond.

At the back of the house lay a flat stretch of garden. Tucked away in the right hand corner of it grew a vast blanket of nettles and right in among them, raspberry canes. The berries themselves peeked out like little jewels of deep purplish pink. Protruding from the dense, dark brown soil elsewhere, were the large, deep green, fan shaped leaves of rhubarb plants, which, when ripe in the Spring, would look like candy from Brighton. Flowers adorned the rest of the garden, including hot red poppies and brilliant blue irises, like a brightly coloured array of jewels.

It was Mrs. Matthews, who with a helping hand from a friend had done the hard task of tending to the place. She loved having control over everything in it, although of course, the nettles and the weeds spoiled it for her. Primrose actually sometimes thought she was very easily nettled though; she always had something to gripe about and she was as mischievous and problematic as a weed herself.

That was exactly what she was acting like right now upon hearing a loud knocking on the front door and confronting her daughter a second time for stewing in what she saw as nothing more than childish laziness.

"PRIMROSE, GO UPSTAIRS NOW!"

"WHY?" Primrose yelled back at her mother, who was standing in the doorway of the living room as if she had a poker up her arse and with such a sour expression on her face as if

she had just been sucking a lemon.

Suddenly her voice, which had just now been loud and sharp, grew eerily soft as she spoke again.

“We have visitors coming and so it really would be much easier for you if you entertain yourself, as I know you are able to do”.

“Yeah, that’s right isn’t it?” Primrose retorted, disliking the way in which her mother was putting her down so much. “Well I don’t think I will thanks. I want to see people. I haven’t got anyone else to talk to except for you. Do you know how boring that is?”

The next thing she knew, she heard a horrible smack and felt a sharp burning on her cheek as her mother whacked her over the left side of her face with the back of her mixing spoon.

“What the heck was that?” Primrose cried, feeling tears of pain standing in her eyes. “What’s the matter with you?”

“Oh, as if you don’t know!” she exclaimed huffily, as if her daughter was a bit dim. “Well, I’m not going to tell you! You, you – oh for goodness’ sake, just go up to your room you wretch, this instant!”

Her right hand was still raised in mid-air. Primrose clutched her left cheek. It was stinging with pain. She stared at her mother. She looked quite mad. Her face, which was creased as if it were a poorly ironed out handkerchief, had grown an impressive blotchily red colour; she wasn’t going to admit it, not to her daughter, or even to herself, but Primrose could see she was angry. This sparked two feelings inside her. One was intense relief that she wouldn’t go down without a fight and that her mother wasn’t entirely able to hide how much she hated her. On the other hand, though, Primrose was still a twelve year old girl standing up to a full grown adult who’d just attacked her.

“Fine,” she snapped. “You have a good time letting everyone else eat cake then!”

“Oh, no, you can still have some too. I’ll leave it in the fridge if and when you want some”, she said. She didn’t sound so harsh anymore; instead, she seemed to be easing off now. She had even lowered her hand.

It did nothing to improve Primrose’s temper. However, it would probably give her more time to think up another way to get her mother to explain why she had a problem with her at all if she went up to her bedroom. Then Primrose thought that she would also read yet another book or draw another picture; anything to make it look as if she was doing something as her mother called it.

She did not go quietly. Instead, she stomped upstairs in her chunky pink and purple sports

trainers, making sure to create a good deal of noise. Her breath sounded loud in her ears, and her head and eyes ached as if her cheek didn't feel painful enough as it was. She didn't know it herself, but her own face had also grown red with anger. Her pulse pounded just as it did when she would go out jogging, even though she wasn't stretching out first one leg in front of the other so quickly right now.

Her bedroom was quite small and cramped; it was box shaped and Primrose quickly realized that if she were to shut the white painted door which she opened now, she would be imprisoning herself. She didn't want to do that, so contrary to the order that she was to shut herself away, she left the door wide open.

Her bed stood against the left hand wall, and the loud red and orange duvet and coral pink blanket that covered it were still as creased and crumpled up in one ball of material as if it were a practice of wrecking future beds if her mother were to keep making them up for her all the time. Primrose just didn't understand why her mother wouldn't let her do it herself, so she always assumed that her mother just didn't care about what she did and didn't want done.

Well, at least we'll be moving house soon, Primrose said to herself, and maybe she would finally get to have her own space where she could take control. Charlene had been living in the tall bottle green house named Yr Encil that was a few blocks up the street and now that she was gone, she'd said that they could live there if they wanted to.

