



Stella's Shorts

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Stella has taught a weekly adult class in creative writing at the Guildford Institute over many years. Her class is much enjoyed by the dozen or so adult students who attend.

One of her techniques is to give out a single word and expect a short piece of writing, inspired thereby, to be read out/performed by the author. A great educational idea. Here are my kaleidoscopic contributions. 31 very short pieces herewith, each with its very different little world. Some 26000 words in all. To guard against possible overstimulation and resulting harmful mental confusion it is best to not read them all at once.

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Storm

The big ship groaned through the storm. Captain Watanabe stood on his bridge, keeping an eye on the helmsman, who was a good hand, but occasionally a little nervous. In this weather the helmsman had good occasion to feel nervous. Should he make a mistake and fail to keep the bows into the wind, even such a large ship as this could get into trouble. The Captain clutched a stanchion as the ship lurched. Each big wave was causing some thirty degrees of roll. His arm muscles were getting tired.

He had been reading one of the books of the Englishman Arthur Ransome to his two children, to help them learn English. Good for their careers when they grew up. Maybe get better jobs than his. He liked his job in charge of a big ship sailing the Southern Ocean, but was less keen on the dirty business of whaling, in which his ship was currently engaged. They had sailed from Ayukawa on Japan's Pacific coast six weeks ago and soon caught several Minke whales. Watanabe found the harpooning of whales with explosive grenades and the subsequent hauling aboard and butchering a depressing affair. The presence of a calf with the last mother whale had been a problem. Leave the calf on its own, defenceless against Orcas or big sharks, or let fly another harpoon and add it to the catch. The harpoon gunner had made a quick decision and the calf was now on deck with its mother, both dead and lashed firmly to stop them going overboard.

Watanabe liked Ransome's books and had joined the Japanese ARC, the Arthur Ransome Club of Tokyo. A fellow sailor, Ransome knew what he was talking about when he described the storm in 'We didn't meant to go to sea'. But this particular storm was much bigger than anything Ransome could have experienced. Here in the Southern Ocean there was no land to stop the winds as they blew round the Earth. Only the gravitational pull of the weight of the water in each wave limited the height of the wave crest. The great heavy wave, once heaved up by the wind, would then come crashing down on the ship with its many thousands of tons of water. Each collision made the ship tremble as if it were wincing from the shock.

Another lurch, this time forty degrees. The helmsman had gone white in the face as he held on to the steering mechanism. Still a wheel in this modern ship, but no longer connected by pulleys and ropes; instead electronics conveyed the signals from wheel to rudder. The electronics had a built in feedback effect so the person turning the wheel had some idea of the

resistance of the rudder. This helmsman could feel, to some extent, the power of the rudder wrestling with the waves. His imagination supplied the rest.

The Captain too was becoming nervous. He moved alongside the helmsman and put his hand reassuringly alongside the other's arm, on the wheel. He too could now feel the rudder's reaction.

'Steady Ono. You're doing fine. Just keep the bows to the wind and waves like you're doing. I'll stay with you till this little blow is over. Or till your shift is done'.

'Thanks Captain. I've never seen seas this big and I've been twenty years at sea.'

'Yes it's a bit of a monster isn't it?'

The tannoy burst into life as a crewman spoke to the bridge from a porthole looking on the after deck. 'Captain - the whales have gone overboard - that last wave took them'.

'Thank you crewman... So they have now joined their ancestors on the sea bottom - many thousand fathoms down. Where all whales go when they die till we began taking them. They feed an ecosystem down there of worms and hagfish that exist at huge pressures in the utter blackness... the loss will be for the owners I think, not to be docked from our pay packets'.

Another wave hit. The Captain clutched at the stanchion and the helmsman hung desperately to the wheel. That must have been nearly forty five degrees of roll. The ship, in ponderous slow motion, laboriously righted itself. The Captain began to think about some form of lashing for himself and the man at the helm. If they were both thrown on the deck the ship would lose steering. He looked for some webbing that would do and began to fix up a rig. Around this stanchion and then around the helmsman's chest should do it.

Neither of them saw the rogue wave at first. Through the streaming water on the bridge windscreen a line of six giant waves rolled in beyond the ship's bow. Spume filled the air. Out beyond number six was number seven. A mathematically improbable combination of energies was nevertheless possible. Given the right sea conditions wave energies could combine additively.

The helmsman spotted it and gave a little scream. The Captain looked up and saw his fate far off. It was over one hundred feet high, a near vertical wall of glassy water like a weird million ton mountain in the sea. The Captain set his jaw and stiffened his shoulders. His ancestors had been samurai, or so his father had told him. He still practiced a little kendo when he could. Calm resolution was called for - if he could possibly manage it while his bowels liquefied.

'I see it. Steady Ono. We'll hit in about two minutes I guess. First we deal with the six small ones. Then we tackle the monster. Then you'll have a tale to tell your young lad.'

'Yes Sir'. The helmsman drew on the Captain's calm and steered the ship at the first of the six. Six vertiginous rolling wallows, which each came close to capsizing the ship, six mighty blows of crashing water, which each came close to breaching the hull plates. Then the big one.

'I think we'll play the surfer on this wave helmsman. Straight up and a flip over the top.' A shout into the tannoy. 'All hands brace for impact, brace for impact '.

...

And so it went. The Captain broke his collarbone as he was slammed into the deck but the helmsman clung on and steered the ship up the wave and down the other side. Eventually the storm subsided and the waves dropped back down to the normal Southern Ocean mighty rollers. The Captain never went to sea again but took a post with the Japanese branch of Greenpeace, aiming to end commercial whaling.

Hawk

Pilot Officer Johnny Phillips sat in his plane at the end of the runway and shivered. Justifiably nervous at the start of his first solo flight in a fast jet. The plane was a Hawker Siddeley Hawk T1, used in large numbers by the world's air forces as a trainer and as a combat aircraft. It was capable of flying faster than sound in a dive, could reach 40,000 feet in a climb and carried air to air missiles, bombs and a cannon. Johnny's Hawk was not armed up today. Just as well - he wouldn't have to worry about pressing one of those wrong buttons.

He had gained his wings after learning to fly at RAF Cranwell and then been selected to train as a fast jet pilot, one of the few chosen in an extremely competitive process. He felt humbled. He must have done something right. But there was always the nagging doubt. One of his friends had ended up flying a desk for the rest of his career, after failing to survive his high G pressure course. Fast jet pilots now had to get used to operating at high G - up to 9 G at times from some manoeuvres, nine times higher than earth normal gravity. Johnny had felt fear the first time he went for a spin in the centrifuge: the G force had kicked in, his eyes bugged out like organ stops, his cheeks were plastered to his skull till his teeth nearly tore through his skin, his stomach wanted to exit through his backbone and the blood tried to drain from his brain. Had it done so he would have passed out. But the comforting clutch of his pressure suit on his belly and legs had made the blood stay in its place and prevented the rest of his body from messily squishing. It also helped him stay calm and keep control.

He smoothly pushed the throttle open and felt the kick in the back as the plane accelerated faster than any sports car. In just a few seconds he was moving at 150 miles per hour. He delicately lifted the nose and the plane rose up into the sky. A climbing turn to the left; he was already at 10,000 feet, with beautiful Anglesey and the sea glitter of the Menai Strait below him. Life was good...

