

Stella's Shorts

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Stella has taught an adult class in creative writing for over 40 years. So I am told by one of my fellow students, who has studied with her all that time. Her class is great fun. One of her techniques is to give out a single word and expect a short piece, inspired thereby, to be read out by the author at next week's lesson. In my year with her I found this undammed my creative juices. Resulting torrent of over 20000 words making up 25 very short pieces herewith. Don't read them all at once or you will get indigestion. © Joe St.Johanser 2023

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1. Marsh

The chill air of winter was heavy over the wide extent of the marsh. A cold wind blew through reed beds, through the branches of scattered alders on the small islands and across the wide stretches of open water between, causing little shivers of wavelets that reflected the grey sky. Fast moving patches of light, interspersed with shadows.

The birds, in small groups of ten or twenty, floated quietly on the water. Widgeon and teal mostly; a few shovellers and dunlin. They kept to the middle of each stretch of open water, quietly feeding and sleeping.

The boy could see them far off as he slid cautiously down the grass of the hill and came to the edge of the marsh. He was dressed in animal skins, rabbit fur for a cap that covered his ears, a jacket that fell down his back to reach his knees, and pig leather for trousers and knee high boots. He was young, not yet a man, and thin. The skin of his nose and cheeks stretched tight over his face.

He could smell the marsh, the peaty smell of long submerged vegetation, the salt tang in the air blowing on the wind from the seaward edge. He shivered under his fur jacket and walked quietly along the shore until he came to the mark he had held carefully in his memory. A boulder as big as a man just by the water. He stood by the boulder and looked for his other mark. Another boulder, this time on an island a hundred yards or so offshore. Then he walked into the water.

Walking slowly and steadily as the water grew deeper. The cold seized him. He shivered violently but made no disturbance in the marsh. The wind noise was just loud enough to cover his small splashes.

He reached a thin inlet on the island before the water reached his belly. Ten feet inside the inlet, hidden by rushes, was his small punt. He flopped across its bow and twisted himself aboard. The punt was very low in the water. Just a few inches of freeboard. He knelt in the mud that covered the floor of the punt, found his paddle in the ooze and took the punt out on the open water.

He could see the birds away in front, floating quietly and communicating in their groups with small quacks. He looked for his final mark and headed gently towards it. Pain from the cold masked by the intense focus of the hunt. His body would have to endure. He reached his mark, a log buried in the mud and felt down into the water. There was his thin rope.

The birds were in the right place now. He rose erect, shouting and yanked the rope. The birds rose up off the water, in a panic to get away from the predator, beating wings fast to gain speed and climbing to gain height. The rope came out of the water. It was attached to another punt in a reed bed. The frantic flapping of wings almost covered the groan and crack of the large crossbow in the other punt as it released the power of its taut bowstring and shot a net twenty feet high in the air. Some of the birds had not gained sufficient height to escape this predator. They flew into the net and fell struggling back into the lake.

The boy paddled fast to the net. He used a small iron bound cosh hanging from his waist to despatch all the birds he had caught, hitting each one on the head, thanking it for its gift of life, as his father had taught him, pulling it out of the net and throwing the small body into the pile at the bottom of the boat.

Too cold to reset the crossbow and net and hide the punts. He would come another day for that. The task now was to get home before he died from the cold. Eleven fine widgeon and two teals slung dripping over his shoulder were comfortably heavy and still warm.

He ran back up the hill. Tonight his mother would roast one and the small family would eat their fill. She would be happy. The others would be cooked into a thick confit jelly in their own fat; to feed them for a month. The pain of the cold still hurt, but he could cry now. He would not have to face the cold again for a month or so.

The marsh returned to silence as the evening turned to dusk.

2. Glasses

'Now isn't that lovely?' This from Roger Wooley, noted expert in glass, as he held up the item in expert fashion, two fingers nonchalant around the stem, showing it to the TV camera and squinting at it knowledgeably.

'Well I like it'. This from the owner of the object, a large middle-aged lady, with a pronounced Yorkshire accent. The show was coming from Barnsley.

'So you should, my dear. It's a very precious and beautiful piece of glass. From the seventeenth century. You can tell from the round bubble in the stem that it is by Ravenscroft, the Englishman who invented the lead crystal process. Listen to this.' Wooley pinged the glass with his finger, producing a richly sonorous chime that rang around the stand and put an appreciative smile on many faces in the audience. 'I estimate, at auction, a price of two to two and a half thousand pounds.'

Gasps and applause from the audience. The Yorkshire lady said 'Not bad'.

Wooley smiled. He had done his bit and could come out of character. In the editing room the camera would now cut away from him and go to the next item. He looked over to a colleague standing nearby, put out his tongue and raised two fingers.

The colleague, Sarah Tondo, flushed with annoyance. She was a rather pretty young woman. Also an expert in glass and an ingénue on the TV show. She had yet to earn a regular slot on the show. The flush made her very attractive, especially to the young cameraman who had just filmed the piece. He also admired her slim female figure, tightly clad in a rich brown velvet corduroy. Sarah was serious and studious. Unlike Wooley, forty years in the business and still playing the clown. His persona had made him a TV favourite, though some said he was past his sell-by date. The two experts were now deadly rivals.

Sarah walked over to Wooley. 'No need to be obnoxious Roger. I'm not after your job, despite what you think. I'm sure you're good for a few years yet'.

Wooley knew this was a blatant lie. Soft little Sarah was harder than she appeared. He noticed her thin crimson lips, tight and cruel. He had overheard her enthusiastically lobbying the producer for his slot. The producer was notorious for his casting couch method of selecting presenters, both female and male. Wooley had seen how clearly Sarah was signalling her sexual availability. At Wooley's age he could not compete in that arena any longer, though he had been a doughty fighter in those lists as a young man.

She said, 'You got the Ravenscroft wrong again you know. Don't you feel guilty for misleading the nation? Listen to my piece on the TV Gold commercial channel, "Antiques for

the Million". I explain clearly that evidence is strongly against the idea that Ravenscroft deliberately undertook research that led to the discovery of English lead crystal. In fact, there is absolutely no evidence to support such an approach. I mentioned your name in passing. I hope you don't mind'.

'All publicity is good publicity, Sarah. Mention my name as much as you like'. This was also a blatant lie. In truth Wooley was cut to the quick. His precious reputation under attack. The woman would have to be dealt with. He knew how to do it. It had worked before.

*

Three hours later it was Sarah's turn to present a piece to camera. The afternoon was wearing on, the sun was beating down. All were getting tired: directors, presenters, camera crew and audience, but those at the end of the queue, having waited patiently in the sun for hours, deserved their slot.

Sarah held up an item belonging to an old Scotsman, who had spoken with a quavering voice as he described the history of the glass in his family over three hundred years. Sarah using her own version of the glass-holding pose, finger and thumb around the foot of the glass, held the glass high. The Scotsman looked anxiously at his treasure. Wooley looked on from ten feet away. He rubbed a glass he held close to his chest. A tiny thing with dark red twists. He muttered a few odd words. Difficult to hear what they were.

Sarah opined away, 'A particularly early and rare form of balustre glass from about 1680, with distinctive putto head prunts on the stem and a funnel bowl that is nipped and pincerd. As I'm sure you know, this glass is very valuable. At auction ten to twelve thousand pounds'.

The audience opened its collective mouth and gasped. A deep silence ensued. Sarah went to put the glass back on the table - lurching inexplicably forward, the glass falling - shattered into pieces. 'Shit, shit, shit!' she shrieked, while the Scotsman screamed, 'You stupid, stupid woman!'

Would they edit that out or keep it in to show the dramatic accident to the TV audience of millions? Almost certainly the latter Wooley thought, and smiled.

3. Onion

The earth in the greenhouse gave out a smell of deep, rich loam, slightly damp. Very satisfying. Fred sniffed it in as he moved among his prize-winning vegetables. Hopefully prize-winning. This year's contest was still a day away; but he had often won best vegetable in previous years and the onions looked to be doing it for him again this year. Great globes all in a row.

He had fed and watered them every day for six months. Applying just the right amount of his special fertiliser, from comfrey juice he had made himself in a barrel, seaweed he fetched from the beach at Shoreham down the road and threw into the barrel as well, and his secret special ingredient, the piss he excreted in a long stream into the barrel on top of the comfrey and the seaweed, coming home after four pints of Badger's best in the pub on Saturday nights. Potassium, phosphorus, nitrogen; hundreds of other chemicals. His own unique mixture. It stank to high heaven.

The tubular green leaves of the onions were now browning and falling over as they reached their wondrous maximum weights. Their skins those wonderful onion colours. Shades of brown-green and blue-grey and red-orange and dozens in between.

Fred was a Sunday painter - when he wasn't tending his onions - and had often painted them. But nobody had painted them better than the great Vincent Van Gogh; somehow Vincent had captured the essence of their vegetable being with his vigorous brush strokes and amazing colour sense.

Yers. That'll do it. The one on the end looks best. I think I'll have that one out tomorrow. Must be fifty pounds if it's an ounce. The one next to it is the second best, and it's a long way short. I'll have it up in the morning early and dressed to look beautiful for the show just after breakfast. I wonder what old Jim is doing with his, poor old devil. That is if he can summon the strength to dig it up. Poor old Jim. Last time I saw him - Wednesday week ago wern't it, he smelled bad from that hospital. Damned if I couldn't smell the illness on him. Seventy years now I've known him, since we were young kiddies at primary school. Every day a wrestle in the playground, or a game of conkers, or British Bulldog... We used to love the rough games. We got lots of bruises but very rarely blood flowed. Miss Pickles never minded as long as no blood was spilt. God that illness smell. Opropomosis or some such. He said it was killing him. But they let him out. Maybe he made them so as he could show at the prize contest. He always was a stubborn old sod. You couldn't stop him if he made up his mind to do something. But he never managed to beat me in best vegetables - for all his

stubbornness. You got to have the magic touch. Just wanting it won't get you there. And I've got the magic touch by God. I can't paint so good it's true - not like old Vincent - but I can grow onions. King of the onions that's me.

Morning came with bright sunshine in a beautiful blue sky and Fred went out to select his best onion. The air was gently warm. Fred felt the force of Nature and natural things in his bones, in his bowels, in his head and in his feet. He stood on tiptoe and stretched his arms wide. If he had been religious he might have fallen on his knees and prayed. He wasn't and he didn't, but he did fall into a reverie.

Yerss that's the one sure enough. Got to be a winner that one. That'll beat whatever Jim can come up with. I'll have him once again... Might be for the last time though poor old sod. That smell. It can't be long before he pops his clogs. Then we'll have the bloody funeral to go to. All of his relations like when his wife died last year. He's not been the same since then. Life's a bugger.

Fred grew sombre with that last thought. He stood silently in the sunshine, the row of onions before him. He sighed deeply. Then he reached for his spade and dug up - the second best onion.

4. Painting

The cramped, poorly furnished room was dark and cold, in late winter. The young man, also poorly furnished with clothes, had a thin pale face and looked undernourished. He charged his brush with paint from the palette he held in his left hand, a deep blood red pigment, considered his next stroke and vigorously applied it to the canvas on the easel. He was painting a townscape, an old church and adjacent houses, from a charcoal sketch. He spoke to his friend, another young man, who was playing the piano a few feet away.

'What do you think of it so far? Not bad eh?'

The friend stopped playing and replied, 'Not bad - indeed it's rather good old buddy. Should be able to shift that for a nice little price tomorrow'.

'Not tomorrow. The problem with oils - they take time to dry. As you know very well'.

'Ah yes of course. Excuse me - my head was still in my Wagner'.

'I think my head is still in your Wagner as well. You're so lucky to be at the Music Academy. That Lohengrin - what a fantastic piece! I worship that man'.

The friend had got up and made to leave the room to go out, but stopped and regarded the young man with compassion. 'I feel for you, you poor fellow. They were wrong to reject your application to the Art Academy. I know you have talent. You will be a great man some day'. He opened the door but paused again to say, 'And now to be rejected by the Army - a second blow - what did they say, "unsuitable for combat and support duty, too weak, incapable of firing weapons." - bloody stupid - you would make a great soldier. I know how brave you are.'

The young man said, 'Don't worry about me. They were two blows of monstrous injustice. Clearly God hates me - for something I have done, or not done - but I am resilient. I will survive all that. Go off to your Academy. I'll see you later. I have a couple of books to read this afternoon. Reading is a great consolation.'