Primrose really loved her sister, so it was no wonder she felt betrayed and alone since Charlene's departure from home. Charlene was twenty two, tall, slender and had gorgeous red gold hair; she even had freckles on her cheeks and around her bright blue eyes, and the two of them both looked great together in the one photo that Primrose had of them that she now bent down to look at as she sat at her natural pinewood drawing desk where she kept it. Charlene looked as straight and tall as a lamp post. Primrose, on the other hand was a good deal shorter, like a stunted fir tree in its youth which didn't look like it would get any taller. Her gingery brown hair was tied up in a long pony tail that hung over one shoulder. Primrose's figure was of a sturdy and yet still attractive build; with a nice arching back and curvy waistline which would go on to support a fair sized bust in her teenage and adult years. Unlike Charlene, she stood on quite stout, yet solidly built legs, but she didn't mind because she sometimes went out for a jog around the village to keep fit, and always used them to advantage to wear shorts over leggings and short sleeved t-shirts (which she was wearing now) or skirts, dresses and tunics that came up to above her knees and a wonderfully mad collection of boots and wellingtons that were mostly patterned with psychedelic owls or

butterflies of all colours.

Thinking about clothes and her own appearance, Primrose looked at herself in the mirror that was affixed to her tall, pinewood wardrobe.

The Cunning Man's Last Day - extract from a novel

Sara Fox

He was awake, and his first thought was that this might well be his last day on earth. His eyes travelled to the window, where outside, noisy convocations of sparrows in the thick ivy were squabbling. He could hear busy morning sounds from downstairs, but he made no attempt to rise. His gaze fell upon the large black book on the chest by his bed, bound with an iron chain and three locks. His gorge rose suddenly and he closed his eyes to calm himself. His ability to predict the future was well-known, but he had never imagined that one of his conjurations would concern his own fate. He had told Lettice and Henry their son, but it was clear that they had forgotten. No matter, he saw little point in reminding them. He would avert disaster by quietly remaining in his bed, and God willing, none would be the wiser regarding his narrow escape.

The woman set off on her journey whilst it was still dark, it was seven miles there and seven miles back, but go there she must, before the cows sickened or even died. It was desperation only, that had driven her to this measure, to consult the *dyn hysbys*, the knowing man, as she had a healthy and superstitious fear of all learned folk. Small and spare, with a dark complexion and black eyes, she was part of an ancient but vigorous strain that flowed strongly in the local bloodlines. It was said that they were descended centuries ago from Greek sailors stranded inland at the foot of the Cambrian Hills. She had left the sleeping, dirty little village with its straggling street of church, chapel and cottages and made her way north. One by one, faint stars were extinguished as the sun approached over the eastern hill, she became surer of her footing and increased her pace.

Boots clattered on the steep stairs and paused outside his room. 'Father are you awake? Your cawl is on the table.'

'I have no appetite today Henry.' The thought of the thrice heated broth turned his stomach. There was a pause before he heard the boots return slowly downstairs, and then

he heard the questioning tones of his wife. Some minutes later, she made her way into the room with a dish of fragrant tea that she placed by his bedside.

‘What is the matter with you Shon, it is not like you to miss a fine May morning? Were you not going collecting? The dew will be long off the herbs, before you are dressed and ready.’

He sighed and said. ‘Can I not lie abed just this one day? My bones ache and a fever is already upon my brow.’

She looked at him and felt his forehead, ‘You are clammy enough, but not hot. Well the boy must go on his own today, though he mangles the plants so.’ She paused for breath. ‘And do not be wasting that tea at one shilling an ounce.’

She had slipped away before dawn because her husband would have forbidden her to go. He had modern ideas and was all for dosing the animals with patent medicines. He had no respect for the old ways and scoffed at those who visited the cunning men. But nothing he tried had worked, and so Ann knew that someone in the village had put the eye on her beasts. She was so tired, with little Annie still at the breast and four older children. It was the milk from the small herd that kept them strong, and the yellow butter she made from it brought much needed pennies from the market.

The first rays of the sun burned through the early mist as she passed the cottages in the hollow and the lazy smoke of damped down fires travelled upwards out of their chimneys. There had been no rain for several weeks and so the way was firm underfoot. She was enjoying having the road, the warm air and the birdsong to herself. ‘Why, it is almost a holiday.’ she thought and then smiled at her foolishness.

John Harries lay in his bed watching the stems of the early buff roses swaying outside his window in the soft May breeze, making patterns on the lime washed walls of the room like sunlight under water. He liked to think of himself as a doctor, he knew some of the new treatments and had he not gone abroad in the world in the first flush of his youth? He also had collected and found efficacious many receipts of the old knowledge that he had carefully recorded in his notebooks. Locally people respected him, and his formidable reputation had even enticed the great actress to visit him. Who would have thought it, the great and good in his own modest parlwr. It would not do for him to fall foul of fate yet. He

had much still to learn, and his gift benefited so many. His thoughts then turned to his son, poor bachgen Henry who was sickly and had not inherited a quarter of his own talents. He would be a lost lamb without him.