He looked up and to his right. There on his shoulder a hundred feet away was his boss in another Hawk - giving him a thumbs up - he snapped back to work focus. Today the work was low flying. Dangerous but deemed necessary by the RAF as the best way to avoid missiles and anti-aircraft fire in a low level bomb run.

Johnny followed his leader to the Welsh hills nearby and then through the winding twisting valleys, keeping to a mere 100 feet above the grass and the startled sheep. The sides of the valley above his head to left and right. Like flying through a tunnel. When the valley made a twist then so did both Hawks, following the curve at 400 miles per hour. No room for error. The planes banked sharply over in the turn and pulled whatever G force was needed.

Wings that had been horizontal to the ground now vertical, the lower one fifteen feet closer to the odd tall tree or telegraph pole that might have been below. He sweated into his pressure suit. Danger was part of the job. Not the part he was especially keen on...

Years of flying went by. He had lost several of his friends to flying accidents. Johnny Phillips had done well in his career and was now a Flight Lieutenant, He had two successful tours flying Tornados, nicknamed the Tonka toy. The Tornado was the latest low level attack fighter bomber, whose role was to destroy enemy radars and airfields. Johnny was now flying another Hawk. This one was painted red. A Red Arrow; he had been selected as one of the best pilots and was assigned to one of the RAF's aerobatic display teams. World class precision flying. The RAF Red Arrows, in their Hawks, were in America displaying with the top US Air Force team, the Thunderbirds, in their F15 Fighting Falcons. Each team sought to put on the best show.

Like the Tornado, the F15s were big heavy combat planes, in contrast to the much smaller lighter Hawk. The six American pilots flew them very well, in exact tight formations, sometimes only two feet apart at 500 miles per hour. Like six mighty American quarterbacks charging down the field shoulder to shoulder. The nine Red Arrows' manoeuvres were impressively showy, with red, white and blue smoke plumes trailing behind. Rather artistic, somewhat in the style of Matisse. Huge pictorial designs that filled the sky two thousand feet high, with descriptive names. The watching audience at the air show 'oohed' and 'aahed' as the spear went through the heart in 'Heart and Spear' and the bomb exploded in 'Detonator'.

Johnny was not in the front five planes, known as the 'Enid' group, after Miss Blyton's famous five. Instead he flew as Red 7, one of the synchro pair in perhaps the most dramatic manoeuvre, when Red 6 and Red 7 fly head on at each other at a closing speed of some 800 miles per hour, to pass at what seems a gap no wider than a piece of paper is thin. Johnny frowned so hard during this manoeuvre that he was always left with a headache. The crowd loved it.

Display flying was also dangerous. Flying a display several times a week - one or two deaths every year or so. More friends gone. One of the team developed nerves from the loss of colleagues and had to stop flying. Johnny was doing what he loved. He was a pilot doing what few others could do...

More years went by. Promoted to Squadron Leader, Johnny Phillips was assigned to fly a Tornado during the Gulf War, as part of the allied effort to expel the Iraqis from Kuwait. Saddam Hussein, notorious for using poison gas to slaughter thousands of his own people

who he thought might oppose his dictatorship, had borrowed billions from Kuwait to finance his war with Iran and decided to invade rather than pay it back. Big mistake. The Americans couldn't have a crackpot in charge of much of the world's oil and next door to the rest of it in Saudi Arabia. The UK was roped in.

The Tornado was the right weapon to attack enemy airfields and radar at the start of the campaign. Afterwards the sky would be safer for the following planes. The Tornados were sent in as the very first wave of attack. No more display - this was combat.

Jonny led his flight of Tornados very fast and very low over the desert. The Iraqis defended the airfield with curtains of anti-aircraft fire. The attacking planes flew right through it. That was their job. Statistically somebody was going to get hit. Johnny's number came up. Johnny's plane was hit and he and his co-pilot died when they crashed to the ground at Mach 1.3. It was all very quick. He felt no pain. Not a bad ending for a brave pilot.

Pineapple

In October 1976 the consultant stepped off a plane and into a humid tropical atmosphere, richly scented with wafts of exotic vegetation, which should not have surprised him, but did. After all, he was in a tropical country, Malaysia. His six month assignment; to survey and specify requirements and then propose the most suitable large computer for the country's agriculture research and land surveying organisations. He could feel he was going to enjoy the assignment. His feeling was confirmed when he saw, caught in a sudden rainstorm and flapping about against the airport windows, hundreds of seven inch tall iridescent blue butterflies.

His boss back in the UK, a partner in the small consulting branch of a large and prestigious firm of international accountants, had been smitten with cancer, and perforce was convalescing, rather than taking this plum assignment for himself. The consultant felt he deserved the foreign trip, as he had done very well for the firm. He calculated that he had earned four times his salary for the partners in fees billed for his work. At thirty six he was neither young nor old, and had been contemplating working for himself, rather than leaving the gravy for the bosses, since leaving IBM some ten years previously, already a computer software expert. The responsibility of a wife, two children and a mortgage had so far stopped him. He was to make the overdue decision to set up on his own during this assignment when his colleague, whom he privately referred to as Little Butterball, was promoted over him while he was away.

The local partners of the Malaysian accounting firm allied to the UK firm were very pleasant. One became the consultant's minder. He was named Mo, a smiling Malay, clad in a grey safari suit. Mo saw that the consultant was furnished with a small, air-conditioned Toyota and he was soon visiting the research stations.

Malaysia was multi ethnic, sixty odd percent Malays (known as 'Bumiputra' or 'Sons of the Soil'), twenty odd percent Chinese, the rest mostly Indians. The country had been colonised by the British in the eighteenth century, kicking out the Dutch and Portuguese colonists before them, and kicking themselves out when the country gained independence in 1957. From 1946 to 1960 there had been the Emergency of a communist uprising which the British and allies successfully defeated. Among the methods used was training at the Jungle Warfare School and the appointment of the top commander with jungle warfare experience.

Prime Minister Harold Wilson had kept the British out of the later Vietnam War, but the Americans might perhaps have benefited from a closer study of the British operations.

The consultant soon realised that the Malays held the top jobs. The expats rudely referred to this practice as appointing a 'token Bumi'. Each Malay boss had underlings from the Chinese or Indian communities who actually did the work. The whole thing worked quite well. There was peace and growing prosperity. And the need for a computer or two.

The research stations were delightful. Single story buildings, dark inside with walls open to the soft warmth of the tropic air. Lunch in the open, queuing at a wooden table canteen style. Curry of course.

The consultant drained the brains of the Chinese scientists doing the research and learned what he needed to know. They were trialling different varieties of crops in Latin Squares, like giant chessboards, and needed statistical software to crunch the numbers. Fortunately the consultant had a bit of knowledge of statistics. The scientists were delighted to find someone who vaguely understood the science and happily downloaded their knowledge.

Then there was the Department of Land Survey. They did cadastral work, mapping land ownership, soil types, underlying geology and suchlike. A gentle Chinese scientist ran the department and explained his needs for mapping software. Fortunately the consultant had a bit of knowledge of soil types and geology.