The door closed, the young man threw down his brush and began pacing the room, muttering to himself.

The afternoon wore on and the room grew dark and even more gloomy than usual. It was as though the winter mist crept into the room, forming a haze above the poor sticks of furniture. The young man muttered yet more intensely. He hadn't eaten properly for several weeks and was becoming light headed with hunger. The cold had penetrated deep inside him.

He became conscious of a bad smell that had entered the room. Perhaps the local drain had blocked again. But God that smell was really bad. Perhaps something had died close by.

The mist in the corner of the room grew thicker. A low moaning came from the mist, as of a soul in torment, then a light tenor voice, 'Good afternoon.' The young man started in fear. The voice continued, 'Don't be frightened - nothing to be frightened about, I'm here to help. If you want to be helped that is. Do you want to be helped?'

The young man stamped on his fear and grew calm 'We all want to be helped don't we? Who are you?'

'That's better. People know me by many names. Let's just call me 'The Old one', as I am indeed very old. Older than you can possibly imagine. So it's a good name. Now you are most interesting to me. In particular I see you are possessed of a great love. Your love for your mother who passed away last year. She adored you and you returned her love. You nursed her devotedly as she lay dying, bringing her great comfort. Such love is very rare. Such love is very beautiful. Such love is very helpful to me - the fuel of my being. Give me that love and I will give you what you want.'

The young man lifted his eyebrows. He had heard of such encounters with the Old One. They rarely ended well. 'It's true that I did love my mother - and that I love her still. How can I give you that love? It's an abstract thing. It belongs to me'.

'That is my problem. I just need you to make the deal. I will do the rest. You will feel nothing, save an odd lurch in your inward being'.

The young man hesitated. Now he was sweating. 'So Old One - you must know what I want. If you can truly give it to me then I will make the deal.'

'Let us consider it done then. Did you feel the lurch just then. I shall now take my leave. I am also known as the Prince of Lies, but I can solemnly assure you that you will become, as you want, a great man. Believe me - people will remember your name for thousands of years...thousands of years'.

The mist dissipated slowly. The young man stood in a trance, his hypnotic light blue eyes staring into space. The door opened and his friend returned. 'I heard voices. Who were you speaking to Adolf?'

5. Mules

What's a mule? Well everybody knows that. Where I work there are four hundred of them. Great big devils made of metal: each one fifty yards long. They trundle back and forth with a grinding roar on their metal rails. Four hundred - all in step together from the central mill power crankshaft. Spinning cotton on dozens of spindles at a time. We put the cotton rovings in one end and out the other come spindles of fine yarn. Assuming me and my brother run about fast enough.

I'm a piecer. Me I'm Jimmy. At fourteen ; and my young brother John at eight; together we make two piecers who work with a grown man, that's old Ted, to run two mules at the same time and spin the yarn.

We call it Crompton's mule, 'cos he invented it; so Dad says. Samuel Crompton of Bolton. Dad goes to the library to read the newspaper and see what that Napoleon is up to. Dad says that Parliament has voted to give Crompton some money, 'cos he didn't get any when he invented it and now there are over four million spindles in Lancashire using his invention and making millions for Parliament in taxes. Seems fair to me.

What's a piecer? Well that would take me a while to explain. We work from our little space between the mules. The yarn breaks a lot and we have a few seconds to join it together as the mule does not stop - we reach in and roll it with our fingers to join it up - that's piecing. We also do the doffing - that's taking off the spindles, and the oiling - that's putting oil on the yarn. The oil gets everywhere.

Then the really tricky bit is the cleaning. For that the mules do stop. We piecers have to run the length of the mules cleaning off the muck. Then we run to our places of safety and the man restarts the mules. We can run pretty fast 'cos we're in our bare feet. It's very hot - over eighty five Fahrenheit - so we don't get cold. We hope to God the man has good eyesight to see us clearly through the flying muck and not mistake some other boys for us, and doesn't restart until we are in our places. Ted hasn't killed either of us yet.

Not like that other poor lad whose man was dopy from drinking. His mules stopped for a good while that day. The men got a subscription up for the dead boys' mother as he was her only support. The boss wasn't going to sack the man but the rest of the men got together and made him do it. There's power in joining together don't you think?

My brother and I are lucky to have our jobs. It's hard work and the hours are long - from seven in the morning till five thirty at night with an hour for dinner - but the money keeps our heads above water and food on the table.

Dad says some men want to smash the mules up. They want to force the employers to go back to hand spinning. They call their leader King Ludd. That would employ ten times as many men - or perhaps twenty times more. But would I have a job without my mules? I don't think so. Without the mules me and my brother would be on the streets, Napoleon and the Frenchies would be making all the cotton yarn and soon the hand spinners would all be on the streets with me. Men like Crompton are great men. Without their like no one would have invented the plough and we would still be living like animal and digging corn with wooden sticks. Anyway that's what I think. Anyway Dad says the new Frames Act will soon get all King Ludd's followers hanged.

Now I don't want to be doing this job for ever. In a few years I'll be a man and they'll put me in charge of a team of two piecers myself, but it's no job for man to grow old doing. I think I can see the way some improvements might be made to the mules. If I can save a bit - and maybe interest some gentleman in a partnership then maybe we can get a patent and make a fortune.

Anyway that's my dream.

I like to dream. It keeps me happy when the yarn keeps breaking and I struggle to keep up and another cleaning is due and I've been on my bare feet for ten hours today and my little brother is looking very weak and not so nippy.

And Ted is showing his age now and seems to be half asleep.

6. Magic

Ioconnu, the Laughing Magician, had long irritated those unfortunate enough to live in his neighbourhood; which neighbourhood encompassed several hundred leagues around his manse. Ioconnu was possessed of many spells and enchantments which he had used to bring into being a magnificent castle, furnished with every luxury, and which he continued to use for many vexatious acts, to the great discomfort of his neighbours.

One Eldoran, a watchmaker lived close by. He had a beautiful daughter, whom he cherished.

Ioconnu had noticed the girl and one day carried her off to his castle with a spell of Encumbrancing Encirclement, where he had toyed with her for a week, before, his lusts sated, he used Plunging Stasis to bury her sixty feet below ground, where he had disposed of many others, to remain fixed in a barely living sleep.

Eldoran ground his teeth in his rage and fury. He knew it would be useless to attack directly. He must use his brains, which fortunately, he had in abundance. He retired to his workshop.

After many days and night of intense labour Eldoran had finished crafting the little machine he felt sure would prove useful; perhaps even allow him to overcome his enemy. The machine was made of gold and very small, no bigger than a walnut. It resembled a sort of watch in that it had a face with a tiny wheel that could rotate on a spindle. He had used all his skill in making the bearings extremely smooth, almost entirely frictionless. He slipped it in his robe and set off for Ioconnu's manse.

The night of Old Earth was coming on. The sun, swollen to a great size in its old age, hung in the air like a great balloon covering a quarter of the sky; dull red with dark blotches. Deep red light lit the ground and threw dark blue shadows from the trees by the path. Each branch cast a shadow with a penumbra of refracted colour mixes: gules, argent, indigo, carmine, violet. As the light breeze blew the branches moved and made the colours dance and ripple.

Night birds began to make their presence known with their calls: reedy oboes, shrill piccolos and dull bassoons. The night orchestra sang a threnody for lost souls, of which there were, in this age of the dying Earth, after the passage of innumerable previous eons, eras and epochs, many trillions.

Eldoran warily passed along the path, his gait cautious and delicate. Things other than birds came out at night. He could smell the damp earth, rich with rotting vegetation and fungi.

At length he came to Ioconnu's residence, lit by a golden light from within. He paused and raised a great shout, 'Ioconnu come out. You have insulted me. You have besmirched and entombed my beloved daughter. All this is to my great annoyance. I will make you wish you had considered more carefully.'

Ioconnu appeared at his great door. He emitted his characteristic laughter, a high pitched and unpleasant cackle. 'I hear you Eldoran. I meant no offence. If I have done you an injury I wish to make recompense. Come inside and let us discuss the matter like reasonable men. I have just opened a bottle of a marvellous wine. Do share a glass with me'.

He raised his hand and chanted the spell of Encumbrancing Encirclement, which he intended to cause Eldoran to be helplessly bound with ropes. But Eldoran had pressed a button on his little machine, which began to emit a high pitched whirring and rose a foot into the air in front of Eldoran's face. The machine was levitated by magic, and magic, though powerful, was not infinite in extent. The machine was spinning at ten thousand revolutions per second. Such was the speed of the machine that it consumed all the magic latent in the immediate vicinity and nullified Ioconnu's spell.

Ioconnu ceased his laughter. He gabbled the runes of his most powerful spell, Universal Encyclic Interference. The spell burst upon Eldoran with a flash of light and a boom of thunder; the ground shook with its force. But the whirring machine consumed the magic and the spell had no effect.

Ioconnu ran to his door and retreated inside, where more powerful spells and energetic demons protected the entry.

Eldoran moved to the foot of the wall of the great building, dug a small tunnel with a tool, turned the dial up to maximum and placed the machine inside. The high pitched whirring became a tortured scream as the revolutions climbed to millions per second. The little machine rose inexorably. The building shuddered, foundations cracked and parted with a groan. Masonry fell in shards as the building climbed rapidly into the air, taking Ioconnu with it, up past the stratosphere and on into space.

Such prodigious expenditure of energy consumed magic to exhaustion for hundreds of yards around. With a rapid series of pops those who had been buried with Plunging Stasis returned to the surface from sixty feet below. Among them was Eldoran's beautiful daughter,

wearing a dazed expression. Eldoran, now laughing himself, ran to his daughter and embraced her.

(A tale of the dying Earth - apologies to Science Fiction Grand Master Jack Vance)

7. Gorse

A beautiful breezy Monday by the shore. No clouds. A pale sun bouncing white light off the waves and making the practically deserted links an intense green in the late morning. Bill Cameron opened his shoulders and took a manly swing with his driver. Alas he hooked it ferociously. The ball flew high in the air. It was going to travel a long way. It made a sweet curve of over one hundred yards, before it touched down and vanished in the bright yellow flowers of the gorse.

Bill was a fifty year old accountant, not given to displays of temper. He cursed quietly and spoke to his golf partner, another middle aged man, this time a computer programmer. 'Sorry Jack. Looks like I've lost it. Let's call it a day. You win by four. I'll toddle over and have a good look for it. I'm tired of buying new balls. Maybe I'll find a few in that gorse. Why don't you take off and get one in at the clubhouse. I'll be along later.'

Jack was happy to win, which he did rarely. He was always losing when Bill the accountant found the bugs in his supposedly well tested computer code. He walked off whistling.

Bill was left alone on the course. Around him the links stretched wide and flat. The sea shone cheerfully and the wavelets chuckled as they came up the shore. He relaxed, breathed in the salty sea air and smiled. He was happy to be left alone. Out in this beautiful morning, enjoying the natural charm of the place where he lived and worked. He walked lazily over to the gorse bushes. It had gone in about there. He contemplated the tangled mass of thorny green foliage, each bush crowding the next and all bearing a mass of bright yellow flowers.

What did they call it in the village? Jenny flower? Where they had got the term *Planta Genet* or *Plantagenet*. The name of the English dynasty of kings of the three hundred years before the Tudors, who used the yellow flower as an emblem. He liked that. It was the one bit of history he remembered; the Black Prince slaughtering the French at the battle of Poitiers at the end of his raid through France. Funny how they used to teach such stuff to kids - all patriotic glory and carefully leaving out the ghastly savagery and cruelty, the rapine, the looting, the slaughter of innocent children. Glorifying a bunch of thugs. Probably they taught it differently these days. He must ask his daughter Caroline, who was still at school at sixteen. She could tell him what was going on these days at school.

He could see a thin sandy track that the rabbits had made. He ventured down it, pushing the bushes aside with his arms. God those thorns were sharp. Gave the rabbits some

protection from the foxes and stray dogs no doubt. Soon he was deep in the tangled vegetation. He searched the ground for the ball. Ah there it was. He picked it up. No that was not his. He put it in his pocket and pushed on. In fifty yards he found three more, though still not his. This was worthwhile work. Then he heard a noise. Somebody was up ahead of him. He became still and listened.