The woman hurried on, past the crusher for the mine on the other side of the valley, where its ceaseless grindings and dust enveloped the village. Soon she had passed Bwlch y Rhiw and was quickly descending into Cwm Cothi. The foaming white flowers above and below, formed a bridal bower for her to walk through. Their sweet and acrid scent made her drowsy, and her pace slowed. Day dreaming, she almost forgot her purpose, but as the hamlet of the Court of the Foxes came in sight she quickened her steps again and turned left at the crossroads on the track that led to the conjuror's house.

The doctor again heard voices downstairs, Lettice's high and grating, joined by the softer tones of a stranger. Footsteps again came up to his door and his wife's head appeared.

'Mrs Theophilus, Glandwr, is here Shon. Will you speak to her?' He sighed and plucked at the bedclothes, 'What does she want, I am in no state to be receiving visitors.'

She replied impatiently, 'Get up will you man, her cows have been charmed, and she has come miles for your advice.' Peevish now, why was she bothering him so, today of all days? He snapped. 'Show her up then, as today in bed I will remain.' Shaking her head, his wife went downstairs and soon returned with the visitor, who she was obliged to push into the room.

Ann, left with the great doctor, was struck dumb at first, yet it did not seem to matter as he was not paying any attention to her. He was looking towards the window. She could see that although past his middle years, his hair was still dark, his nose was straight and he had the beginnings of a double chin. She was startled when he did speak, he gestured to the window asking her what she thought of the day. Taken unawares by his pleasant voice, she blurted out the first thing that came to her. 'The flowers are full along the roadsides.' He looked at her then, and his wistful thinking blue eyes took in her appearance. She had taken off her shawl, which she clutched in her hands, and her dress and flushed face were dusty from the road.

'What brings you to me?' he asked, 'I am not myself today, but I will do what I can.'

He was so different from her wild imaginings regarding what a cunning man should be; a strangely dressed fellow, with a face terrible to look upon. Instead he appeared like an ordinary person, if one of the quality, and she found no difficulty in telling him the details of her small herd's affliction. The strange truth was that they would not eat from their own fields, but would only graze upon the land of others. It was now getting quite desperate, as they grew rangy and their milk thinned.

The wizard, forgetting his initial reluctance, was pleased to welcome this distraction. He appeared lost in thought for a few moments before issuing the following remedy:

'First, you must buy a new knife that has never been used, and cut some wood from the Mountain Ash in your fields. Then you must burn this, along with some hair from the cows and some witches butter. Do you know what that is?' She nodded. 'Only then you will see the person who has cursed the cows pass by your window, and the spell will be broken.'

Ann listened intently and felt inside the purse hanging from her neck, but he smiled and waved her hand away. 'I'll take no money today'. She thanked him gratefully and made as if to go, but hesitating, she looked back at him.

'What ails you Sir? Is it the ague? I make a good poultice for the chest.'

At once she was overwhelmed by her temerity in daring to instruct him of all men on a medical matter, but he laughed. 'No, it is not the ague, I am well.'

He then frowned and stared at her for a few moments 'But shall I tell you a secret?' She was discomfited but nodded reluctantly. 'Today is my last day on this earth' he pronounced dolefully. 'I saw in that very book my own death by accident on this date, and so I am remaining in bed to avoid any mishaps.' Her eyes darted to the solid looking volume, like any family bible apart from the metalwork and the gilt embossed symbols, and shifted on her feet. He caught her nervous look and continued. 'I suppose you think me soft in the head, but too many encounters with that tome, which even to open its pages causes storm and tempest, have convinced me of its wickedness.' Ann's black eyes dilated, and she shrank away towards the door.

The wizard grew agitated, she must not leave! A plan was taking shape in his mind, his family would never destroy such a valuable book, and he himself must not leave his bed today of all days. There was only one thing to do, the woman must take it for him.

'Its powers must be quenched. Never again will I consult it, nor will anyone else. The book must be sent down into hell where it belongs and I will be safe. No more conjuring of

spirits for me, I will keep to my healing and low magic.’ His voice quieted, ‘You look like an honest woman, do me this service, will you rid me of the book?’ Ann felt the blood beating in her neck and her legs were suddenly too heavy to move. She wanted to run from the dark and airless room.

Frightened now, she gabbled. ‘I don’t understand Sir, I’m just a poor farmer’s wife. What do you want with me. Surely the Minister’ and she looked around wildly for a such a figure of authority, but he interrupted her.