It all went into a notebook, then back to the old fashioned hotel for the evening. Tea and excellent cakes, the reading of last week's Times, a swim in the pool, taking care to avoid the centipedes in the changing room, a beer in the bar and then early to bed. No TV of course. It could have been lonely for him but social life was somehow organised: squash at the posh sports club (buckets of very liquid sweat replaced with cold lime drinks), runs through the jungle in tennis shorts with the ancient order of Hash House Harriers - mostly expats but also local professionals. He managed to stay up with the pack by closely shadowing a young female runner in an exciting pair of shorts. It was also exciting seeing wild elephant dung on the jungle track and getting bitten on the knee by a spider, fortunately with no ill effects. He really enjoyed the hash house bit, the after run meal in a downmarket local eatery, with palm leaves instead of plates. He met an Indian accountant in a bar and was invited back to his little house and then to a stadium for an Indian music concert. At the local firm's sports day he distinguished himself in the two mile walk by getting in front, then subtly dropping back

to let the local lad go first past the post. Salesmen from computer firms bought him dinners. Amazingly and thankfully no bribes were offered. Not to the consultant that is.

A short return trip to the UK allowed him to visit Rothamsted and East Malling, premier UK agricultural research institutes, to pick their brains in turn and transfer knowledge of the latest statistical software. Then back to complete the report. Little Butterball, a pleasant enough chap and very capable, came out to review the report, which he declared to be too short. The Malay government was spending money on the assignment and needed to see a weighty report for their money. More weight needed. An intervening Sunday was the occasion for a trip to beautiful old Malacca with Butterball, with a visit to the small graves of the Dutch and the Portuguese and an hour sunbathing on the beach. The beach was deserted save for a little goat herd girl in a tattered shift, leading her goats. Butterball glistened whitely in the sun.

Much weight was added to the report to help increase the apparent worth of the conclusions. Computers needed all round, the two suppliers in the frame could both supply the relevant software packages. No programming needed. Report presented to meeting of probably clueless bigwigs. Butterball returned to the UK.

The consultant's minder, Mo, had several times bought him lunch and did so for the last time to say goodbye. Inexpensive food in a restaurant downtown. Outside the open shop front the street, with beggars in the gutter. Up the street more open fronted shops piled up with fragrant vegetable stuff unknown to the consultant.

As always the meal was delicious. Soup then rice and curry. Finally, as was his wont, Mo asked, in his Bumi accent, with a large smile 'Frooot?' The answer was always 'Yes please!' It was swiftly delivered up, the freshest, sweetest, most glorious tasting pineapple that ever was. Such things burned deeply in the consultant's memory.

Wire

It was a beautiful early morning soon after sunrise. A high, blue cloudless sky and a light haze on the ground. A wide flat prairie landscape where one could see for miles. The cowboy walked his pony slowly through a grassy meadow skirting a ploughed field, where the standing crop, grown already up to the pony's shoulder, was promising fat heads of corn. The handsome young chap was in a very good mood. He stood in his saddle to stretch his legs, sniffed the air and smiled. The air smelled good. Grass and trees and water and animals.

They passed though a small herd of cattle. One little brown maverick gazed curiously at the cowboy, who raised his hat in greeting. 'Mornin old gal'. A stand of willow trees was rustling musically in the light breeze. 'I see you a-laffin' at me you ol willer trees'. He was about to visit his new girlfriend, who owned the property he was riding across. He felt so good with all the sounds and smells of the earth around him that he could almost burst into song...

Jim Smithers stirred in his sleep as his stomach muscles clenched and his throat opened. The dream fled and no sound came out. Just as well. It was two o'clock in the morning. He rolled over and determined to go back to sleep. Tomorrow he would be playing Curly in the opening night of the New Ottershaw Players's production of Oklahoma, the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical of 1943, that was now a staple of the amateur theatre world. It was his first big solo role. He really needed his rest to stay sharp. He slept. The dream returned...

Now he was with his lovely girl Laurey, asking her to go with him to the box social party, where all the hard-working farmers and cowboys could relax, eat, drink, dance and flirt. Only she was playing hard to get. Danged if he could see why. Wasn't he pretty enough and beautifully bowlegged from years in the saddle? Laurey's Aunt Eller liked him well enough, and made jokes about his bow legs. 'Couldn't stop a pig in the street' is what she said. So he made up a story about a tidy little carriage with a fringe on the top to take her in. And then she showed more interest. She even let her head rest on his shoulder when he slowed up and talked of the homeward journey together...

Jim stirred in his sleep again. Alice Pinsent was taking the part of Laurey in the show. She had a delicious light soprano voice and was not bad looking. He had enjoyed their duets together and looked forward to the head on the shoulder bit in rehearsal every time. He also looked forward to the bits with his ugly, smelly, dirty rival Jud, played by a fine singer and

actor you couldn't help hating. Jud and he had a knife fight late in the show - bit tricky that - Jud was a somewhat of a Method actor, dousing himself with evil smelling juice in the dressing room - sweat and urine it must be - thank God they were using a rubber knife. But the worst scene was the big auction, where they all bid for the girls' food baskets and he had to sell his gun to outbid Jud. Very tricky with all the interjections from the crowd on stage - they hadn't done it right once in rehearsal yet and the show is going up tomorrow...

Jim woke slowly in the morning, his head still full of the tricky interjections. He cleared his head over breakfast and thought of the setting of the show; Indian Territory in 1900, that would soon become the state of Oklahoma. He reread the quotation at the top of the libretto, presumably from the original play by Lynn Riggs; 'the loveliness that would soon pass away', a brief requiem for the lost world of farmers and cattle ranchers together in the abundant plains of the prairie, room for all, where the farmers and the cowboys could be friends, before the invention of cheap barbed wire. The wire fences came and property boundaries fractured the idyll. Of course Mr Riggs was forgetting that the 'loveliness' too had but a short history. Before it came the much longer occupation of the land by the Indians in the Territory, with their buffalo herds that stretched from horizon to horizon. All gone by 1900...

But enough of this gloom. Jim was not a misery guts. It was his proud privilege to be a thespian taking a solo role. His task was to knock 'em dead. The show had been a major success for Rodgers and Hammerstein and it was his job to make it a major success for the New Ottershaw Players. He channelled his inner handsome cowboy. Never mind the bags under his eyes; the makeup would take care of that. The powder and paint, applied sufficiently thick, knocked twenty years off his age. Alice Pinsent, Jud, his many friends in the chorus and stage crew, and not least, the hundred odd members of the audience, all awaited him.

But first he had to do his day job. He was a tax accountant with a local firm. His job was providing legitimate tax loopholes for his clients, members of the sizeable proportion of the population who had property, houses and shares, private pensions, cash balances, control of charities and the like. He mused on the invisible wire that stretched across society, unseen by the great mass of the population, but separating the two parts of society as firmly as the farmers in old Oklahoma, who had property, were separated from the cowboys who had only the open range . He wondered at the strange unconscious conspiracy that somehow kept the wire and these tax loopholes a semi-secret; unmentioned in the press and news media,

ignored by politicians of right and left and maintained year after year by government officials. This unconscious group effort by those on one side of the wire meant that the proportion of the population without property, those living from hand to mouth on the other side of the wire, believed that the rich paid more taxes.

His not to reason why. Eight hours in the office and then he would be on stage in another world entirely. He walked down the garden path still chewing on a piece of toast with honey and, which was rather difficult, humming the show's big chorus number.

'O','K','L','A','H','O','M','A'! Oklahoma!

Ruby

Leroy turned on his side and watched the flickering ruby light that danced across the woman's right buttock on the other side of the room. The light came from a Q switched ruby laser; instrument of choice in tattoo removal. He was pleasantly somnolent.