There were two people. It became clear what they were doing. Out here in the depths of the gorse, where they thought no one could see them. Yes definitely two people, one male and one female. Not talking but something else. Unmistakable noises. Grunts and groans, slapping and sucking. They were really going at it. He was curious to see. He moved another two feet closer. This was being a voyeur. He didn't want to be seen. He gently moved a branch aside. The amorous pair came into view, the man on top, the girl beneath, her mauve satin knickers with lace trim wrapped around one ankle that was raised high in the air. Dirty devils!

The mauve knickers must have been the latest fashion in that week at Marks and Sparks. They were the same mauve as those his daughter had bought last week. She had pranced around the living room in them. Showing them off. Her mother and he had not approved. Too tarty by half.

Jesus H Christ! He started violently and stilled himself to immobility by sheer will power. That was his daughter Caroline there on the ground, underneath her latest boyfriend, Colin in the sixth form.

So that was what was going on at school these days! He shuddered and slid rearwards quickly, making no noise.

Back on the golf course sweating. His shirt stuck to his skin. He collected himself. What to do.

He walked up to the clubhouse. Hopefully Jack will have got one in for him by now.

Make it a double please Jack, I have just had a nasty fright. No - no matter - just a dead rabbit half eaten by a fox. I'm now working to forget it. Yes do let's have another.

8. Wheelbarrow

Frank Thurston, a sixty year old widower who worked as an accountant in London, was busy in his Surrey garden. It was a splendid Autumn Saturday morning with clear blue sky. He was enjoying himself with his leaves. The trees surrounding his large suburban garden had dropped their yellow, brown and gold millions on his lawn with last night's wind and rain. He was raking them up and depositing them in his rusty old wheelbarrow, prior to their further deposition on his commodious compost heap, whence they would rot down gracefully during the next two years and then be returned to his garden again. An excellent cycle of rot and renewal which appealed to his sense of order. He smiled with pleasure.

Over the fence appeared the lank hair and pasty features of his neighbour's son Robin. Now over thirty years old, but still a child in his mind and behaviour. On the spectrum they called it. Frank used to call it being dopy and simple minded, but had stopped using the terms after being corrected by the self appointed sheriff of the parish, his other neighbour. Frank's smile grew broader. He liked Robin, who was invariably cheerful.

'Hello young Robin, how are you this morning?'

No reply from Robin, which was par for the course. Frank tried again. 'I'm gathering up my leaves for compost', he said. This time he did get a response. Robin smiled in his turn and said, 'Wheelbarrow'.

'Yes that's my wheelbarrow, for the leaves'. Frank and Robin carried on their one sided conversation for a while and then Robin went in for his lunch.

Shortly after Robin's mother came out. She was a widow now, since her husband died a couple of years ago. She was slim and slightly stooped, with white hair after thirty years of caring for Robin. 'Hello Frank, lovely morning isn't it? Robin wants you to come over tonight to see his wheelbarrow. Would you be able? He is very keen on you coming.'

'Of course I can. What's it all about? I haven't seen him with a wheelbarrow.'

'I'm to keep it a secret. He'll show you when you come. Come after dark.'

Darkness came early. The sky had not clouded over and the stars came out clearly in this well wooded and ill lit suburb. Frank looked up as he went next door. There was Venus, lovely and white in her splendour. There was Mars, red as ever, chasing Venus pell-mell through the night sky. There was bold Jupiter, playing gooseberry. He would need to let his eyes adjust for a while to see the others.

Frank knocked and was let in by Robin's mother, opening the door in her apron and releasing a powerful smell of chicken stock, garlic and onions, which Frank had often noticed

hanging appetisingly around the garden. Frank envied Robin his meals. She directed him upstairs to Robin's workroom, which he had not visited before. Frank had known that Robin was often in his workroom tinkering with stuff, and was interested to see what he had been doing.

The room was large and high ceilinged. It was crammed with work benches on which were placed bits of apparatus of all kinds - a small lathe, an anvil, saws and clamps. In the middle of the room and sticking out of the open window was a twenty foot long two feet thick pole that looked like an unusual form of telescope.

'Good Lord Robin, what's that? What have you been up to in here?'

'Wheelbarrow', said Robin. Which was no help. Frank called down to Robin's mum. 'Edna, come up and help me out. What is all this stuff?'

Edna came up and beamed at both of them. She was no longer wearing her apron and had applied a bit of lipstick. 'See what my clever boy has done. He's made all this. Just by himself and looking at the internet things. That's his telescope. Robin, show Frank what you can see through your telescope'.

Robin showed Frank how to put his eye to the telescope. He did so.

Frank saw the glory of the night sky. Time stood still for him. He was lost in wonder as a billion coloured pinpoints of light twinkled in the deep black of space. Robin turned the wheels. Saturn swam into vision. With its magnificent rings. Then the Andromeda nebula - so near and yet clearly so distant. Trillions and trillions of miles away. Then brightly banded Jupiter with four moons circling. Frank remembered the story, from his long ago schooldays, of the first human to see them. Old Galileo, the Italian genius, on his no doubt creaky old man's knees recanting before the authorities, who denied his facts, but secretly murmuring in despite, that the Earth really did move around the sun, 'Eppur si muove'.

Robin turned the wheels again. There was the constellation that most called the Great Bear, or the Big Dipper, or the Plough. 'Wheelbarrow, wheelbarrow!' crowed Robin. Frank surfaced from his trance and laughed. 'Yes Robin old chap. It is indeed like a Wheelbarrow. And we shall call it that.'

Edna said, 'Frank, would you like to stay for a bit of dinner, when you have done with your telescope looking? I've cooked a chicken and there's plenty for three'. She moved close to Frank and tilted up her head so that he looked into her eyes. He held her gaze for a long moment. Her eyes were a clear light blue. She was still a good looking woman. Why not he thought, why not.

'It smells delicious', he said. 'Thank you very much. I will indeed'.

9. Turnip

The house sat on its rump, on its own broad lawn, on its own estate; in calm, beautifully proportioned splendour. The very pinnacle of domestic architecture since the world began. The architectural style known broadly as Queen Anne. The early morning sun shone on the mellow stone and the grass.

I smiled with pleasure as I drove up to the back of the building and parked my little car next to the Bentley already there. I had been invited to look over the house by a student in my history class; a scion of the Townsend family, which had held the estate for over four hundred years. I was researching the life and times of Charles, Second Viscount Townsend, KG, PC, FRS, a man who, in the early eighteenth century, was ambassador to the Netherlands under Queen Anne, where he helped negotiate the Treaty of Utrecht that brought peace to Europe and subsequently, together with Walpole, Kings George 1st and 2nd and the Whigs, ran the country for many years, promoting an anti-war policy in Europe.

The great house appeared to be deserted, but the estate manager appeared, it must have been his Bentley. 'Do come in my dear chap, Tommy told me you were coming. Wander as you will. Just don't steal the paintings'. He left me to explore the grandly spacious rooms, some of the ceilings forty feet high, faintly smelling of dust and polish.

The silence was profound. The sun shone through the tall windows, casting narrow beams through the dust motes. I was entranced.

Eventually I sat down on a chair placed for the guide at the side of the master bedroom, to rest for a while. I was tired and dozed off. I must have been psychically attuned in some way as I had a very unusual dream.

There he was before me with a sunbeam behind his head; the noble Lord himself, clad in his garter robes just as in his portrait by Kneller. He was rather indistinct - indeed the sunbeam was shining through his head.

'Well Sir, what do you think of my house?' His voice was a rich baritone with a nasal honk. His accent was odd. Of course it was eighteenth century upper class. Eton and Cambridge. Tinged with his native Essex. 'Cost me a pretty penny don't you know. It's the finest house in Norfolk. Far superior to that of my esteemed colleague Walpole at Houghton'.

I felt honoured to be addressed by the great man. I tried to summon up a topic of conversation to interest him and prolong the visitation so that I did not wake up.

'Indeed my lord, it is perhaps the most beautiful house in the kingdom... may I ask you, while you are here, to cast your mind over your long and successful career. I am

thinking of your suppression of the Jacobite rebellion, your work on the negotiation of the Treaty of Utrecht, your peace with Sweden and Denmark, your rapprochement with France. Some details you could offer would greatly help my research'.

'Ah yes indeed. Many years of work. Many difficult negotiations. Many awkward bastards to wrestle with in the Lords, which I controlled. And in the Commons the greatest bastard Walpole: who eventually ousted me. His dishonesty outmatched my probity. When they had bribed him he would do their bidding. Not for me that way. I am an honest man and proud of it.' Then he fell silent.

What he had said was extremely interesting but not what I needed. Could I obtain new research facts from him? I had no details. But surely he could help. Here he was, Viscount Townsend, somehow existing simultaneously in the present and in the past. Bit like a quantum particle. What did he make of his reputation in the present time? I asked him. He paused and seemed to consider carefully. He started gradually to fade but creaked out an answer.

'Well I do see many people who come to my house to enjoy its splendour. Yes many of them, all ranks and stations. Many foreigners. Many schoolchildren. As they troop through the halls they do occasionally remark my name. Mainly they talk about the furniture. The old ladies bemoan their painful shoes. With the children the principal focus, when rarely I am the subject of discussion, is my invention of what they call the four course rotation system of the Agricultural Revolution, which seems to be part of the curriculum in their places of education. Unlike in my day when it was Latin and Greek. And of course Rhetoric, which I always enjoyed...

His voice dwindled down. He was vanishing. I urged more from him. 'What else do you know?'

'It seems, despite my long and glorious career managing the diplomatic affairs of the Kingdom, cementing the join of England and Scotland - ha! till now perhaps - and setting the fate of several countries of Europe, I am principally known for helping the production of more food per acre with fewer people. They call me Turnip Townsend.'

He vanished. The sunbeam shone unobstructed to the floor. I mused. There could be worse epitaphs.

10. Steeple

The April morning was bright and sunny. The sky a clear blue with a scattering of small fluffy clouds up high. Forty thousand feet up those clouds were. Strato-cumulus as he recalled. Hank stepped out across the short, springy turf with a vigorous tread, breathing deeply of ozone laden air with a hint of thyme and other chalk-down herbs. The sea shone grey and shiny over Studland Bay.

He was temporarily a young man again, reliving his time here in 1944, when he, a young colonel in the US Army Air Force, had commanded a squadron of Mitchell medium bombers, relentlessly pulverising Nazi Panzers to stop them pushing back the Americans landing on Omaha beach. Good days, though terrifying.

Then his walking stick slipped a little on the dew-wet downland turf. Ouch! His arthritic knee didn't like that at all. Back in his old body again. Never mind, it was a good day to be alive. Maybe he would really meet her again. The girl he had met then and with whom he had had a brief but lyrical affair. She had been a sweet and pretty blond, with a slim figure and lips like cherries. He smiled at the cliché, but it had really seemed like that to him. Iris was beautiful. They had parted when the war ended and he had returned to the States, leaving the military and starting out his business in radio engineering. Eventually he had married an American girl, the lovely Edna. She had come with him on this holiday, still lovely in his eyes, but old, grey and well crinkled now. She was presently shopping in Bournemouth or Dorchester or somewhere. He would see her back at the hotel this evening. He did not want her with him on this assignment.

He had arranged to meet his old love today, here in Dorset. Would she be at the meeting? Of course he would probably not recognise her, or she him. But they had made arrangements. He had his old air force cap in his pocket. She would have a red, white and blue headscarf.

He had found out her address by employing a detective agency. It took only a couple of hundred dollars and a few weeks. They obviously had access to all the online files and records. Then he had written to her. And then, to his great joy, she had replied. Apparently she lived in a tiny Dorset village called Steeple, population sixty five. Now he was walking down the lane to the village, his stick rattling on the stones in the dusty earth; flints eroded out of the chalk, which formed the walls of many of the local buildings, though not the tiny medieval church of St. Michael and All Angels, which he was now quickly approaching and

could see was made of the local grey Purbeck stone. She had told him she would be in the village church at midday.

He walked through the little wicket gate into the churchyard. Old weathered grave stones standing crookedly in the earth under the yew trees. All was silent and green with lichen and moss. He entered the church. The old church smell strong in his nostrils, damp lime wash, mould, old wood, a faint whiff of polish where someone had attended to the wooden pews. Only one person in it - a little old lady by the altar. She heard him and turned. She knew him. He knew her. She smiled. He went up to her and they stood face to face.

'Hello Hank', she said, 'where have you been all these years? Amazingly her voice was the one he remembered. A stupid grin split his face.

'Hi Iris', he replied, 'I've been in the States'. They stood silent for a long moment. Then he said. 'So you recognise me then, after fifty years?'