‘No, it must be you, and it must be today.’ His hand shot out and grabbed her arm. He pulled her down to his face and in his vehemence his voice rose. She shut her eyes tight, and felt his breath, spiced with wood and hedgerow on her cheek. ‘I have dared to cross my planet, it may be too late for me, but swear to me you will do this, throw the book into Hell’s Pool, swear it.’ She cried out as his hand gripped her wrist tighter, and hung her head, subject to him, anything to get out of the room. He released her and trembling she reluctantly picked up the book with both hands. It was a dead weight.

‘Quickly, hide it in your shawl’ he whispered furiously as his wife’s footsteps could be heard coming up the stairs. ‘What’s all this Shon?’ demanded Lettice, ‘You are creating a racket fit to make the departed rise.’ She looked at Ann who had regained control of herself, yet her dirt streaked face was wet with a cold sweat. ‘I think you must leave, he’s overtired now. You have upset him.’ She indicated with her head towards the door and the younger woman was down the stairs and out of the house in moments. Dr Harries, closed his eyes and smiled as his wife continued to berate him.

Ann left the cunning man’s house half running, clutching the heavy book in her shawl. She was soon out of breath and her calves ached, but she carried on and after a couple of miles she turned off the lane onto a smaller track. Soon, she saw in the steep gorge below her, the *Pwll Uffern*, peat black and angry, boiling in the infant Cothi. She stood indecisive for a few moments. To get near to the pool she would have to scramble down a precipitous slope. Then she bethought herself, and tied the volume in her shawl, which hung densely to the front of her as if she were carrying a baby. She clambered downwards, holding onto the slippery clumps of bog grass and when the drop became sheer she crouched and pulled out the book. She could not read, but her curious fingers nervously traced the gold embossed magical symbols that decorated the cover and she touched one of the locks. Then she

shivered as the sky grew unexpectedly dark; a cloud was passing between the sun and the earth. She stood up, leaning into the bank, and flung it as far as she could without overbalancing. Its fall was twice broken against the side of the gorge until at last Hell's Pool swallowed it and it was visible no more.

Doctor Harries settled back into his pillows, content that he had done what he could to prevent the danger that the day had held. His wife and son left for chapel, and he dozed fitfully for a good while, lulled further to sleep by the wisps of sulphurous smoke that curled under his door. He did not hear the cries and shouts to alert him to the fire, and slept on.

Share & Enjoy - opening of a novel

Pete Barker

A subdued early morning light from the full height windows at the front of the supermarket stretched along the rows of empty shelves. The flickering of an ancient tube overhead did little to raise the mood in the queue for the bread counter.

“You’re in my place,” came a deep voice from behind Imogen.

She looked around to face a shaven headed man staring at her. “You what?”

“You heard.”

“I was here before you.”

On a gold chain around his neck hung his phone, projecting the flickering, hologrammatic images of a violent movie, just centimetres from his face. He took a step forward, forcing Imogen back into the woman in front. As she turned to apologise, she found herself sidelined by the man who had claimed her place in the queue. She looked around for support but everyone averted their gaze, so she stepped back into line behind him, her green eyes flashed as they bore into the back of his stubbly head. *You ever do that to me again, she thought and I’ll burn your arse.*

Imogen pushed the rising ball of anger back down and dropped her head, allowing her light brown hair to fall over her thin, pale face, past her slumped shoulders. Then she heard that deep menacing tone again, “You’re in my place,” he was saying to the woman in front.

Now there were raised voices at the front along with a ripple of under-breath mutterings running back through the queue.

“They’ve run out!”

“Impossible, they can’t have!”

Imogen noticed the extra staff assembled behind the counter and now appearing along the aisle, even the manager in his dark suit and slicked back hair was there at the front. *They fear trouble*, thought Imogen. *They shouldn’t run out.* The government’s own spread-sheets were showing enough grain coming into the country to meet the rations, she knew, she’d seen them.

The mood was turning ugly, people started shouting. A whiney voice came over the speaker system, it was the manager. “We’re very sorry but that’s it, the bread’s all gone, please come back next week and we’ll make sure those of you who missed out, will be at the

front of the queue next time. Now please make your way to the exit, unless you have further purchases to make.”

A roar of protests erupted, “What are we meant to eat?”

“I’ve got kids to feed!”

“I’m very sorry, but you must now leave, the police are here.” The manager gestured to a lone Bobby and his PCSO sidekick looking slightly startled at the back of the store. “You will be arrested if you do not leave the premises.”

Everyone turned to look at the policemen and then resumed the abuse. Things were getting out of hand, the orderly queue had broken up. In the pushing and shoving, the bully in front of Imogen had made his way over to where the last few people to receive loaves stood huddled by the counter trying to defend their prizes. He reached out at a woman in her forties, dressed in a light green cagoule and grabbed her shoulder, pulling her forward towards him. “That’ll be mine,” he growled as he ripped the bread from her grasp.