The air in the small tattoo parlour was wet and steamy. The smell of lotions applied to bodies hung in the dampness. Leroy was a boxer. He was used to this atmosphere, which reminded him of the gym and training room where he sweated for hours every day, lifting weights, hitting punch bags and sparring in the ring. He had turned professional four years ago and had a record of twelve fights, two ending in knockouts and no defeats. He was a fancied comer and now making good money for his manager and himself, some of which he enjoyed spending on tattoos. He was celebrating getting a new fight booking with another one.

Leroy was twenty eight years old, six feet two inches tall. He competed as a cruiser weight, with a fighting weight of one hundred and ninety pounds or just over fourteen stones. He was a handsome mixed heritage man from Peckham in South London. Just now he was stripped to his trunks and lying on the couch receiving the attentions of the tattoo artist, a young woman in a nylon coverall, sitting beside him and wielding the ink filled tattoo pen.

His genetic inheritance and hard physical training had given Leroy a magnificent body, smooth hard muscles and no fat. His coffee coloured skin glistened and shone in the dim light of the room. Owing to his defensive skills his face was still handsome, though you could tell he was a boxer by the slightly squashy shape of his nose and ears. His hair was cut very short, like a Marine. He had a beard, though no moustache. He felt this took some of the sting out of a punch to the jaw. He may have been right as many other boxers had the same beard.

What had been the beautifully clean blank skin of his head, neck, upper arms and shoulders was now covered with an intricate pattern in dark blue ink: whirls, swirls and twirls, heavily overlaid so that little clear skin was visible. Somehow the tattoo girl was finding room for another curlicue below his ears.

Some women might have felt that the tattoos were a disfigurement, but Leroy had many female admirers. One of them was lying on a couch on the other side of the room. She was having a tattoo removed. It read 'Angelina loves Joshua', and was situated, with an

encircling heart, at the highest point of her right buttock. Leroy had insisted. He said it put him off his stroke.

He gazed at her adoringly. She smiled back, the red light of the laser reflected in her eye gave her an unearthly look, like a devil woman. He knew she was more of an angel woman. She was doing this for him. The vivid ruby red spot moved over her buttock as the technician wielded the instrument. She had had a topical anaesthetic applied but still felt the pain. Her eyes watered as she bravely smiled.

He knew all about pain. Very hard to describe to those who had not engaged in boxing. Boxers had to be able to ignore pain. The worst was not the rock hard fist in the eye during a bout. A punch caused pain, but adrenaline erased it. What the boxer had to watch out for was the shock and bewilderment that followed. If that was not mastered more punches and the end of the contest would swiftly follow. The pain that hurt came in the training before a bout. Muscles, bones and sinews strongly protested even as they strengthened. But without the will to endure the pain one did not become match fit. Leroy had the will to endure; hence his unbeaten record. Ten of his fights had gone the full twelve three minute rounds. He could still remember the effort he had made to keep going at the end of the bouts. That had taken all the courage he could summon up...he dozed; the pain from this little tattoo no problem at all...

Three months later his new fight was on. He is in the ring taking off his luxurious silk robe and revealing his smart black trunks. Over his shoulder was the glittering satin emblem he had won the last time out; the belt that proclaimed him cruiser weight champion of England. He raises his arms to acknowledge the cheers of his supporters. Angelina is in a ringside seat in a glamorous low cut dress, inch thick makeup and ridiculously long eyelashes. She is sitting next to a well known pop singer who hasn't had a record out for a while and needs the exposure. The lights are very bright; the noise, from crowd, pop music and braying announcer with a microphone is very loud. Professional boxing is an entertainment business. The razzamatazz is there to sell tickets to the punters.

Another music crescendo. The noisy master of ceremonies introduces Leroy's opponent, who hopes to take away Leroy's belt. The opponent strides down the gangway from the dressing room to a brass band march, which clashes oddly with the rock beat from the stage loudspeakers but is very popular with his supporters who cheer him. He comes from Lancashire. His heritage is all white and, when he sheds his white satin robe, his pale skin shines in the lights. Very unusual for a professional boxer - not a solitary tattoo. His beautifully muscled body looks oddly naked. No beard for him, his chin is shaved, his

innocent young face looks rather dopy. Alan Jackson the contender, a tall slim lighthouse of a man in green trunks. Leroy and Alan will share a purse of forty thousand pounds tonight and more from the TV fees, but they are not fighting to get rich. They could both have earned more in their careers had they worked as bricklayers or brain surgeons.

The fight begins. Leroy's style is to come forward in a crouch. His gloves block punches. When he gets close enough he throws his big punches, hooks and uppercuts; almost invariably it ends in a wrestling clinch, till the referee separates them and the dance begins anew. Alan's style is to stay upright, retreat and circle, bobbing and swaying his head to avoid the punches, with left jabs all the while. He has been well taught old style. Many of the jabs land and briefly stop Leroy's advance. The points pile up. Alan is winning each round.

Drops of blood and sweat fly though the air. Alan tries a low left hook. It connects below Leroy's right rib. The air goes out of him. He falls to his knees for a count of eight, reaches deep inside and rises to fight on. Round ten. Both are exhausted. Leroy looks the stronger now. He punches on through the final round but the bell saves Alan from a knock down.

Both fighters hug each other as the fight concludes. Good sports. No doubt about the verdict. Alan is placed first by all three judges: the new champion. The TV people grab the two for a ringside interview. Drenched in sweat and water they gasp out their comments over the screaming crowd.

Leroy catches sight of the two of them in the TV monitor. There he is the loser, menacing and primitive, a mass of dark blue tattoos. There is Alan, face bloodied but pure and clean, the winner. Leroy thinks he has gone too far with the tattoos, perhaps it is time for him to use the ruby laser himself.

Navigation

The frail old man was visiting a small World War Two aircraft museum, situated in a field in the flat and muddy Lincolnshire country side. It was a rainy cold Autumn morning, a steady drizzle from a grey sky. There were few visitors today. He was the only person in the mid morning tour group, so the young woman tour guide had plenty of time to show him round. She was wearing a Remembrance poppy, as was he. She was probably a volunteer. They toured the displays inside the small hanger: maps of Europe showing airfields and bombing targets, giant sized photos showing Coventry after the raids and the Möhne dam after it had been destroyed, a short extract from the Battle of Britain film narrated by Laurence Olivier with music by William Walton. The old man let his memories flood over him.

Many of the planes were outside in the rain. Sheltering under the big umbrella the guide thoughtfully held up, he was shown the Spitfire and the Hurricane, planes with which he was very familiar. He touched the wet metal fuselages of the planes. They looked forlorn with little chutes of water dripping off the wings. That was in keeping. It was how he remembered them.

Now it was the turn of the Avro Lancaster heavy bomber. There was one Lancaster exhibited, too old and decrepit to be flown any longer. It might stand there and decay for many years yet, while earning small amounts for the museum owners. Great metal beast like a fossilised dinosaur from another age.