'Well you're not as young and pretty as you were, but it's still you. Your voice is much the same.'

'And you my lovely Iris, are as beautiful as ever'.

'Still a smooth talker then'.

They talked for a long time, after a while moving to sit side by side in the one of the pews. Eventually, inevitably, they both realised the ravages of time in each other. They had both changed. They were not the same mad young couple of the war years. The talk slowed.

'Well Iris - thank you very much for agreeing to see me. Meeting you again has given me a great deal of pleasure. I hope you haven't regretted it'.

'Not at all my dear Hank, it has been a pleasure for me too. You changed my life. I look back on it all with fondness. Though you made me very unhappy for a while when you went back to the States. Let me show you one thing before you go. It's here in the porch'. She stood up and led him to the arch under the porch. There on the wall was an ancient carved plaque. 'Look - these are the arms of the Lawrences in the seventeenth century. Also the arms of your George Washington. You can see the Stars and Stripes.'

'Well I'll be damned, you're right'.

'Goodbye Hank. You can write to me you know'.

'I will my love. Goodbye. Look after your self'.

11. Asymptote

'Good morning Elon, thanks for taking my call'. Yuri tensed up. His earlier calls had found the great man unavailable. It looked to be third time lucky. He held the landline phone cradled on his left shoulder, his pen in his right hand, ready to take whatever notes might be needed. The conversation was rather important.

The reply had come immediately. It seemed the great man was now available. 'No problem Yuri, nice to hear from you. How are you' How's the AI business?

'I'm fine thank you - just thinking of our old days at Paypal- I'm calling from Kiev - just wanting to thank you for your fantastically generous gift of the satellite coverage'.

'Great days Yuri, great days - yes I hear it has made a big difference - done a bit to level the playing field - when they spot a tank they can call up a Javelin crew on a farm cart double quick to take it out. Of course it's all good advertising'.

'No really you should be proud of yourself. My fellow Ukrainians plan to erect a statue of you in Odessa'.

'Well that'll be nice. I'll come and see it when the war is over. What can I do for you?'

'I'll get down to it. I have an idea for a weapon that will make another big difference. I'll give you the five minute version now and then I want one hundred million from you and your best military aviation contacts at your space business.'

'Right - fire away'.

Yuri quickly gathered his thoughts. Outside the window was the winter, cold and grey. His fellow countrymen crouched in sodden ditches and cringing as they endured shell bursts from the enemy artillery. 'It's basically an unmanned drone that can hit a tank directly point blank with a five hundred pound bomb by dropping it from twenty feet away. It will fly at six hundred miles per hour at only fifty feet up. Immune to radar and counter missiles. I've just bought a couple of BAE hawks second hand from the Bahreini airforce - that's the plane that the Royal Air Force fly as the Red Arrows acrobatic team'

'I've seen the plane - those guys making pretty smoke rings in the sky. I caught an air show in Dallas last year'.

'It's a great little plane - rated at over nine G. Hopefully enough to stand the turbulence at fifty feet with the violent manoeuvres we plan to use.'

'You reckon you can do the target acquisition and aiming do you?'

'Yes I do. I've just placed an order for the chips on a fab in Taiwan. Now I'm out of money' Yuri paused and considered his words. 'I need more to finish the job. Especially the command and control'.

'I thought you said it was unmanned'.

'Yes indeed, but we can't have it roaming over the countryside selecting whatever targets it fancies. It will be operating close to our front lines. Perhaps on top of them. And our tanks look just like theirs.'

'I see"

Yuri paused again. He was sweating, beads from his forehead dropped on his notepad. 'We will need a tight beam coms channel. I plan a small truck sitting maybe thirty miles behind our lines. The plane will take off from a bit of straight road. Three hundred yards should do it. '

'Hold on', from Elon, 'I have to take this - hold the phone I won't be a moment'. Yuri waited. He could hear Elon shouting at one of his minions. Then Elon was back. 'Sorry about that. Some people can't understand plain English. Where were we? Your drone is taking off'.

'Yes. The guys in the truck can give the OK when a target is acquired, guide the plan back to land on the road when it has dropped its bomb, reload it with another bomb and repeat the cycle. We will also target artillery pieces. We need to defend against jamming. If we use three truck crews we can bomb every half hour round the clock. In a month they won't have any tanks or artillery left. And we will have won the war'.

'I love your confidence. Just like you were in Paypal days. And we got that working didn't we?'

'Yes we did'. Yuri played the trump card he had held until now. 'I will grant you a ten year free lease to use the patents I am filing on the software and the chips. Should help quite a bit with your big Falcon rocket I hear you are planning for Space X'. Yuri waited. He had made his pitch. He mopped his brow.

'Yuri - you are one hell of a salesman. Count me in. Get your people to call my people and fix up the details. I'll wire you a hundred million today. Good luck with the project. Let's meet up when you come over next. So long old buddy'.

'So long Elon and thanks', said Yuri and slumped on his desk.

12. Pennies

Jerry Garcia, twenty five year old painter in oils, walked with pleasure, down Brighton's Preston Street, towards the sea front. He looked forward to his morning coffee and croissant at Luigi's. He sniffed the air and savoured the spicy Middle-Eastern smell of the street, perhaps the most cosmopolitan street this side of Istanbul. On every side Indian, Arab, Jewish and Turkish shops and restaurants, their exhalations producing a fine mist of exotic nose pleasure.

On a Spring day like today, with a bright morning sun high in a cloudless blue sky, he had to feel joyful, despite the nagging feeling of the impending disaster that would surely befall him, should he fail to produce the rent money by tonight. The landlord, a greedy money-grubbing old bastard, would there and then eject him from his one room flat in Regency Square, that he used as his live-in studio. He enjoyed the fifteen foot high ceilings in the old style, where, in front of his easel, with a half dozen brushes in his mitt and a pretty model girl posing as before him, nude save for a Russian fur hat, the painter could pretend he was Matisse.

Luckily the model was also his girlfriend. She posed for him without charge. Otherwise he would have had no model to paint. He thought of her now, such a lovely sight. He had trained briefly in Italy and planned, in the manner of Bottone, to add small cadmium yellow streaks as matching highlights in the dark brown fur that luxuriated, in the hat and between her legs.

'Hi Jerry', this from his friend Anton, a fellow painter, though in acrylics rather than oils, who stood waiting for him outside Luigi's cafe.

'Hi Anton. Fabulous day. Shame I'm about to be thrown out into the street tonight. Got any room in that basement of yours?'

'No chance mate. There's three of us in there tonight, in a room meant for one. It'll have to be the beach under the Palace Pier for you then'.

'Yeah, along with all the junkies. No thanks'

'Come on. Cheer up. I'll buy you a breakfast to ease your pain'.

'Thanks. I owe you one'

'Why don't you sell one of your paintings? That soft porn stuff you enjoy painting so much should fetch a price in the Lanes.'

'It's not porn - it's art. Don't laugh you cynic. And I'm serious about it.' Jerry glared at Anton, who smiled his apology. Jerry went on. 'I've got a good one on the go, but it's not yet finished. I worked on it for ten hours yesterday. I need another month to finish it.'

'You need to paint faster old son. If you want to make a living. We live in a different world from your old Italian masters, who could take years over a painting. Slap it on and sell it. That's my motto.'

They stood for a moment outside the cafe, enjoying the sun and the fine crisp ozone savour blowing in from the sea and the beach seaweed...

At 10:17 that morning the 10.00 hours Aerolineas flight from Gatwick to Buenos Aires was in a steep ascent at 32, 000 feet over Three Bridges in Sussex, when the bomb went off. Five pounds of Semtex in the hold exploded, and split the plane in two.

Signora Fernandez had left her first class seat and was in the first class toilet. After consuming that morning a full English breakfast in the Savoy hotel, and recently the prawn stuffed canapes bounteously offered by the steward, she had begun to evacuate her bowels. She finished her evacuation, bowels and aeroplane, and expired, frozen stiff, at 31,00 feet. Her body, with outstretched arms, produced some slight aerodynamic lift, and she glided down to the Channel. The contents of the toilet, also frozen solid, produced the proverbial zero lift effect of frozen excrement, and dropped towards the South Downs.

Dozens of other passengers also exited the plane, froze and died. They, together with their assorted bits of luggage, flew down in dozens of gently curving paths. An elegant spray of contrail parabolas.

Signorina Penelope Brazos, a career criminal and drug smuggler, and the target of the assassination, also flew out of the plane and, post mortem, towards the Channel. Her large leather bag in the hold of the plane contained several million dollars in large bills. It had some slight aerodynamic configuration and headed for Brighton, plunging down to Earth and landing near the Brighton boundary with Hove. As it happened in Preston Street. Penelope's bag hit with a dull splat and burst its seams.

Bundles of money spilled out on the pavement. Both men jumped in alarm. Anton squeaked out 'Jesus Christ Almighty - that could have killed us'.

Jerry grabbed up two fistfuls of the money. Perhaps his problems were over. Unaware of the grinding irony of his comment he said, 'Look Anton, Pennies - from Heaven'.

13. Mountainside

Janine Johnson ran hard up the hot dusty track towards her lodge, the smell of pine needles thick in the air. The last part of her daily workout route was uphill and she needed to maximise the exercise she obtained from her free time. Sweat gathered in large dusty beads on her neck and chest. Her breath came in deep gasps. Having slept all day, after last night's observing session, she looked forward to her shower and evening breakfast before driving up again to the telescopes at the top of the mountain.

Janine was a young post doc at the Gran Canaria observatory in La Palma, one of the Canary Islands. Tonight she would be observing for her professor's project on black hole classification. The prof was back in Madrid, many hundred miles away, and would be sleeping normally tonight, but someone had to be on hand to change the filters. He had been lucky to get time on the instrument, the world's largest single aperture telescope, set among a dozen others atop the highest mountain on the island, the Roque de los Muchachos. Janine's reward would be to be one of the dozen or so authors on the paper when it was published. A step up in her career and a small move towards obtaining tenure. Maybe the research on black holes would add something to this latest frontier of physics, where gravity meets the quantum and the maths dissolves in meaningless infinities. She was happy in her assignment.

She consulted her horoscope for the day, oddly for a scientist, but she was an Aquarius, known for being cooky. Astrology was part of her cookiness. Breakfast was cereal and fruit juice, then she jumped into her little Toyota and drove up the mountain in the gathering dusk. Disturbingly, the horoscope warned of danger. It wouldn't hurt to drive carefully.

More than a thousand miles away was the middle of the Atlantic ocean, where the mid Atlantic mountain ridge ran north to south for thousands of miles at a depth of some 5000 feet. The ridge grew both east and west by about one inch non each side, creating new ocean floor as it did so. The Atlantic thus grew wider, over the millennia, from a time when South America and Africa were conjoined, as can be deduced by anyone who looks at the map. Alfred Wegener had suggested this possibility in 1920, and called it continental drift. He was derided. It took until the fifties before geologists belatedly realised the truth, that great tectonic plates were moving, pushing up the edges of the continents with resulting earthquakes and volcanoes.

Between the ridge and the Canary islands is the pelagic abyssal zone, pitch black at a depth of some fifteen thousand feet and a pressure of over 700 atmospheres. The island of La

Palma, an almost extinct volcano, rises sheer from the abyss. The Roque, the mountain with the observatories, carries on the almost vertical rise to six thousand feet more. That's a long way to fall. There are people who worry that an eruption would cause the whole mountainside to slip down to the abyss, and result in a tsunami wave some thousands of feet high. That's a big splash.

Tonight, as Janine drove carefully up the road, a whiff of smoke was issuing from the old caldera. She noticed it out of the corner of her eye. Would it affect tonight's viewing? Her anxiety was for her team's precious observing slot. Cancellation would set the project back many months.

She reached the telescope site, parked and entered the control room. 'Hi Janine, we're all set for your session'. This from Pedro, a Spaniard from the control team. Fortunately for Janine, who had very little Spanish, English was the lingua franca of science. She liked Pedro, who she knew was a Leo, but not the aggressive kind.

'Great thanks. Did you see the smoke from the caldera?'

Alfonso, the senior controller, answered. 'Yes, the geological office says it's nothing to worry about. What does your horoscope say?' He was a Pisces, and very artistic. They all ribbed her about her astrology.

'Well it warned me of danger. So better stay in touch with the geological office. Let's get started. You know the starting filter'. She smiled at Alessandro the handsome filter engineer. He was a Libra, harmonious and balanced. A good match for her Aquarius. She was trying to get him interested.