“NO!” she shouted, swinging a looping fist which landed on his upper arm but made little difference, he was already turning to leave the scene.

Imogen watched it all unfold, watched him push his way back through the crowd, *They’re letting him get away with it and they haven’t even deducted his ration.* She turned to the policeman and although he was a good 15 metres away, called to him, “Hey, did you see that? Aren’t you going to do anything?” The officer looked her in the eye and then turned away to focus on the manager at the counter, waiting for an instruction.

Imogen took one step to pursue the bully, fists clenched, unclenched, she knew there was little she could do. She felt for the reassuring box of matches in her jeans’ pocket. *‘Don’t get involved, it’s not worth it,’* her father would say.

Her attention was drawn back to the counter. A six-pack of toilet rolls had just bounced off the face of a podgy middle-aged baker, leaving a faint green, pine-tree smudge.

Someone had snuck around a side aisle to the Health & Beauty section and bottles of shampoo were now being lobbed mortar like towards the empty pastry shelves.

“Please, everyone calm down.” The manager had a back-up plan. “We have a limited supply of strong white flour, it may be out of date but still absolutely fine, how about that?”

The crowd went quiet. *This could work, bake our own bread.*

Someone yelled, “Okay,” and everyone fell, sheep like, back into line. Staff gathered up the bags of flour and started swiping ration cards again. The person who had shouted ‘okay’ retrieved their blue supermarket tabard and headed for the tills.

Henry's story

Mary Thurgate

Thursday evening had been the highlight of Henry's week for the past twenty five years. It was his chess club night, nothing stood in the way of it. It was sacrosanct. He was pleased that his wife Gladys shared his opinion that nothing was more important than his Thursday evening. Henry was a man of regular habit. Even as a small child his doting mother used to boast about him, "You could set a clock by our Henry".

Now he carried his fifty years well. Neat and trim with a good head for figures, he had worked his way up to become the principal actuary for Moorfield Insurance Ltd. He revelled in the work; the subjugation of the chaotic events that affected other people's lives to the beauty of mathematical formulae. Seemingly immune to such random forces his own life was a shining example of order.

That was until one Thursday when Henry arrived at the chess club to find a note pinned to the door;

**No meeting today due to boiler failure,
hope to meet next week as usual.**

He read the notice several times but each time it said the same thing: "No meeting". He lingered for a few moments staring at the locked door and then up and down the street. He waited a few minutes hoping that some of the other members would come and read the notice and share his indignation but nobody was about. A strange feeling crept over him as if had caught the sleeve of a favourite jersey and looked down to see it unravelling. *Thursday without chess, unthinkable!* If Jerry, his favourite opponent, turned up perhaps they could go for a drink together. *A pint on a Thursday.* He felt almost giddy at the very idea, but there was no sign of Jerry so he decided to go home. *Gladys will be surprised to see me*, he thought.

Gladys, indeed did seem to be surprised, you could almost say flustered by his untimely arrival, she seemed to be making an awful fuss of him bobbing about in the hall as he took off his overcoat. Bound to be unsettling, he thought. Chess club closed like that!

"I'll make tea" she said. He followed her into the kitchen. She seemed flurried, hastily sweeping things into the washing up bowl. Was that a wineglass in her hand and another in the sink?

She followed his eyes and said hastily, "Dusty! Very dusty just giving them a wash, don't like to see things getting dusty."

She made two mugs of tea and took them through to the lounge plonking herself down on to the sofa. He sat beside her. In front of them on the coffee table was a box of Milk Tray. He looked but all the soft centres were already eaten. He gave her arm a little poke. "You want to watch it Gladys eating that rubbish, you'll get fat."

She looked at him and he coughed a little as if to clear his throat. It occurred to him that he didn't know what to say to her on a Thursday. He looked back at her, sitting beside him small and plump, her hair was a sort of bright chestnut colour and he realised that she must have dyed it and he wondered when she had done it. He felt profoundly protective of her 'poor old girl, not getting any younger'. He wanted to reach out to her, to tell her that it was alright, she didn't need to dye her hair for him, he wasn't fussed what she actually looked like now, she was fixed in his mind as she was when he first met her. But he thought better of saying anything. After all, women are funny creatures, you never knew how they would take things. He studied her again, there was something about her that he couldn't quite put his finger on. '*Restless,*' he thought, '*like a little bird making sudden darts at conversation*'.

"What shall we do?" He asked with something like desperation.

"You please yourself," she said. "I'm going to have a bath!" And left the room.