The guide and the old man walked to stand under the huge wing of the Lanc. That gave some protection from the rain. The guide set down the umbrella and started up the ladder that rose into the belly of the plane. They would be even more out of the rain inside. The old man put his stick down on the ground. There were plenty of things to hang on to in the plane. They climbed the ladder, then down the narrow corridor to the rear gunner's eyrie. The guide was fluent in her description of the apparatus; the point 500 calibre machine guns, the conduit for the gun ammunition, the shelf for the parachutes that the crew would put on just before jumping out. Then they inched their way up the narrow corridor forward, past the chemical toilet in the floor, very necessary on the long flights, usually more than seven hours, past the mid and upper gun turrets, past the flat shelf that would serve as a bed for any injured crew member, past the little box where they kept the carrier pigeon that they would release if they ditched on the sea, till they reached the navigator's cubby hole, where the old man

paused and sat down at the little table. He was silent. It was cold and damp, though warmer by far than the minus forty he had had to endure at twenty thousand feet over Germany.

'This used to be my perch, my dear. All those years ago when I was still just a young boy of nineteen.'

The guide said 'I thought you might be a veteran. It must bring back memories'.

The old man did not reply but sniffed the air. The old plastic smell of hundreds of electrical plugs and wire insulation still strong. Then he spoke. 'Oh yes. That's why I came. I wanted to revisit my memories. I'm writing my autobiography. I need it to be accurate - just in case anyone reads it'. He laughed. 'I remember I had a blue curtain I could pull around me to cut out the light when I was looking through the scope at a star. To fix it's height above the horizon. Then I could find out where we were by using the chart. More or less.'

'More or less?', said the guide, also laughing. 'Surely you were usually pretty accurate. To know where to drop your bombs.'

'That what you think is it?', the old man grew serious. 'Well they had us drop a flash out the tube and take a photo. So we could prove we had been over the target and not wandered around the North Sea for seven hours, out of the range of night fighters and flak. If we couldn't produce the photo the trip would not be counted on our tally. We had to do thirty, then we were let off. So woe betide the poor sod that cocked up the photo. That was my job. I never failed to do it thank God. I did my thirty and they let me out. As you can see I am still alive. Unlike most of the rest of my old crew mates. Bomber command had a forty percent death rate. Only twenty seven percent uninjured. I bet that injury bed there', he pointed at the flat table down the tunnel, 'I bet that little bed has seen quite a few boys die in a pool of blood'.

The old man coughed and put his handkerchief to his eye, which was watering.

'Are you alright?' The guide was solicitous.

'No I'm fine thank you. Just I have a cold'.

'They were brave boys', said the guide.

'Yes they were', said the old man. 'In the early days we tried precision bombing of arms factories. Most of the bombs dropped in open country side. In a ploughed field or cow pasture. Navigation not good enough. All the boys died for nothing. The top brass would never admit it. Poor old Bomber Harris. It was his decision most of the time. He was responsible for most of the RAF losses I think. Fifty thousand or so. Bit like Haig in World War One. Over the top lads and never mind the machine guns. It was Harris who switched to

blind bombing towns in February 1942. By the end of the war the navigation was much better. We had Gee and Oboe and pathfinder Mosquitos that dropped flares. After that we started killing the people we were intended to. Men, women and children in Hamburg, Dresden and suchlike. '

He stopped and wiped his nose again. Then he went on. 'But--- someone has to give the command. We couldn't just surrender because we were frightened of somebody getting killed, or of killing innocent women and children. We had to hit back. The reality is - if we had surrendered they would have killed all of us. All the Jews like me anyway...'

'Come on', the guide said, 'I think we've had enough for one day. Let's go and warm our toes and get a cup of tea in the museum. It's included in your ticket'.

Parasol

Kelly Daly drove her little Honda hatchback sedately out of her driveway and started her commute to work. On her car radio she listened to a replay of a lecture on elementary neuroanatomy from Harvard. That was because today was a Wednesday, her learning stuff day. Most other days she listened to Fleetwood Mac and other golden oldie soft rock albums. Whatever it was playing the radio helped pass the time on her twenty five mile commute across Maryland, USA towards Baltimore.

She was thirty years old and mixed race. In her case the heritage was well mixed indeed, a froth of genes from all over the globe, including a Columbian father, himself a mixture of Spanish and Amerindian Chibcha, and a Black American mother, exhibiting in her light skin the influence of white slave owners in her ancestry. Kelly's Irish surname was from her mother. Her father had long ago disappeared, leaving her mother to bring the girl up with very little money. America's many private charities provided some assistance and Kelly was lucky in gaining scholarships to a second tier university.

Kelly gave her ancestry little attention. She belonged to the nerd tribe; those like her who were well educated and liked tech. Her bachelor degree was in Physics and her PhD in systems engineering. Her job was helping with the design and deployment of the parasol for the James Webb Space Telescope, the JWST.

The radio sounded loud as she cruised along the Baltimore boulevard leading to the Johns Hopkins Space Telescope Science Institute. The lecturer on the radio was droning on through a boring bit about dendritic connections. Kelly's attention wandered. On most days she would be singing along to one of the music tracks that came out many years before she was born. These songs were called 'pop' when they came out. What would they be called in a hundred years? Would they still be pop or were they becoming classical with the passing of time? Kelly thought about that. The thought finally interrupted the import of the lecture. She turned the radio down and let the neuroanatomy go for today. She could always listen again on the journey home tonight.

Oh, but she would be working late again tonight, the launch was due soon. After the launch, on Christmas Day 2021, she would be spending so much time at work she might as well take up the option of a hotel room near the Institute the management had offered her. She had rejected it at first, having no wish to spend nights in the notoriously dangerous streets of Baltimore, the homicide capital of America, but now, she felt, she would take it up.

The job was an all encompassing activity. As the launch date drew near there was no time for a long commute.

She had worked for years on the design of the parasol, a giant sunshade that would keep the telescope really cool. She now thought a better word than cool was needed. The telescope had to be kept at a temperature less than thirty six degrees above absolute zero, actually colder than outer space. The seventy foot wide parasol kept off the sun's heat rays, and the moon's heat rays, and the Earth's heat rays. There were seven layers, each layer colder than the next, protecting each inner layer from the heat rays of each outer layer, so the telescope could see the heat rays from far distant galaxies clearly in the infra red, even galaxies more than ten billion trillion miles away, whose heat rays had started out more than ten billion years ago. She had made her mother laugh by using the word cool for the extraordinarily low temperatures of the parasol.

She turned into the car park of the Institute and hurried across to the big control room, with its banks of huge visual display screens. Her home from home. Her colleagues greeted her cheerfully, She was a respected member of the team, especially after her invention of the trim tab, a little piece of metal that could be moved a tiny distance to change the weight distribution of the telescope and obviate the need for a myriad of tiny attitude jet corrections, each of which little squirt used up some fuel. The chief systems engineer had calculated that she had added years to the life of the telescope by thus saving fuel. Definitely a gold star for Kelly.

'Mornin Darlin'. That was Darryl, from the control station next door, who might be her boyfriend if she were to encourage him a little.

'Hi Darryl', she smiled back at him. Today she was in an encouraging mood. Trouble was she knew Darryl wanted a large family, lots of little kiddies. He had given up his previous girlfriend because she had not wanted children. As yet he did not know that Kelly was of the same persuasion. She did not want children either. Her life was work. It was all embracing, endlessly fascinating, infinitely rewarding. She wanted promotion. Perhaps she could reach the top and run the whole show some day. She knew she was good enough. Lots of little kiddies, lovely as they were, would surely hinder that ambition.