Then the phone rang. It was the geological office. Alfonso answered the phone. His face grew serious. He spoke in Spanish. Janine did not understand what was happening. Alessandro translated for her. 'Apparently there is now a possibility of an eruption. They are saying it is an unprecedented event. How do you say. A black swan - an unanticipated possibility has now become a likelihood. I think they are panicking. They insist. We have to evacuate. Come let's go.' Alessandro took her arm and led her out to the open ground with the others. A grey smoke plume was now visible, rising gently from the caldera. Was that a tiny ground tremor she felt? She laughed. Perhaps it was just her reaction to sexy Alessandro's arm round her shoulder.

Two hours passed. The crew stood around in a desultory fashion, cold, bored and restless. It was hard breathing the thin air at this height. The hard grey-white light of the Milky Way, with its billion stars, rolled slowly and spectacularly overhead as the Earth turned. As scientists they wanted to be doing science on this expensive and rare machine, not

wasting time doing nothing. Eventually Pedro, the Leo, spoke up. 'I'm going back to do some work.. I can't stand the thought of all those millions of dollars sitting idle'.

'Ok lets go back', Alfonso was convinced. 'We all have to die sometime. I doubt if it will be tonight'. They all traipsed back. Work resumed. Janine's project obtained excellent data. There were no earth tremors.

As dawn broke optical observing finished. Alfonso said, 'What does your horoscope say today Janine?'

Janine consulted the new morning edition on the web. 'It says I should look out for a new love interest in my life. But it's all a load of rubbish isn't it?'

'Is it ?', said Alessandro.

14. Lapis Lazuli

Maureen Smith, five foot four and still pretty, with soft dark hair, was lying on her back in the labour ward trying to give birth. Unfortunately for her she had chosen a delivery date when the nurses were on strike. Staff were thin on the ground; particularly the nurse who was supposed to be administering the pain killer stuff. Maureen was suffering. In her agony her mind wandered. She thought back over her life. What had she done to deserve this?

She had been a dutiful, trusting child. Her misfortune was to have had, in both mother and father, people who had themselves been dutiful and trusting. Indeed a long line of dutiful and trusting folk had preceded her.

Along that line, at some long past time, the mores of the tribal religion, in her case that of Rome, had been introduced as part of every child's basic training. Maureen had learned the meaning of the word 'mores' just a month ago, from her eldest child's school textbook. The dutiful, trusting children had absorbed the precepts and injunctions, and then, in their turn, transmitted them to their children.

As a result young Maureen was devout and punctilious in her observation of the prescribed codes. Mostly this did her some good and little harm. But one injunction, it could be argued, and depending on your point of view, was indeed harmful. That relating to contraception.

Ruby, Emerald, Pearl, Amethyst, Turquoise, Opal and Sapphire had resulted, at roughly eighteen month intervals. Seven beautiful daughters, much beloved of their mother Maureen and more or less tolerated by their father Michael. It was Michael who had instigated the naming of the children after precious stones. 'They are precious', he had said when Ruby arrived, 'and should be given precious names accordingly'.

Michael was a taxi driver. He was the opposite of brainy, but hard working and conscientious. And sexy as hell. You could say that about him. He worked seventy hours per week to get the money to support his family. Fortunately the government helped with the rent on his overcrowded flat and he got income support, so there was enough left over to buy him a few pints at the weekend. Maureen didn't work. Well she did take care of seven children, which occupied her for over one hundred hours per week, but that didn't count as work in the great scheme of things that was the National Statistics Blue Book.

Maureen, opposite to Michael, knew herself to be indeed brainy. She often wondered how she and Michael had come together in life's great lottery of love. She had married Michael at seventeen, swept away by an irresistible sexual attraction, before her education

had made much impression on her. As the children grew older she had devoured the school textbooks and other reading matter they brought home, partly so that she could help them with their homework, but primarily to assuage her growing thirst for learning. Ruby, the eldest, had been bright too. Her passage through the sixth form college had yielded information on population genetics and Dawkin's book, 'The Selfish Gene', whereby Maureen had conjectured that Mother Nature had somehow caused her and Michael to be attracted to each other because, together, they were supremely fertile.

Emerald, the second child, was the opposite of bright, like Michael. Ruby's books on statistics and the intelligence levels of the subsequent children, varying with what she felt to be mathematical correctness along a U shaped curve between her level and Michael's level, had taught Maureen the concept of regression to the mean.

Life in the three bedroom Smith household was chaotic. Lines of drying nappies took pride of place in the rooms and the hall. The allocation of bunk beds in each of two bedrooms had sufficed to accommodate the children at first, but when Maureen had rebelled against Michael's post pint sexual demands and moved her sleeping quarters to sleep in a bunk bed in her daughter's room herself, the resulting overcrowding had necessitated the use of the cupboard under the stairs for the youngest. Michael had taken off the door to the cupboard, so it was not like in Harry Potter.

Michael was not particularly religious. He plodded happily through life with his own mother's banal motto, 'If God brings little feet he will bring little shoes to fit them'. His sadness was that he had no son to take to the football. None of the girls was interested.

Now the eighth was due. Michael had pounced on Maureen as she left her bath, carried her off to the marital bedroom and insisted on sex there and then. It had only taken one such kidnap to impregnate her. They were really that fertile together.

Michael had the child's name all ready. Lapis lazuli. A beautiful jewel of the East.

Now Maureen was in hospital awaiting the birth. The staff in the maternity unit were still mostly not present..

Alas the child seemed to be refusing to be delivered into the cold world. Its selfish genes wished to stay longer in the mother's bountiful warm body. Twelve hours of labour had ensued. The non-striking nurse allocated to deliver the pain killers was not around - busy elsewhere. Maureen's screams went unheard, save by the other six women on the labour ward, who were busy with their own agonies.

Maureen's throat was hoarse with shouting. She went into a strange place in her mind that she had not visited before. She began to curse God. Her language was foul. God was

responsible for her pain. She would see him punished, the wicked cruel old man, if she died in the attempt. The pain pushed her further into a new mental state.

Suddenly all became clear. The scales fell from her eyes and she saw clear the underlying power structure at play. She was not yet middle-aged. She could have another seven babies. To hell with the injunctions and prescriptions issued by wicked cruel old men who never got pregnant. In her brain, brutal logic, clear common sense and sheer self-preservation wrestled as a tag team with the ingrained dutiful devotion she had imbibed as a child: and threw it to the mat. She changed her mind. It was easy. If she got out of this hell she would take the pill. If the priest would not absolve her then she would become a Protestant. That would show them. The paths in her mind showed many avenues to take. Maybe she would cease to be religious at all. In her agony she laughed out loud.

At this moment young Lapis decided to risk being born after all. He - yes he - it was, amazingly, a boy this time, opened his lungs and cried vigorously. A young doctor appeared, running like a hare down the ward, tied the cord, dumped the baby in Maureen's arms, scanned the other labouring women with a glance, and vanished, speeding on to the next nurse free assignment.

Maureen, the memory of her pain already fading, looked at her beautiful baby and loved him with all her heart. His eyes were the deep blue of his name. She drifted off to sleep. Now Michael would have a son to take to the football.

15. Blackthorn

'Look at it, it's coming down in great gobs, each one big as a football. It's already several feet deep - and it's not stopping. You can't drive in this. You'll have to stay here tonight'. Calvin, an old man with a stoop and short cut white hair, peered out of the cottage window at the snowstorm.

His daughter Tessa, sturdy, middle aged and dyed blonde, smiled her acceptance at the invitation. She would be very pleased to spend a bit more time with Pa. Her own family could fend for themselves tonight. 'That'll be nice. We can play chess - like in the old days'. She looked out at the snow, already piling up in drifts under the old blackthorn tree on the lawn. Her car was now almost hidden under a white pillowcase. 'I'll fix us some dinner. I see you've got a nice steak in the fridge. It'll go with your frozen peas'.

'Thanks sweetheart. I'll get out the chess set'. Calvin made his way over to the cupboard, leaning on his heavy walking stick for balance. It sounded loud on the wooden planks of the cottage floor as he tip-tapped across the room.

Tessa cooked the steak and unfroze the peas. She opened a bottle of red and splashed some into the frying pan to make a glazed gravy. Calvin set the table. They ate their dinner and then sat by the fire to play their game. Calvin poured a couple of small glasses of his sloe gin, put his stick down and laid out the board. He was white. He contemplated his opening move. Maybe 'King's Indian' again or perhaps the 'Queen's Gambit'. He knew Tessa was a good player, probably above his level now. He would have to concentrate.

Tessa picked up the stick while she waited. God it was hard and heavy. Shiny black wood with a carved gargoyle head at the top and a brass ferrule at the end. Pa had had it for ages. She caressed the smooth and solid gargoyle. It was serving him well in his old age.

Calvin noticed her approval of the stick. 'I see you like my stick. That's a good stick that is. I have a tale to tell you about it. Now you're grown up enough. But I won't do it tonight. Remind me in the morning'.

They played three games. Tessa won all three, though by the third game Calvin had woken up and she had had to try harder. Had they played a fourth he might have won, but they were both tired and decided to call it a night and go to bed.

Morning came with a change in the weather. The snow had stopped. It was calm and sunny. Tessa looked out the window at the snow covered lawn. The blackthorn tree was in full blossom, a magnificent froth of sunlit white flowers, interlaced with veins of dark black

branches and bejewelled with blobs of snow. 'Pa that's a really beautiful tree. I remember it from my childhood. What's it called?'

'That is 'Prunus spinosa', the Blackthorn tree. Very beautiful and very useful. You had some of my sloe gin last night. I get the sloes from that tree. And my good old stick. I got that from the tree as well. Cut the branch before you were born. Your mother objected, she thought it would harm the tree. But it didn't - look at it now.'

'The drink was lovely - the sloes gave it nice bitter touch'. Tessa thought of her mother, ten years dead now. Mum had liked the sloe gin. 'You asked me to remind you. Last night you had a tale to tell me in the morning - well it's morning now.'

'Ah yes. Ok. Well let's sit in the window seat and I'll tell you the tale. They sat by the window and Calvin began. 'It was a dark and stormy night - yes - don't laugh - really it was - not as bad as last night. No snow but wind and rain and pretty wild. Your mother and I were in here and you were a baby in your cot. We were fast asleep. Then I heard a noise which woke me up. There was someone in the house. I was frightened to death but it was my job to deal with it. I couldn't pass the buck to my wife - and certainly not to the baby.' Calvin laughed. Tessa could see that relating the tale was having an effect on Calvin, who had become very animated. His face had gone white. He went on in a low voice 'I got up quietly, grabbed my stick and went to investigate. I snapped on the light. There he was. A young man with cold eyes. A bloody burglar. He was carrying a knife. He said I was to stay quiet and I wouldn't get hurt.'

Calvin stood up as he relived the scene. His voice dropped to a growl. 'He was in my house. The bloody nerve. Threatening me and my wife and baby. Big mistake. He should have picked someone else to burgle. A red mist came down. I held my stick in both hands with the brass end out in front and ran at him. I poked at his nose but hit his eye instead. I put my weight on it and shoved hard. His eye caved in. He screamed. Then I hit his head with the gargoyle end. He went down on his knees. One more blow and he was on the ground. Then I kept hitting him, taking time for each blow - until he was dead, with his brains spilling out.' Calvin sat back down and became calmer. 'Then I buried him a two feet deep in a shallow trench Under the blackthorn tree. Your mother cleaned up the blood and brains. You will see the hump under the grass - when the snow has melted. You'll have the cottage when I am gone. Don't go digging under the blackthorn tree!'

16. Chimney

Lieutenant Julie Clandon, twenty four, five nine and one hundred and sixty pounds, thought she was pretty tough. She was not averse to matters intellectual, but her delight was in matters physical, running and jumping and playing sport. So, after getting a degree in sports psychology, she had joined the Army. She had revelled in the hard physical training, holding her own against the men in her platoon. She had had one tour of active service in Afghanistan with a motorised infantry regiment, where she, like others in her regiment, had certainly killed enemy combatants at long range with her heavy machine gun, but did not know how many and refused to talk about it. She had been commended for bravery under fire.

On her return, still wanting to push herself, she had applied to join the SAS. She had been accepted as a candidate, under the new regulations, and was currently being reviewed.