Before long he heard the water running and was that voices upstairs? *No of course not*, he thought. *It's the radio, she likes that, a long bubble bath with the transistor blaring*. Baths didn't suit him, he preferred a shower; seven minutes he took, he had it down to a fine art. He took a book off the shelf but couldn't settle to read. He wondered about phoning his mother but decided not to. *Mother will only worry if I phone on a Thursday*. In the end he set out his chessboard on the coffee table and phoned Jerry.

"E4," he said, moving a pawn. There was a chuckle. "So it's like that, is it? E5 then."

"I'll get back to you" said Henry and put the phone down. After deliberating for a while he picked up the receiver and phoned Jerry back, and so the game went on. Long and complex, phone call by phone call, until Henry made the final excited call.

"Queen takes F6 check! Checkmate, Jerry, checkmate!"

He looked at his watch. How did it get so late? He'd been wrapped up in the game ... way past his usual bedtime. He hurried upstairs to get ready for bed. He looked at his feet in consternation. He hadn't changed into his slippers! *What would mother have said?*

Shamefaced, he kicked off his shoes and pushed them under the bed, out of sight. He undressed quickly and got into bed beside Gladys.

Gladys had her back to him. She was snoring gently. *Like a little bee*, he thought affectionately as he put his arm around her. And how soft she felt under her yellow nylon nightie; his hand felt a little damp over the slippery material. Briefly he thought of waking her, but didn't. *After all it's not Friday. It wouldn't be fair.*

Very soon he fell asleep. In the morning he struggled to surface. Something felt wrong, it felt late. He reached out and brought the alarm clock up to his face; he must have forgotten to set it. He felt a rising sense of panic. For the first time in his life he was going to be late!

Feverishly he dressed, then reached under the bed for his shoes. If he was quick, he might just make the bus. Gladys was already up and out hours before, she worked the early shift at the linotype. No time for breakfast, he'd gain eleven minutes there. He grabbed his overcoat and rushed out of the house. He could still make it. He took long strides and then broke into a run as the bus appeared. His heart felt like it was going to burst, pounding in his chest.

Sweating and out of breath he reached the stop in time to see the bus disappearing up the road. *Fifteen minutes till the next bus!* His chest heaved, he almost wept. *Late!*

He'd started at the firm as office runner when he was fourteen; man and boy he had worked there and never been late. He prided himself on his regularity. More people started to arrive at the bus stop. They were giving him funny looks. Gradually his breathing became more regular. He forced himself to quell the rising tide of panic. A couple of teenagers were laughing at him and a little girl in a pink dress was pointing at Henry's feet and whispering to her mother.

"Don't point," said the mother. "It's rude."

But the corners of her mouth were twitching as she stifled a laugh. Henry looked down at his feet. He was wearing odd shoes, on his right foot his own plain black work shoe and on his left one brown brogue. Henry looked from his feet back to the people in the queue back to his feet and back to the people, his mouth opened, he felt he was going to say something momentous; make a pronouncement, something epic, but no words came out. The bus arrived, the doors opened, the conductor said, "Hurry up mate, I haven't got all day. Are you going to get in or not?"

The doors shut, the bus drove away. Henry watched it go. He had to think. This was something big, It had to be thought about. He wouldn't be able to think in the office. He thought of them all tutting, shaking their heads. No, he would have to go somewhere to think.

There was a park across the road. He had never noticed it before. He walked over to a bench among the bright flowerbeds of early primulas, shining jewels in the thin March sunshine.

As he walked he felt the strange brown brogue encasing his foot. *Fits like a glove*, he thought and almost laughed as he imagined his toes growing into fingers and wriggling in the strange shoe.

He sat on the bench. At first he was tempted to tuck his foot back into the shadows under the bench, to hide it from mocking eyes. But then he stretched his foot out in front of him and admired it. How well it fitted! It was rather classy; hand made perhaps. Expensive for sure, but ever so slightly down at heel. Beautifully polished, though.

His own shoe looked dull by comparison.

This shoe was daring; flamboyant; joyful.

The big thing to be thought of, couldn't be thought of now. That would be for later. Now there was only one thing to think of – would the other shoe still be there?

He thought of the stranger, the person who had left the shoe under the bed. He must have left in his stocking feet. Oh, the hurry of it, the bustle, the commotion. A man who wore shoes like that would be adaptable, adventurous, the sort of man who could leave his shoes behind and slip off in his socks.

Henry was filled with admiration. He got up from the bench and walked briskly home, noticing the pinch of his old shoe and the comfort of the new one.

Dreading that it would be too late he hurried into the house and upstairs to the bedroom. He scrabbled under the bed and found the matching shoe. Blissfully, he inserted his foot into the right brown brogue. He spent a few moments looking at the dull black shoe, now discarded on the floor. He collected a few bits and pieces together, and in his very precise handwriting wrote a note for Gladys:

I am going out. I don't know what time I will be back.