But he was so handsome with his big dark eyes, narrow nose and perfect cheekbones. His bristly dark moustache above his lips. She giggled as she thought how that might tickle. Perhaps she could go on a few dates with him, live a little. Bounce around in his bed a bit. Wizzly whirr - thank you sir. But that would be unfair. To hell with Darryl, charming and

sexually intriguing though he might be. She turned to the screen and began her daily check routine...

The launch from the coast of West Africa in French Guiana on Christmas Day was successful. The European Space Agency Ariane rocket was its accustomed reliable self. Huge relief all round from those who had spent much of their professional lives working on the project. Some of Kelly's colleagues had been working on the telescope for over twenty years. Then followed days and nights of peering at screens as the telescope moved a million miles away to its final position, four times more distant than the moon. During the journey the team of systems engineers executed their intricate schedule of unfurling the complex origami of the telescope bits and pieces. First one rib of the parasol, then another in turn, as the fifty foot wide and seven layers of the ultra thin plastic sunshade unrolled from the cramped confines of the rocket, like a butterfly emerging from its chrysalis. Kelly didn't make any mistakes.

Almost miraculously the system worked perfectly. After eight days and nights of extreme nervous tension the parasol was finally all out and set up in position to do its heat blocking job. The other crew had work to do till the final positioning burn on the twenty fifth of January, but Kelly's job was done. She erupted. A joyous shout of triumph and relief. Jumping in the air and screaming. Darryl was finished too. He was standing up and stretching his arms wide to relieve several weeks of stiffness. Kelly sidled over to him so as to be there when he closed his arms again. She made it. He seemed surprised but happy when he found himself holding her. Perhaps, Kelly thought, it was not beyond the bounds of possibility that Darryl would be in receipt of a delayed Christmas present tonight.

Waltz

Colin slithered around the door and slid into the room. His elegant legs ended in no less elegant feet.

'Come on Katherine, let's get into it', he enthused as he sashayed over to me and, putting his arms around me, his thigh and belly alongside my thigh and belly, led me into a waltz. The waltz was our dance of the week, assigned to us by the producers on the popular TV dance show that pitted celebrities like myself with, supposedly, no dance experience, against each other in a competition. I was a very minor celebrity; so minor that at first I was practically unknown to the TV audience who voted to keep us in the competition each week. I had been - note the had been - a running track athlete of some renown. I had won bronze in the Olympics in the four hundred meters hurdles some twenty years ago, but I was available and fitted the producers requirements, so I was chosen to compete (and receive the tidy fee they offered, which was a big help with the sudden and unpleasant rate rise in my mortgage).

As a one time athlete I had had a strong body, and I had kept myself in shape. But I was now over forty and staying quietly and comfortably at home raising my two children. My body hurt after each training session. I had taken care to warm up my muscles before this session started but it still hurt for the first ten minutes or so. Colin seemed to feel no pain.

He was a wonderful dancer and a pretty good teacher too. After we had danced our routine about ten times non stop he did call a halt, for me to breathe and for him to point out my many errors. Alas I was not a wonderful dancer. I had survived the early weeks of the competition, despite my feeling that few members of the public voted for me, because others were even worse dancers who got lower marks from the judges. Or because they were people who were even more obscure to the public, being minor actors in low budget soaps on TV and so on. Or because I had worn a ferocious but winning smile during the show and succeeding interviews. I was sure that this week it would be me for the chop.

Colin was handsome as well as being slithery. In the first week I found it was a pleasure to be physically close to him, but after six weeks of intensive training with him I had become immunised to any physical attraction. His body was just a part of my apparatus. I had felt nothing towards the rope I climbed in the gym at school, long years ago, though it pressed intimately against me, and now I felt very little when his belly pressed close to mine. When he had hugged me and kissed my cheek, and I his, at ten second intervals, after we had finished our public performance and were waiting for the judges, I felt even less. We had

been told to demonstrate affection for each other; so we did. It helped with the public vote apparently.

But I did like him. His work ethic was admirable. He had been a poor boy in an obscure middle European country, but had been discovered at dance school and taken up by a top teacher, to win several international competitions in ten dance. Now thirty three himself, for a dancer he was ageing too. He planned to open his own dance school. Each week we stayed in the competition the mighty million headed TV public would see him and recognise his name. The advertising for his future dance school was worth hundreds of thousands of pounds, dwarfing his fee from the TV company. He was really keen for me to keep going!

The waltz was a weird dance. One two three over and over was no problem, though different from the pumping one two of a runner's action. Leading each time with a different leg, now the left, now the right. I found I could get used to that, though, as a hurdler I always led and jumped with my right leg. But the way I had to hang my head out to my left, supposedly like a flower in a vase, while turning both to the left and the right, I found physically strenuous and unpleasant. I felt my neck would break. Of course I smiled all the time. We flowers in vases are taught to do that for our admiring onlookers.

I had compensated by hanging on to Colin. He was determined I should stop that. There were no TV cameras in the room. He shouted at me.

'You're not trying are you? For Christ's sake you silly cow. Just focus!'

I clenched my jaw and tried my best - I needed the fee. No tears from Katherine. The top class dance training, once the stress of the session had disappeared, was life enhancing for an old gal like me. I loved it. I had worked this hard as an athlete many years ago. No pain no gain. On we went, sweating around the room.

Then it was Saturday night; competition time.

We were in the green room, six couples together, we girls in our skimpy costumes, hair piece extensions and lashings of fake tan, the men ditto with the fake tan. The mood was tense, though everyone was smiling. Despite latherings of anti-perspirant lotion, the air was pierced by shards of an unpleasant odour, the sharp smell of nervous sweat, so that one dared not take a deep breath. We knew one pair would be gone in a couple of hours. I was reminded of my schoolgirl Latin, 'Nos morituri te salutant', which Roman gladiators shouted to the Emperor as they entered the arena.

The voting window closes soon after the first part of the show has ended and then we go again with the results. This second bit, the 'results' show, performed and recorded by us on

Saturday, the same day as the main show, is broadcast the next day, Sunday, while pretending to have actually occurred on that Sunday and to be a live broadcast. The whole process is shrouded in mystery, which I suppose adds to the attraction.

Colin and I were on first. The music was a fast pop number - not my choice, not Colin's. It didn't sound like a waltz to me, though it was in three time, but what the hell, we were only doing a dozen waltz steps. Mostly it was Colin lifting me up and whirling me round. Hard enough but better than trying to make me be a flower in a vase. For six days I had rehearsed those steps and lifts until my limbs trembled with fatigue. As we waited to go on before a TV audience of millions my nerves were twanging and my legs were twitching. My breaths came in short, panting gasps. Much worse than the parachute jump my husband had bought for me last year on my birthday.

As we finished our two minutes of terror the audience burst into raucous applause. I felt great. We watched the others dance. I was in the lower half of the judges score, though they had been very complimentary. Just as well, as otherwise I might have cried from the strain.

Then we had a rest break and waited for the public vote. All the couples were placed in a strong spotlight to receive the news of the combination of the judge's rank score, which was already known by the TV audience, and the public vote, which was never divulged. The actual numbers of public votes and the method by which the two sets of results were combined were kept secret by the producers, despite attempts to have them divulged under the Freedom of Information Act.

The light turned red if a couple were placed in the final competition by the producers using their secret method. Just two couples as a final gladiatorial contest for the judges to give thumbs up or down. Gladiatorial combat and death TV style without actual blood. After the usual dragging suspenseful music our light went bloodily red and we went again.

Once more with feeling.