Today's task was to climb the Pulbarrow chimney, a granite and limestone rock configuration in the Brecon Beacons, in under one hour. She was a hundred feet up and going well, though her legs and arms were tiring and her breath now came in sobs. She stopped for a rest and hoped for recovery.

The chimney was so called because it was a narrow slit in the cliff face. The idea was to climb it using the body braced against the sides. As the chimney rose it changed in width. Different body positions were called for, now pressing the back and feet against one side as the knees and hands pushed against the other side, moving upwards by squirming, now facing directly into the rock face and, using counterforce between the hand and foot on either side, moving upwards by alternately moving arms and legs.

It was all very complicated. Each posture took energy from the limbs in a different way.

She was climbing in a roped pair. Her leader, just now ten feet above her, was a veteran SAS sergeant, one Don Bradley.

Don was a massive dark hunk of a man. He seemed to merge with the rock itself as he climbed, apparently effortlessly. He felt her stop and called down calmly. 'You're doing fine; take a break if you want, but not too long or you'll stiffen up'. He was keen for her to succeed. He knew that no female had yet passed into the SAS, which had not lowered its standards one iota, and it would be to his credit if his candidate became the first to do so.

Julie also knew the odds against her. As she rested she could feel her tank of energy running low. The first flicker of doubt entered her mind.

'OK let's go', she called up to him and began to squeeze her left leg against the side of the chimney. It wouldn't move. Shit. Try the other leg. That could still move thank God. Press it against the other wall of the chimney. Now move the arm up and hook the fingers over the next hold. Good. Now heave up and place right leg against the wall. Now the arm again.

Everything was hurting, hands and legs, every muscle in her body, but she could ignore that as long as each limb moved when she commanded it to do so. Only another three hundred feet to go. She looked out to the ground below, green and misty. A long way down if she fell. But her rope was securely attached to a piton banged in to a crack in the rock. She took each of them out as she moved upwards, to 'clean' the rock and to reuse again higher up the chimney.

The wind blew in a strong gust. Suddenly a noise from above. Rocks were falling. A shout, then a bang of rock on helmet. Then a scramble of falling debris as Don's great unconscious body plunged past her. Then a mighty yank on her rope that almost pulled her off the cliff as his rope pulled taught and he dangled ten feet below her.

She was taking his weight on her legs. Her legs were buttressed against the chimney. She had to stop her legs giving way. Or they would both fall. She summoned up her fast emptying tank of courage and resolution, made a decision and acted. She would pay out her rope and let him down to the ground. It took a few minutes. The team on the ground could see what was happening. The rope ran out with Don still ten feet up. She had a spare ten feet or so between her and the next piton up. She let herself fall off the cliff to be held by the piton. Don hit the ground. Now she dangled, exhausted and helpless, gently banging against the cliff as the wind took her.

Two soldiers from the ground team swarmed up the chimney. They pulled her in and let her down to the ground.

She and Don were both taken to the hospital. He with concussion and she with broken ribs and lacerated leg muscles and damaged kneecaps. Of course she had failed her test, but they were congratulatory on her presence of mind and decisive action. They would let her have another go when her knees mended, though they told her that might take a few months.

She would have to think seriously about that. Everybody has a limit.

17. Octopus

Three hundred species much the same in habit,
Which eat each other where they meet at all.
Fellows in the mollusca phylum bracket,
Save that some are big and some are very small.

They have three hearts, a widespread brain,
Of which much is dotted through each dimpled
tentacle.

A limb when lost just grows again,
Wondrous creature really quite exceptional.

Each female spawns her fifty thousand eggs
To hang in chains where they are tightly glued.
Poor little darlings with eight little legs,
All but a few are destined to be food.

A life spent eating, then at last they mate,
And soon thereafter they grow old and die.
Senescence comes soon, there is no wait.
They can't live on, however much they try.

Given these facts be grateful to evolution.
Else the world would be three hundred feet deep in
Octopus pollution.

18. Terrace

It must have been in 1958 that my friend Peter and I worked as painters and decorators to make ourselves a bit of money in the summer holidays. Peter and I were seventeen. We had come up together at Brighton, Hove and Sussex Grammar School for six years and knew each other pretty well, though our paths had diverged in the sixth form A level split up, when I took languages and geography and Peter took chemistry and biology. We were both tall and handsome creatures in our buoyant youth, with very beautiful girlfriends a couple of years younger than us. Despite our poverty we gloried in life and the summer sunshine, lazing on the hot shingles on the beach in a mixed group of charming young people, some visiting from Germany to learn the language. Peter's single mother was German and had come to England after the war. She lived in a basement flat in Brighton, which I would sometimes visit to spend time with Peter. Afterwards tea with bread and butter and continental sliced sausage. On one occasion listening to Sibelius on his Telefunken tape recorder instead of attending as compulsory spectators for the school cross country run, for which crime we were sentenced to write an essay on Brazil. It was a short walk to the sea.

Peter's uncle Eric was our employer for this painting job. Eric was a slim built man in late middle age. He lived with Alan, then a well known TV star, actor and comedy writer, as his secretary and housekeeper. When housekeeping he wore a little pinafore. One presumed the pair were a gay couple. In those days, incredible as it might seem now to young people, this was a crime for which offenders could be sent to prison for years. But Brighton was a louche and tolerant place: lots of actors, lots of gays and lots of the type of older single chaps wearing faded grey suits and living on fading pensions, known as Kemp Town gentlemen, who spent their days reading the Racing Times and waiting for the pubs to open. A pub on every corner in those days. Often the very same people fitted each of these categories. The subject of homosexuality never came up.

Eric and Alan lived in a very beautiful old house, one of several in a splendid and architectural gracious terrace, probably built in Regency times along with The Royal Pavilion. The terrace stood high on a hill, close to the centre of town, facing South. There were no buildings on the other side of the street, instead the tops of the bushes in a small public park, so the view was straight to the sea, glistening ultramarine blue and white in the middle distance, like a Quattrocento oil painting. It was high summer when we did the job; every day was hot and sunny. The sun shone directly at the house. The walls of the charming little sunken garden at the back were white washed. The interior decor and atmosphere,

curated with exquisite taste by Eric and Alan, two comfortable connoisseurs of elegant living, was clean and cosy. Rich dark wood, polished furniture, terracotta tiles on the floor with Turkish rugs. It was a vision of Heaven.

I also lived in a terrace at that time, also high on a hill, but in the unfashionable East end of town, with my Mum, stepfather and two younger brothers. An architecturally impoverished terrace of very small council houses, two up and two down, probably built in the forties. Grey pebble dash. Outside toilet - just a yard outside the kitchen door actually. Facing North. Somehow we all co-existed in the tiny place. Probably taking turns to breath. The hill was called the Race Hill, with a race course on top. I don't remember summer there. In the winter snow the bike ride to school down the very steep long hill was like traversing a ski slope.

I biked over to Peter's Mum's flat each morning from my little terrace house. Then Peter and I would journey to each of our painting jobs on Peter's old green motor bike, a little BSA Bantam 125cc two stroke. Me on the back seat carrying our buckets and brushes with my legs sticking out the sides. Neither of us wearing a crash helmet. Luckily we never crashed. The bike couldn't go very fast under our weight.

The trip to the job at Eric's beautiful terrace house was only a five minute ride. For me another universe entirely. We turned up each day for a week or so, starting at a comfortable time of day - around ten in the morning and finishing in time for the beach at tea time. Eric told us what to paint and gave us the paint tins he had bought. We were very professional, sanding down and preparing the surfaces with Manger's Sugar Soap, then applying undercoat and a couple of smoothly finished top coats. He seemed to be satisfied with our work. We would have been mortified otherwise.

The house smelled of expensive continental foodstuffs. Exotic cheese, ground coffee. We ate Eric's lunch in the garden, sitting on the low whitewashed garden wall in the bright sun, surrounded by Mediterranean plants which scented the summer air: rosemary, thyme, marjoram. I have never forgotten it.

19. Acrobat

I had thought it was a good idea to take my new girlfriend to the wrestling. Subject her to the sound and smell of strong men in violent physical action. Let the ancient pheromones do their clever work. Put her in the mood for afterwards.

Well the invitation did not go down too well. 'Aren't professional wrestlers just acrobats?' she said disdainfully, wrinkling her pretty nose and provoking in me a tiny surge of lust. I stomped on the surge and politely retorted, 'Just acrobats? Why the sneer? Their level of skill is very high. You'll enjoy it, I promise you.'

I was a bit of an acrobat myself in the gym; on the pommel horse and the vaulting horse. I admired the skill of the professional wrestlers. I knew the amount of work involved and how hard it was to do well.

I worked to persuade her and she agreed to come. And she did enjoy it. Within minutes she was laughing and red in the face. Well in her case it was more of a pretty pink. We had ringside seats, right up close to the action. When one mighty male body, slammed into the ropes by another at forty miles per hour, rapidly came to a dead stop, it produced a shower of flying sweat over those ringside seats. It was an immersive experience.

The noise level was very high. The announcer and the rock music, amplified up to eleven, the crowd screaming their socks off, the thuds, bangs, shouted curses and threats of the dialogue from the ring would each of them have been deafening. Combined in a soup of sound bouncing off the concrete walls of the hall, they made our ears ring. Curiously, some trick of the acoustic allowed us to hear the conversation between the combatants as they communicated, as they thought sotto voce, under the noise.

'Now the body slam right?' This from blue trunks, the ugly villain, with his tattooed bald head in a tight headlock. He spoke between shrieks of pain as his head was almost twisted off.

'OK, three, two, one, go!' This from black trunks, the handsome hero, with his long blond hair neatly tied up in a bun, as he eased off the lock and allowed the villain to lift him high in the air, spin him round (more flying sweat) and smash him to the canvas. The crash from eight feet up would have broken most backs. Black trunks lay there groaning his anguish. The villain ran up, jumped high in the air and landed with his heels in the hero's spine. If not yet broken it surely was now. The villain started to bang the hero's head on the mat.

The hero, sotto voce between shrieks, 'That hurt you sod, what are you playing at?'

'Sorry. Timing a bit out'. The villain didn't sound too sorry to me. He backed off and went posing round the ring, working the crowd. My girlfriend was wide eyed. She was loving it.

Now it was the final act, the denouement of the drama. It was always the same ending. Ugly villain loses to handsome hero. The formula hundreds of years old. The hero eased himself off the mat and stood, legs wobbling, head shaking. The picture of abject defeat. He was about to make an amazing comeback. A resurrection you might say. Perhaps an even older formula.

The crowd roared their support. The hero raised his noble head and held his mighty arms high above his head. His hero's chest extended. Smooth, oiled up and lightly tanned. He bulged his pectorals and his hero's biceps, gave a roar like a lion and charged at the villain.

The villain quailed and tried to run away. A fine piece of acting that. The hero pursued him, seized him and clouted his head with an mighty round arm swing. Then it was the roundabout as the villain was hurled from side to side of the ring, bouncing off the ropes only to be projected violently to the other side, each bounce gaining more momentum. I could see the final throw was going to be a big one, perhaps bigger than the villain realised. It was not in the script. The hero put in a little extra bend of the knees, a little extra snap of the throw and the villain sailed right over the ropes and into my lap.

I was very surprised. The villain must have weighed seventeen stone and I'm only a little chap. He smelled like a dead rat. He broke the seat, my collar bone, my arm and several of my ribs. I was lucky he did not break my neck.

My girlfriend was very good. She accompanied me to A and E and a seventeen hour wait. She also visited me on the first day of my two week stay in hospital.

But after that I didn't see her again.

I learned afterwards that she had taken up with one of the wrestlers. No, not the handsome hero, but the ugly smelly one that landed in my lap and broke my bones. Apparently his pheromones were more powerful than mine.

Outsmelled by a villain! C'est la vie.

20. Arches

This narrative involves arches in the shape of the Kings Road Arches on Brighton seafront, where the incidents related below took place. To tell the story I put myself back in the mind of a fourteen year old boy in the 1950s. The lad has just obtained a paying job for a few weeks in the summer holidays. The circumstances make a big impression on the young mind. This is the first time the personal ownership of money enters the young man's life and with it comes the promise and allure of independence. The enchanting possibility of being in charge of one's own destiny beckons from the future, though still dim in the distance, through clouds of Latin declensions, simultaneous equations and other impractical unrealities that clog up the brain.