Assistance

Kathy Biggs

Train travel usually unnerves her, but today's journey poses no problem: she has booked 'assistance'. And here he is now, smiling as they pull in. He spots her straight away and stands by the open door as the carriage empties, waiting to 'assist' her.

She looks him over: he's young, spotty, probably on some Government Scheme. She gestures vaguely in the direction of her three matching suitcases and watches as he bounds aboard, falling over himself with eager helpfulness.

Irritated, for no real reason, by his energy and youth, she answers his friendly enquiries with curt snappishness. She frowns at herself, but really, does he actually need to know how she is, how far she is travelling?

She walks as rapidly as she can, placing her walking stick smartly, leaving him to navigate the two-way travellers and the luggage. She announces that she needs a good cup of tea, and allows him to accompany her to the station café.

Once in there, she makes a great fuss, which involves a lot of chair moving and luggage rearranging. The young assistant, his Lynx deodorant wearing off now, is embarrassed and flustered. Fuelled by this, she continues to task him unnecessarily for a few minutes more, before dismissing him imperiously.

Twenty minutes to spare before he has to put her on the 14.49 to Manchester, the young man takes refuge in the staff room. He considers his options: he could phone his probation officer and tell her he's packing the job in, he could put the old boot on the 14.47 to Edinburgh, or he could just leave her in the café. Then again he could just nudge her under the next train in. He dismisses that idea – no way he'd get away with it twice.

Guardian: opening of Gemini Series Book 5

Mike Tomlin

The warm breeze rustled the leaves in a gentle rhythm. The dappled sunlight highlighted a spider's web before dying upon the carpet of decaying leaves and vegetation littering the forest floor. A thrush stopped singing as a dark shadow passed over the bough it was perched upon. Its head darted around, watching the shadow move across the forest floor. The sunlight reappeared and warmed the bird's back again. It started to sing again.

*

"I wouldn't do that," Tanja said, resting her hand on his.

Emil lifted an eyebrow. "Do what?"

"Leave the lid off the jam. The wasps will be all over it." Tanja swished a lone wasp away, reached for the jar, and placed it in the small picnic basket before looking back at Emil. "Did you hear the news last night? Pretty bad wasn't it? The factional fighting is getting worse. The Bosnians are asking for volunteers."

Emil lifted a shoulder in a half-shrug. "It'll die down, I'm sure of it. Anyway, it'll never reach us. Let's face it, there's not much here, is there?"

Tanja reached out and gave his hand a squeeze. "There's you."

"Aw, Tanja."

He leaned over the blanket. Their lips touched for just an instant before Tanja pulled away. "Did you hear that?"

"Hear what?"

"Deep thuds, like big guns firing in the distance."

Tanja stood up, pulling Emil with her. "Do you think the fighting could be here already?"

Emil embraced her. "It's nothing," he whispered.

"No, listen to that – leaves rustling – over there!"

The warmth of the sun had faded in seconds — the same time as a gloom descended over the forest. She looked up expecting to see a black cloud obscuring the sun. There was no cloud, but something large, very large, stood between them and the low sun in the tree line. She squinted to make out details but it was too much of a silhouette. Whatever it was,

it wasn't part of the forest, and it hadn't been there a minute ago. Emil was transfixed by the same object.

"Quick!" Emil grabbed Tanja's hand and pulled her towards the track and their parked car. Tanja turned to follow as a ray of sunlight streamed past the moving object, providing definition of its outline. She smiled and gave a small nod at the object.

Emil tugged her forwards. "Come on."

Tanja followed, glancing back. The thing was moving now. The silver bangles on her arms jangled as she picked her way over the uneven ground. The car was a hundred yards away.

"Faster!" Emil urged, pulling her in his haste to get to the road. They reached the car, panting. Emil fumbled in his pocket for the key.

"It's okay, get your breath," Tanja said, placing her hands on his shoulders.

"What the hell is that? Did you see? It was huge ... black ... moving."

"I saw."

"We should go. "What if it's following us?"

Her smile grew as she hugged him. "No, it won't."

*

Carla squeezed harder, but the imitation leather on the armrest resisted the pressure. God, she hated landings. Jamie turned and grinned. She thought he would say something stupid, but the slight opening of his mouth morphed into a breath. Perhaps he'd thought better of it. He placed his hand over her clenched hand. She frowned at it and he withdrew it.

"I know, I know. Before you say anything, I understand the physics of flight. I know about thrust and lift. I could write you the equations, but it still scares me when three hundred and seventy tons of a 747 is coming down on eighteen bits of rubber at one hundred and sixty miles an hour."

"Gee, you sure know your facts," Jamie said.