We failed. We were out. We had danced our last. Poor Colin. Still we had had a good run. And I was knackered. Tomorrow I could stay in bed. My kids could get me breakfast.

I have no doubt that the producers fix the result, to meet their own requirement for the show. I had met the requirement for many weeks so I had no complaint. Don't tell anybody I told you so. I might want a job on TV in the future. That's show business.

Porcelain

Late afternoon, grey sky and rain washing the ornate brick frontage of the Victoria and Albert Museum in South Kensington. Two teenage schoolgirls, one tall and thinnish and one short and fattish, dodging the traffic as they cross the road and enter the museum. They wear sap green blazers and green chequered dresses with white socks, as approved by their upmarket comprehensive in West London. On their backs the regulation plastic grey ruck sack. Neither girl heeds the rain.

'You take the Meissens and I'll take the Sevres', said the tall girl.

'OK cool', said the other, 'Do you think the Badger will mind if we do it together?' This was a reference to their six form teacher, Mr Bagg, inevitably named for the grey stripe that bisected his dark hair.

'No Susie my sweet, not at all. He fucking expects us to collaborate. At least on the research. We can lie about the writing. He will never know'.

'I hope not. I've got to get an A on this coursework. It's like ten percent of the A level. My Mum will kill me if I don't go to uni, but I'm not going to some third rate shithole.'

'You'll be fine. We've still got three months before the exams.'

The two girls quickly scrutinise the notice boards for ceramics and part company as they head into the high-ceilinged labyrinth of staircases and corridors.

'Have a look at this - pure eighteenth century porn - look at the bum on that!' The tall girl, whose name is Aliysha, points her phone camera at the glass case where sits a demure nude figurine of a young woman, pink and white in shiny porcelain, lying on some cushions on her belly and displaying her bottom. 'It says here that she is modelled on the fourteen year old mistress of the King of France'.

A snort of derision from Susie who is holding her own phone in the next display room. 'God that's disgusting! We're both three years older than that. She must have been just a child. Would you like to have been the mistress of the King of France?'

'I don't want to be anybody's mistress thank you very much. I'm OK on my own. Who needs men? I expect she did it for the money. Perhaps we could use that for old Badger's essay - what was the title again? "Cultural history - Porcelain as a class signifier in Eighteenth Century Europe" '

I've got lots of pretty little shepherdesses displaying their underwear and wearing floppy hats. Oh my God - I've just put the Badger's title into Chat GPT. It answered in twenty seconds. Look at what it says.' Susie displayed the text on her phone. which read as follows:

"In eighteenth-century Europe, porcelain emerged as a significant class signifier, particularly among the elite and aristocratic classes. Porcelain, a type of fine ceramic ware, was first developed in China and later introduced to Europe in the early 18th century. The production of porcelain in Europe was initially influenced by the desire to replicate the highly prized Chinese porcelain. Here are some ways in which porcelain functioned as a class signifier during the eighteenth century: Porcelain was a luxury item, often associated with rarity and high cost. Its production required specialized knowledge and skills, making it an exclusive commodity. Owning porcelain signaled wealth and social status because it was not easily accessible to the general population. Displaying porcelain items in one's home, such as tea sets, vases, and figurines, became a symbol of refined taste and social standing. Elaborately decorated porcelain pieces were seen as markers of sophistication and cultural refinement. The acquisition of porcelain was linked to an interest in Asian cultures, particularly Chinese and later Japanese aesthetics. Collecting and displaying such items demonstrated a cosmopolitan outlook and cultural appreciation. Royal and Aristocratic Connections: European royalty and aristocracy often patronized the production of porcelain, and owning pieces with royal or aristocratic provenance became a way to showcase one's connections and status. Porcelain manufacturing companies were sometimes established with royal support, further enhancing the prestige associated with these items. The use of porcelain in tea culture became a prominent feature of elite social gatherings. Tea-drinking rituals were important social events, and having fine porcelain tea sets was a reflection of one's refinement and participation in fashionable society. Gifting porcelain items was a common practice among the elite. Exchanging such high-value gifts reinforced social bonds and alliances while also showcasing the giver's ability to bestow expensive and refined presents. The establishment of porcelain manufacturing centers in Europe, such as Meissen in Germany and Sèvres in France, became associated with the production of high-quality, prestigious porcelain. Owning pieces from these renowned centers carried additional prestige. In summary, during the eighteenth century in Europe, porcelain functioned as a powerful class signifier, reflecting not only economic wealth but also cultural refinement, social connections, and a cosmopolitan outlook. The ownership and display of porcelain items

became integral to the construction and communication of social status among the elite classes."

Both girls were silent for a moment, digesting the Chat text. Then Alisha groaned, 'Oh shit - now what are we supposed to do? That reads like a pretty good essay to me. It's got the Badger's snooty tone - he really is a Trotskyist or something isn't he? What can we add to that? We could have stayed at home'.

Susie said quietly, 'Well we could fix the American spelling. That might be worth a few marks.' There was silence for a few moments. Then Alisha gave a muffled shriek. 'Oh my God there's Ryan - that boy that you pulled at Daisy's party - he's creeping about over there - look!'

Susie hissed, 'Don't let him see you! Get away from the King's mistress. Let's see if he comes over to look at it.'

Alisha slid away. In a while Ryan, a six foot two youth in school uniform, with a faint wisp of blonde beard not entirely disguising his pimples, drifted over. He discovered the statuette. He must have been impressed as he bent close over the display case. He was clearly fascinated.

More hisses from Susie. 'Let's take a close up shot of him like ogling it. He was OK but I didn't fancy him for another go. If he threatens to say something nasty about me on Facebook we can use it in revenge. Perhaps the afternoon won't be entirely wasted'.

The girls got their camera shot and then scuttled giggling back out to the Cromwell Road and the rainy late afternoon.

Lamplight

In the dim light of the golden lamp
The singer stands and sings.
And the songs rise up like coloured bubbles
Or birds with shining wings - Edward Shanks 1917

The singer's voice was rich and creamy, soft and luscious; a fountain of sound ascending to the roof timbers in the theatre that sat amidships of the showboat 'Miraldra's Enchantment'. The boat was floating quietly alongside the dock on the broad River Vissel. It was late evening. The great river flowed like oil past the dock. The showboat's customers, local shopkeepers, artisans, farmers, and a sprinkling of aristocrats, who had formed that evening's audience, had left for their homes, well amused and chattering among themselves as they discussed each of the acts in the show. The theatre was empty, save for the singer on stage, lit by a single deep yellow lamp. The auditorium was in darkness, deep shadows mostly hiding the rows of seats, each row higher than the one in front, till the upper rows almost reached the ceiling.

Ariston Zamp, captain, proprietor and theatre impresario, sat back in one of the boxes and observed his new crew member on stage.

The singer was a slim young woman, tall and delicate, with a lordly bearing. When she had come aboard for the job interview Zamp had been impressed by her beauty and her distracted indifferent attitude, quite unlike the other girls in Zamp's theatre troupe. Now he was impressed by her singing voice. His belly softened, his mouth filled with saliva. He wept gentle tears.

The song went on, an odd melody, surging up then down, in great swathes of notes. The voice flowed like the great river outside, oily and invincible.

Then she finished and stood still, awaiting Zamp's verdict. He tried to rise but fell back, his legs weak. Then he made an effort, squashing his emotion and attending to business.