The Arches are spaces beneath the Esplanade. They have been rented out as shops, restaurants and bars as they give on to the shingles, almost part of the beach, with many potential customers among the holiday makers. Of course the season is short. Most of the year there are no holiday makers and the beach is cold, wet and deserted. So no major retail chains rent the spaces. They are the preserve of those who scratch a precarious living from the few weeks of summer and spend the rest of the year in Spain or on the dole.

One such was Tony, who ran a small cafe in one of the arches halfway between the two piers. He appeared to me then as a small, slim, middle aged, rather grey and seedy man, with sparse Brylcreemed dark hair and a Ronald Colman moustache. I was delighted when he employed me, probably notified by one of my mother's friends. I was very nervous.

Tony was affable enough. He told me what to do and I did my best. I manned the candy floss stall. Learning how to make candy floss took all of thirty seconds. Then he was off doing the teas and the meals and I was on my own. At first there were plenty of customers, but then the pace slackened. Tony came over. I learned a powerful life lesson. In general things don't sell themselves. He insisted I became a barker.

'Just shout it out. Here she is - here's Marilyn Monroe!' He held up a candy floss with a pink blob for the head and white candy floss for the blonde hair. 'Look at lovely Marilyn. Get your lovely candy floss here!'

I was hideously embarrassed, but I had a go, waving my candy floss doll and shouting. My voice was fine and loud. I didn't use his wheezy cockney but my own rather posh declamatory style - sort of Friends, Romans, Countrymen. Tony deemed it satisfactory and went back to the cooking.

After the lunch time rush was over I got my own lunch. Fish and chips with peas from a can. No charge for the help. He also gave me a Coke with an ice cream in it. It was spectacular.

The space inside was cool and dark, in contrast to the glare of the sunshine outside. No colour. Everything grey. Bit like the inside of a gun emplacement. I ate my lunch alone.

Then it was tea time. I had to change the shout. It became 'Get your lovely cup of tea on the beach! Get your lovely cup of tea over here'. Then I would help to deliver the tray of cups of tea to a party on the nearby pebbles. I had a feeling there was another person helping, possibly Tony's missus. Somebody had to do the washing up. Maybe it was me. Memory fades but the fizz as the ice cream hit the coke remains golden.

I only worked for Tony at the height of the season. Just a few weeks. He paid me one and threepence per hour. Even in those days that wasn't thought much of a wage. But I was the lowest of the low, and very happy to get the money.

I forget what I spent it on. Probably on second hand science fiction paperbacks I bought at a dingy little shop. One could buy a book for nine pence, and, having read it, then return it for half the price paid. An excellent scheme. I patronised all the libraries: the one at school I had outgrown - lots of boy's adventure stuff, Henty and Rider Haggard; the big public library in town was beautiful, C.S. Lewis, Arthur Ransome, Rosemary Sutcliffe, but the seedy little paperback shop was the best. Heinlein, Clarke, Aldiss and Budrys stirred the imagination with their alternative societies as well as their spaceships and far planets.

What I learned from Tony was basic economics. As Heinlein put it 'There ain't no free lunch'. I sold my time and labour to the capitalist for money. A fair transaction. Tony used the money to buy stuff and sell to the punters on the beach, and to pay for his food, rent and fares to Spain in the off season. We were all free to choose. We were all free to negotiate. I was independent and, with apologies to Arthur Daley 'Life was my lobster'.

21. Hat

The Earth turned: science progressed. By the year 2065 the world had stemmed the global rise in temperature and avoided both nuclear war and the rise of killer intellibots. The planet contained some six billion people in moderate comfort, most of them healthy. Such was progress.

My profession is that of paleontological archaeologist. Sorry about the ugly mouthful - we in the business call ourselves 'parkys'. By luck and by a cunning and laborious seduction of the unpleasant lady in charge of personnel assignments, I had obtained a precious slot in the time travel schedule. I had swiftly disabused her of my affection. The race goes to the devious, does it not? Today was to be my first trip.

I rose early to prepare, assisted and guarded by a team of minders. I was in full quarantine. The matter of time paradox, of which no instances had occurred, as far as we knew, was still unresolved. So the authorities did what they could to avoid such events.

I was transported to the facility in my suit, very like those used by the astronauts on Mars. I watched in awe as the wondrous machine appeared over the horizon as we drove up in our jeep. It was several thousand metres tall and more in length and width; shiny and white in the sun. Inside was the seeming miracle of a time travel machine. All I knew about the science of the machine was that it was very hot. My suit would, I was repeatedly assured, provide full protection. My skills and knowledge were those of a palaeontologist. I knew about trilobites, ammonites and that kind of beast, but my speciality was the small shelly fauna of the Tommotian strata, which appeared in the rocks in the very first flowering of multicelled creatures some million or so years at the start of the Cambrian, that is some five hundred and fifty million years ago. Nothing was known about them. The fossils were just a pile of tiny and apparently random bits. It was my job to find out the true facts maam. If I could do it my career was assured.

I lay on my couch inside the belly of the machine and waited for the off. Time passed. Some bloke was counting down, which made me nervous. He got to zero. I heard nothing at all, but apparently the machine worked. The walls of the machine disappeared and instead I saw the sea bed in what had once been Kazakhstan. The sea was shallow and light blue, brightly lit by the sun. The sea bed mostly sandy with a few rocks and patches of mud. I was lying in a muddy patch, with a red flashing locator by my side. Time to explore. I had air for an hour but the machine would revert in fifty minutes. I had to get back to the locator, or my

body, in the unlikely event that it should fossilize, would cause a time paradox, wouldn't it? Not my problem. My problem was to find the animals that were the small shellies.

I spent the first minutes gazing in awe at my surroundings. The sea bed crawled with many small creatures that I recognized: echinoderms, brachiopods and molluscs. Nearby a reef rose up high. I walked over to it, avoiding treading on the animals on the sea bed as far as I could. Best to avoid the possibility, however astronomically unlikely, that I should kill the very animal that was the ancestor of the fishes, that became the reptiles, that became the mammals - you can see where this is going.

As I came near the massive structure I could see that it was composed of archeocyathids, billions of them, piled up together. They had built the reef with their hard shelled bodies, each one a two layered cone, like one ice cream cone inside side another, just like the weird hats worn by some elaborately costumed oriental dancers.

Foolishly I decided to climb up the reef a little. Big mistake. The hats were open. They were feeding on whatever drifted by. Nothing so large as me of course, but I provoked the feeding reaction. They snapped shut. I was trapped by several hundred hard shells. I fought to get free. Each movement caused more hats to close tight on me. Soon I could not move at all. I thought hard for several minutes. I was just coming up to the half hour mark. I had plenty of time.

Then the red locator began flashing. What the hell was that! Somebody had made a mistake with my time slot. I had been scheduled fifty minutes. Somebody must have made a mistake. Or altered the schedule. Then I realised. The unpleasant lady in charge of personnel assignments must have reacted badly to my falsehoods and had now gained her revenge.

I thought harder. No time for the shellies now. Sod the shellies. My life was in severe danger unless I could break free.

I vented the oxygen in my suit. The Earth's oxygen concentration in the early Cambrian was not inconsiderable, but much less than in modern times and I had been breathing pure oxygen. The hats reacted instantly to the poison pouring out of my suit and I was free. I made it to the locator while holding my breath to conserve the little oxygen left. Just before I used up the last breath I was returned, shaking, to the present.

All was not lost. I would abandon the shellies and write an epic scientific paper on the hats, the archeocyathids. About which I now knew a lot.

22. Jungle

Three million years ago in East Africa. More rain than today. A dense jungle of tall trees, each with several vines twining up to the canopy above a dark, sparsely vegetated forest floor. Along the banks of a river a thread of jungle creeps out of the jungle itself, and into the more open grassland of the savannah, where the ground is thickly covered with grasses and plants of all kinds.

A male creature, about four feet tall, jumps down from a tree branch in the riverine jungle and runs across an open grassy space to the next tree. It runs on two legs. A pair of lions stroll across the grass a hundred yards away. Clearly there is safety in trees.

The lions see the creature and stop, their gaze intent. The creature does not immediately climb the tree but instead raises the stick it holds in its hand high above its head and stands stock still. The stick looks like it might be the leg bone of a hippo, some three feet long with a large hip joint knob at one end, decorated with a grass tassel. The other end, perhaps chewed by hyenas, comes to a sharp point. There is a long moment of stasis, then the lions, having calculated the odds and the needs, move nonchalantly off. The creature calls out. A smaller female now jumps down from the tree and joins her companion. She does not run. She is carrying an infant in a rough cradle made with woven and twisted grass, slung from her shoulder. The tall grasses of the savannah come up to her head. She stops to pick a stem of bamboo and chew the pith.

The male calls again, a high pitched falsetto scream, three notes; one up a major second, then down a minor second, then down again a minor second, in a distinctive rhythm. It must mean 'come to me', because seven more creatures drop down from the trees on the edge of the jungle and move across to the caller. There are three young males, two young females, one older male, helping along one very old female. All have sticks and grass cradles. They forage as they move, picking bamboo to chew and pouncing on insects, which they cram into their mouths. The jungle may be safer but there is more food among the grasses.

The two older creatures sit and make cradles and slings from grass stems, which they weave into a rope. The younger ones forage. One brings back a large tuber he has dug up with his stick and can hardly carry, which they share, each biting the flesh in turn, the uneaten remains are put into a cradle.

The sun sets in a swift orange blazon and night falls. As the light fades the troop climb the tree, break off branches for bedding and settle down for the night. Antelopes and wildebeest pass over the grasslands, followed by lions and hyenas.

In the morning the troop are up early. There is a communal defecation and urination from above, then all come down and begin to forage again, the lead male heading first to the river, where he checks for crocodiles and they all drink, then he heads out to find another tree. When he is gone two of the young males leave the troop. They want females for themselves, but the lead male monopolises all the females in the troop. The young males have seen females in other troops they have encountered. Anyway the young females are their sisters and rather unattractive. They know the really attractive females are out there somewhere in the galleried storey of trees, just a bit along the riverine jungle. They will hope to find another troop and steal some females away.

Despite it being the dry season, there are many small thunderstorms caused by the heat. It is the season of grass fires ignited by lightning. One now comes by, crossing the direction the young males are travelling on. It moves at a fast walking pace, flames ten feet high as the grasses flare up. The young males have smelled the smoke. They stand and wait till the fire has past. They know it will move with the wind direction. Then they run across the ashes to the far side of the fire track. A small mammal, a kind of rat, has been killed and much burned by the flames. They snatch it up, take it to the far side, then tear it to pieces and share the food. Fires are good spots to find food.

Vultures are circling a mile away. The young men head towards the spot. They can see a single lion has made a kill of a small antelope and has been eating it. The young men walk calmly towards the kill. The lion sees them and looks up. They continue walking steadily towards the lion. They walk side by side, ten feet apart. They hold their long sticks high above their heads. There are grass tassels on the ends of the sticks. The lion sees two eight foot tall creatures advancing inexorably closer. The lion is full with meat. It moves off. The young men cut small pieces from the carcass with sharp stones from their cradles, and leave the rest for the lion. They return to the track of the fire, burn the pieces in the hot ashes and eat their fill.

Then they trek back to the river and the jungle on its banks, to drink and sleep on a high branch as the sun sinks down to night. It has been a eventful day. Tomorrow they will hope to find females.

23. Operator

'You're a smooth operator', said Colin to his girlfriend Charlotte, as they were seated at table by a waiter in a fashionable West end restaurant. The smell of butter and garlic hung heavy in the warm air. Charlotte had left him outside while she entered the restaurant posing as his PA and ordered the table in the name of Lord Colin Faversham. The restaurant had been very well booked, but the dropping of an invented title had worked the necessary magic and the table had been forthcoming for Colin the Commoner and his beautiful companion.

Colin ran his hand over the rich linen drapery of the table, with pleasure tingling in his fingers. This was his fourth date with Charlotte. After date three they had gone to the opera and then repaired to his flat. The sex had been titanic. He was now in love. Things were very fine. Although he was not sure she was quite as much in love as he was.

Colin was a young but fast rising civil servant, currently in the Home Office. He was held in high regard by his superiors and on the inside track for promotion. He had achieved this enviable position by hard work, evidenced by long hours at his desk, by keeping his opinions to himself and by avoiding decisive action. His superiors called this 'maintaining civil service neutrality'. Colin's previous post had been the Department of Defence, where he had been largely responsible for the excessively expensive and much delayed procurement of American F35 fighter jets for the RAF. In the best civil service tradition he was now promoted and plunged into another field of which he knew nothing. He was now responsible for all low level recruitment; prison warders, court staff, border officials and all. He was currently defending the lack of court time and extraordinary delays in justice, whereby innocent accused waited many years before their innocence could be established. As he well knew this cockup was not of his making but the failing of his predecessor ten years before to predict the obvious and take practical steps on recruitment. The predecessor had also been promoted to a job of which he had no knowledge and was currently managing the delay in HS2.