"It's my way of handling the stress." She wasn't even sure she believed it herself as a jolt of turbulence made her hands tighten even more until her knuckles turned white. "I prefer the company jet."

"Me too, but someone's taking too much interest in us. WLet's hope that by coming in with this lot we can slip into Belgrade without attracting attention"

Carla nodded towards the window as the lush green landscape of Yugoslavia drew closer. “I’ve missed that.” “Despite the mystery and beauty, I’ve had enough of Egypt’s rocks and sand.”

“And the flies,” Jamie added.

She grunted as the wheels hit the runway, relaxing her grip as she heard and felt the reverse thrust slowing them down. Feeling slightly more at ease, she looked back at Peter Merchant. They hadn’t been able to book seats together, and Peter had ended up two rows behind them near the aisle. By mid-flight, he had struck up a conversation with the man next to him. It was still going on.

She wasn’t sure whether sympathy was called for or if it was a two-way conversation. Peter could be enthusiastic about his archaeology. This time, it looked mutual. The man offered Peter two books, and he scribbled something inside the front cover of the top one before handing it back.

*

Peter squeezed up behind Carla in the ritual shuffle to the exit door.

“A fan?” Carla asked, an eyebrow lifted.

He looked confused for a moment before realizing what she’d been referencing. “What, err, no, but he was very interesting. A self-taught amateur who loved Mesopotamia, particularly the period after—”

Carla cut him off before the excursion into some dusty corner of academia began. “Was he after an autograph?”

“What?”

“The book.”

Peter looked down as if embarrassed at the thought of being famous. “Oh, gosh no. I’m no celebrity. Just jotted down a few titles I recommended he buy.”

“Peter, I’m only teasing.”

He kept his eyes on the floor. “Oh, yes, sorry.”

As they broke free of the aluminium tube and onto the steps, Carla saw Jamie scanning the airport. He looked at the ground crew and then off to the shuttle bus driver and the expectant travellers watching from behind the windows of the terminal buildings.

“You’ll see no one if they’ve a telephoto lens,” she said over his shoulder. “They could be anywhere. You just look shifty.”

"Yes, I guess. I don't like the idea of being watched."

"That's ironic, isn't it? You've done a good job so far of bugging and listening to everyone on the planet. You've made a career and an international company out of it."

"That's not totally fair," Jamie said, scowling. "I've always loved electronics." She raised both eyebrows.

He obviously caught the full meaning of her expression. "Hmm, well, I still don't like it."

"Anyway, couldn't someone just get the manifest from the airline and find our names?"

"That one I have got covered," Jamie said with a wry smile as they stepped onto the tarmac.

"What have you been up to ... or is it better I don't know?"

"Best you don't know everything, but it involves a subsidiary of Austec Radio, their flight booking software, and a certain maintenance back door left in the code. Our names will be changed about fifteen minutes after we've gone through passport control."

"Stop, that's enough detail," Carla said, poking him in the ribs. "It still wrangles against my ethics. There's been enough to deal with over the last few months."

Jamie winked. "You're getting the hang of it."

*

"And the reason for your visit, Dr. Richards?" asked the dour passport officer still studying her previous visa stamps.

Carla gave him a bright smile. "Research for my work on ancient sites and astronomy."

"You know the country is tense at the moment. It is not the best time to visit us."

Carla nodded. "We'll be well out of the way."

The officer flicked his gaze to her, and with a well-practiced action, thumped his stamp down on her passport. "Take care and enjoy your stay." Carla couldn't miss that the *enjoy* was a definite afterthought to the *take care*.

She met up with Jamie and Peter at the luggage carousel.

"What now?"

"Grab our car and get to those hills near Sarajevo," Jamie said, pulling his case from the belt. "Don't worry, it was bought second-hand yesterday. The paperwork won't catch up for weeks yet."

"Ah, there we are." Peter brightened, reaching for his case. "How far is it?"

Jamie gave him a sympathetic look. "Quite a few hours."

Peter sagged. "Couldn't we have gotten closer?"

"It's better this way. If by any chance we are traced to the airport, we'll be miles away."

Peter grunted an acknowledgment as he lowered his case to the floor.

Carla reflected on the absurdity of their situation as a brilliant engineer and head of a worldwide company, a historian, and an astrophysicist wheeled their luggage towards the concourse trying to look like ordinary tourists.

The fresh air greeted them as they negotiated the revolving door followed by two armoured personnel carriers with soldiers patrolling outside of the airport, rifles slung across their chests.

"Whoa," Carla murmured, "when they said tense, I didn't think they meant this."

Jamie nodded. "The country seems to be breaking up. Internal borders are going up. We need to be quick. If we hang around too long, I'm not sure we'll be able to travel safely."

"Amen to that," Peter muttered.

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