Dinner was delightful. Charlotte was bubbly and bright. She chattered on about her job as a PA in the film business, asking insightful questions about his previous job and laughing at his jokes. 'Tell me Colin', she said, spearing a piece of lobster and charmingly disposing of it between her pretty red lips, 'Don't you envy the money the film guys make? It must be ten times your salary. Life is so short - we have to have fun while we are young'.

Colin agreed with her. He struggled on his salary. His rented flat took much of it. He was going to have to break into his savings to pay the bill for tonight's meal. He had ordered

a very expensive bottle of Montrachet to go with the lobster and was now contemplating Chateau d'Yquem to go with the dessert. To hell with it. He could max out his credit card. She was worth it. Indeed she was. Back at the flat the sex was extraordinary. He wanted the relationship to never end.

On the fifth date she made her move. They had been to a posh art gallery on Bond Street and were now in a cocktail bar nearby. 'We need to assure our future together. I assume you are thinking of our future as well?' He was. 'Good. Ok then. I have a friend who is willing to pay a large sum for certain information, which I am sure you would find it easy to obtain. Nothing illegal of course', she laughed brightly, showing her pretty white teeth, 'But not exactly entirely legal.' She went on. He was interested. Reluctant but persuadable. The lure of the money and their blissful future together was irresistible. He was indeed able to procure information. He silenced his conscience. He agreed to do what he could. He handed over several files. Twenty thousand found its way into an account set up for him by Charlotte in the Cayman Islands. He was on a slippery slope. More files were delivered and more cash found its way into his offshore account. He continued to enjoy the sex.

But all things fade. The guilt came off the gingerbread, gradually and gently, crumb by crumb. He belatedly realised where her interest lay. She was : not in love with him. It must be that, for some reason, she was being a smooth operator with him. At that point he remembered the little lecture he had attended in the office as he was promoted to a senior level. It was called the Mata Hari lecture.

Shortly after Charlotte was visited by officials from MI5 and deposited in Holloway prison. They left her to stew in those unpleasant surroundings. Fed ghastly food, unable to sleep because of the mad cries from fellow prisoners, sharing her cell with a lunatic drug addict and slopping out her own lavatory pot each morning. Until they felt she was adjusted to the reality of the situation and could be asked to turn King's evidence.

She complied with their request, was let out of jail and given a new identity. A large gang of Chinese officials were required to leave the country. Their British accomplices were jailed for lengthy terms of slopping out in specially reserved jails. Pour encourager les autres. The news channels were fed a suitably doctored story. Colin was not mentioned in the news. He was promoted to the Treasury, where he was much involved in battling inflation.

24. Clippers

'So you're one of these ten pound poms', said Alan to the woman he had just whirled around the dance floor at the returned servicemen's association weekly dance in Auckland. They had danced to the music of Glen Miller's orchestra, rather inexpertly played by a local five piece band, the Auckland Aces, now taking a break. He had noticed his dance partner's English accent as she chattered away on the dance floor. She was a petite brunette of about thirty, pretty save for a rather large nose that jutted out and gave her the air of a mother hen.

'I suppose I am'. The woman smiled. She kept her lips closed, to avoid revealing her crooked teeth. She liked this chap who had asked her to dance. He was a good dancer, a rather rare beast among the men she was acquainted with.

'My name's Irene. What's yours?'

'Alan. So how long have you been over then?'

'Just two weeks. I came over with my friend Carol and her family. They are going on to Otago, but I decided to stay here. I've got a job at a car showroom as receptionist. I think I'm going to get along fine.'

'Good for you', said Alan. Irene waited, but no more was forthcoming. Clearly Alan was a man of few words. Never mind, she always had plenty. 'What do you think of the ten pound poms then? I hope you're not prejudiced against us.'

'No, of course not. There's plenty of room here and plenty of work to be done.' He obviously approved that she was so soon employed. Irene waited. No more came. She tried a new tack. 'Are you a returned serviceman then?'

'Yes'.

'So what lot were you in?'

'I was with the forgotten Fourteenth Army in Burma'.

Irene's eyes widened, 'Good Lord, there's a coincidence; my husband was with them, under Uncle Bill Slim, fighting the bloody Japs.' Now her words tumbled out. 'He left a month after we got married. He was out there six years. Then he came back and two years later died of lung cancer. I told him they were bloody coffin nails but he wouldn't listen.' She stopped. She didn't want to cry. She was here for a new life. She waited. Alan let the silence hang, then decided more was needed from him. She was worth his effort. He let his memories flow.

'I was there five years...at Kohima...manning a twenty five pounder... it was tough slogging through the jungle and the mud. We chased the buggers all the way down to

Singapore. Those that were still alive then departed to defend their precious homeland. I don't like to talk about it much... I saw a lot of very nasty stuff. What was left of the POWs they had used for bayonet practice... every time I put one up the spout after that and pulled the lanyard I hoped I would kill another of the bastards.' Alan's voice had tightened and become harsh as the emotions of violence returned to his mind. He stopped himself. He hadn't thought about his war service for a while. He didn't want this lovely woman to think he was some kind of moody nutter. He needed to lighten up the conversation... 'Do you like Glen Miller?'

'Oh yes. That was my favourite - 'String of Pearls'. She sang the melody lightly under her breath and moved her hands in time, 'Dah dah dah dah dadiddah'. I just love that soft swinging bass line. You've just got to dance hearing that. Is he one of your favourites?'

'Yes I like Miller...but I'm more a Duke Ellington fan. 'A Train'...I like it all really... can I get you a drink?'

'Yes please, I'll have a Pepsi'.

'Won't be a minute - don't go anywhere!' Alan walked quickly over to the bar, stood assertively tall, flashed a note so the barmaid could see he was in a hurry and successfully jumped two places in the queue. Then he came back with the Pepsi and a beer, the sides of the bottles wet with drops as the chilled liquid met the warm Auckland summer air.

'Now - where were we?' He said as he plunked down the drinks and dropped his long slim legs back in his chair.

'Have you always lived in Auckland? She had cleverly changed the subject - away from war and music. She wanted to find out more about him.

'No. I've recently come up from the South Island. I was brought up in Dunedin. I've left my Mum and Dad down there to come and see the big city. I decided I didn't want to be a clipper all my life.'

Once again her eyes widened. 'It can't be what it sounds like can it? That's what I was back in England. A clippie.'

Alan was now the one to let his jaw drop. 'You. A clipper? You don't look like you could lift a lamb, let alone a hoggett.'

The two stared at each other, both baffled. Irene said 'What's a hoggett?'

'It's a grown up lamb. A two year old sheep. You can't have been clipped many sheep if you don't know that'.

'I haven't. I wasn't. I was a clippie - a female bus conductor. Tickets please. Hold very tightly. Move on down inside. Those at the back keep pushing!' She recited her litany of bus conductor phrases, deep ingrained from daily repetition. Then she started laughing.

Alan said, 'So a clipper meets a clippie then'. Then he started laughing too. Then he reached over, gave her a hug and a big kiss on her forehead. 'That's got to be a good omen, hasn't it?'

'Oh yes' said Irene, laughing and not caring about showing her teeth. She felt he liked her, crooked teeth or no, and that things looked good down under.

25. Stripes

Frank Thurston, a sixty year old widower who worked as an accountant in London, was busy in his Surrey garden again. It was now late Spring; a splendid Saturday morning with fluffy cumulus clouds, blue sky and faint stratus haze in the East. He was enjoying himself with his lawn mower. A neat man, he liked a neat lawn. Stripes in parallel rows.

Over the fence appeared the lank hair and pasty features of his neighbour's son Robin. Frank was used to his good friend Robin popping up when he was in the garden. Robin was over thirty years old, but still a child in his behaviour. He lived with his mother Edna and only worked a few days a week under supervision at a local plant nursery.

Over the years Frank had pondered on the correct mode of address for Robin's condition. He was apparently poorly equipped mentally and found it hard to communicate, yet he was capable of extraordinary skill in certain areas, as Frank had seen when Robin had hand built an large telescope in his bedroom. Frank felt the need to leaven his accountancy work with intellectual activity. He had researched the labels used by medical people. Like the tide going in and out and rippling the mud of an estuary, the waves of fashion created a ever changing verbal landscape. Medical terms now regarded as hideously crude and uncaring, like 'idiot savant', had been replaced by a succession of terms like 'special needs', until they in turn had been dropped. The latest label appeared to be 'on the spectrum'. For sure Robin was somewhere 'on the spectrum'.

'Hello young Robin, how are you this morning?'

Robin smiled his cheerful smile. His conversation was limited, but he and Frank enjoyed their silent communication. They gazed at each other for a few moments. Eventually Robin said 'Stripes'. 'Yes', said Frank, 'aren't they nice and parallel'. Robin rubbed his head. Frank knew that this was Robin's way of saying that he was thinking.

Frank mowed some more of his lawn, which was rather large and took a lot of mowing. Robin had not moved when Frank came up to him again and stopped for another bit of one sided chat.

'So what have you been thinking about with all that rubbing?', said Frank. He didn't expect an answer but, after a moment, one came. 'Infinity', said Robin, and then went inside.

Shortly after Robin's mother Edna came out for a chat. She and Frank were close these days - he a widower and she a widow. Frank often enjoyed a nice meal and a bit of a cuddle on the sofa afterwards when Robin had gone to bed. 'Hello and good morning you lovely creature', he said. 'Hello Frank', said Edna, 'Robin wants you to come over this evening

and look at his telescope again, and he wants to have a go on your lawn, mowing it himself. If you let him have a go I'll cook you a nice dinner. Roast beef and Yorkshire pudding.' 'Done', said Frank swiftly and went inside to do the crossword, his Saturday indulgence. He liked Edna's Yorkshire puddings.

When Frank came out into the garden that afternoon he saw the whole lawn had been mowed. Robin had been busy. But the stripes were not as usual. They ran parallel for a few yards, then converged; to meet at the edge of the lawn. This produced an odd optical effect of great distance, like the perspective lines used by an artist, with a vanishing point at the horizon. For a moment it was as if the lawn was many miles in extent. Frank resolved to ignore the effect and say nothing. He didn't want to confuse or upset his friend: and the lawn was indeed mowed and rather neat.

That evening Frank went round for his dinner. Robin insisted they first have a look through his telescope, so they all went up to Robin's bedroom. The great telescope took up most of the space in the room.

'So what are we looking at tonight Mr Astronomer?', said Frank. Robin showed Frank his printout of an astronomical website. It featured the latest James Webb space telescope pictures; very early galaxies formed thirteen billion years ago, soon after the Big Bang, when the universe was a small fraction of its present size. Robin had set the coordinates correctly, but the galaxies were invisible in his telescope. It was much smaller than the James Webb. All that Frank could see was a dark area of nothingness.

Then Robin showed Frank a bit of his laptop video. It was an introductory physics lecture from Harvard, which Frank had recommended to him, knowing that he would be fascinated, whether or not he understood much of it. It was Euclid - the bit about parallel lines only meeting at infinity and the later developments of Riemann and others - that this was only true if space was flat, with no curves. Yet didn't Einstein say that space is curved - by gravity? Frank couldn't take this in. Was space curved or flat? He hadn't a clue. What did Robin think? He was rubbing his head. Was this why he had mowed the parallel stripes meeting at the edge of the lawn?

He looked into Robin's wide dark eyes, apparently shining with intelligence yet unable to communicate. Robin made him look through the telescope again. Time travel contact with the dark patch from thirteen billion years ago right there before his own eyes. Frank knew that somewhere in the dark, and unseen, were the faint early galaxies. What was behind those? Did it go on forever or hit some stop, some cliff edge? The eyepiece was cold against his face. He shuddered.

Robin touched Frank on the cheek to get his attention and said 'Infinity'. Frank was silent for a long moment. Then he smiled and said, 'Robin old chap, you could well be right'.

Edna said, 'Enough of that clever stuff. You'll all get a headache. Time for dinner. The beef's cooked and the Yorkshires will be done. Come on. It's time for we Three Musketeers to eat'. Which they duly did.