'Well you've got the job young lady. You can sing in one spot in the show and take other parts as needed. We just need to discuss your duties in more detail. You will be expected to perform unclothed for part of the show, along with the other girls. You will be behind a gauze curtain, so it is not indecent.'

'Not indecent to you perhaps. Others have more refined taste.' Her speaking voice was also very beautiful, softly delivered and oddly articulated. She must be

from some remote part of the great continent. She went on, 'I must have a cabin to myself. It would be intolerable to be crammed in with others.'

Zamp decided swiftly. 'Of course. I can see you are of aristocratic lineage and find it unpleasant to mix with we commoners. You can have the little lazarette, aft of my cabin. What is your name?'

'My name is long and complicated. Please just call me Blanche.'

Zamp was pleased with his new recruit, who proved versatile in taking several roles. For the new season, a circuit of the lower river towns, he decided to go ahead with an adaptation of an ancient piece from Old Earth he had recently disinterred from the junk in an antiquarian bookseller establishment in the town. He had been impressed by the language and construction of the drama. Of course it would need modification to appeal to the tastes of the river folk. He would take the part of Romeo, a fine figure of a man, Damsel Blanche would make an excellent Juliet, and the Montagues and Capulets would be played by his troupe of grotesque acrobats who would surely enjoy fighting with clubs and axes in the rigging. He would need to erect a safety net to avoid casualties among the audience should a weapon, or indeed an acrobat, slip from above.

Rehearsals went well, although Zamp did have trouble with the role of Friar Lawrence, in which he had cast the boatswain. The boatswain had difficulty in adjusting the quality of his voice, as he was accustomed to bawling orders to the crew aloft in the rigging, often in the teeth of a gale. But Zamp was an efficient director. 'Speak softer you dolt! And sweeter. You will injure the ears of the audience. They may decide to attempt to injure you in return by throwing the missiles from the special buckets I offer for sale in the interval. Buckets of rotten tomatoes are especially popular. The whole audience takes pleasure in the justified revenge of those whose ears have been assaulted'.

Damsel Blanche raised objections to being kissed by Romeo, claiming that Zamp had introduced the business as one of his many modifications until Zamp showed her the stage directions in the original script. Then she allowed herself to be kissed, though her expression did not change. Zamp felt he might as well be kissing the boatswain.

She sang her sad song when, alone on stage, she discovered Romeo dead. Zamp had the stage set with a golden lamp. At the end of the song she stabbed herself and fell on Romeo's body. Invariably there was a long silence as she finished, before the audience broke into vigorous applause, with whoops and shouts. Zamp had made this the final scene, so after many seconds, Romeo and Juliet could arise to take their bows and be joined by the rest of the cast.

After a year and a half, the showboat had completed its long circuit of the lower river towns. Damsel Blanche approached Zamp where he stood on his quarter deck, watching the crew going ashore. 'I have come to take my leave. I have booked passage on a boat heading far upriver to my old home, where I have heard that the ruler who was cruel to me has been murdered. He did have many enemies. My uncle has become the new Duke.'

Zamp had been aware of the likelihood of this event. 'I shall be sorry to see you go. Your beautiful singing has been a great attraction. Go to the purser and take your wages. They should suffice to see you home.'

The girl looked at Zamp. Her cool gaze as usual revealing little emotion. 'I must thank you for not insisting that my duties were also those of the dancing girls, who I understand must visit you in your cabin on occasion. Zamp laughed his saturnine laugh. 'I believe the girls enjoy the visits as much, or perhaps more than I do. I maintain a strict equality, to avoid any ill will or suspicion of favouritism. I am a man of large appetites, but there are six girls in the troupe and every man has his limits.'

The girl departed shortly and Zamp fell into a deep melancholy. Outside the great slow river flowed on, inexorable and unheeding.

apologies to the shade of Jack Vance and his novel 'Showboat World'

Guide

You perhaps recall my earlier piece, on the word 'jungle' - about two young male australopithecines, an early hominin species, who left their troop to search for females. It opened thus ... 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...and now continues.

The sun rises swiftly as a large red ball. The jungle air is soon steaming in the heat. Birds call to greet the dawn. A lion roars a couple of miles away. The two young males awake on their high branch, where they have slept on a rough platform of leaves.

The previous day they had eaten well. Their stomachs had extended as they ate the antelope meat they had scavenged. They had slept well. Now they must eat again today, to avoid the hunger pains which they know will come upon them if they don't. Tubers and young grass stems would keep the hunger at bay, but more meat would be highly desirable. Perhaps they might find another lion kill. The antelope yesterday had been killed and was guarded by a solitary lion. It had been possible to persuade him to leave for a while, giving them time to steal a few scraps, but most kills soon attracted a bevy of hyenas and were best avoided.

More prominent in their nagging mental list of objects of desire were females. Both felt the sexual urge constantly, especially vivid in their dreams. One had almost toppled from the high branch as he ejaculated in his sleep.

They quickly drop to the ground, taking with them the woven grass pouches that hung from their shoulders, which contained a few tubers and a large chunk of flint stone, about six inches across. They also took their slim wooden spears, as tall as themselves, with sharpened points and grass tassels on the ends. They drank from a puddle, cupping their hands, and began their trek, through the tall grasses of the savannah, along the edge of the riverine forest.

Soon the sun is a blazing white presence overhead. The smell of food drifts on the breeze, a fruiting tree ahead giving off pungent essences in the heat. A troop of a dozen baboons are eating the ripe fruit which has fallen to the ground. The four large male baboons are immediately on alert and bare their huge canine teeth, as the females and younger

baboons form a tight group behind them. Each big male baboon is at least as heavy as the young hominins. The hominin species has inhabited this region alongside the baboons for hundreds of thousands of years. They know each other well. Each group displays in a ritual fashion. The hominins hold their wooden spear sticks high in the air, with the tassels at the tips making an image of an eight feet tall creature. They unsling their woven bags and whirl them around, the heavy stone making a ten foot arc, its kinetic power evident. The baboons give ground and move back a little. There is enough fruit for all. Both groups feed warily.

The ripe fruit has begun to ferment and produce alcohol. The baboons seem to prefer the rotten fruit to that on the tree. The hominins also find it easier to gather than scrambling along the tree's tiny branches. All eat their fill till an elephant arrives. Then all give ground.

The hominins move forward on their trek, despite the ferocious heat of the midday sun, which would normally have had them resting in the shade.

Suddenly a small bird flutters in front of them, darting to and fro, whistling and fanning its wings. The two males are delighted and whistle at the bird, whose species has also inhabited this region alongside the hominins for hundreds of thousands of years. It is a honey guide. The hominins know the bird for its habit of brood parasitism, whereby it lays its egg in the nest of another species, the chick then murdering the other hatchlings with the sharp tooth on its bill, and for its habit of guiding hominins to a bees nest, waiting till they have opened the nest for the honey and then flying in to eat up the beeswax and grubs.

They follow the bird as it heads into the forest. The shade under the forest canopy is a relief, but progress is slower through the tangled undergrowth. Soon the bird flutters round the bees nest in a large tree, then retires nearby to await the opening of the nest. The bees are a non stinging species, or else the hominins would have abandoned the effort. They clamber up the tree and attack the nest with their flint blocks. Soon the honey is theirs, some eaten with pleasure immediately and the remaining combs packed into their woven bags. The two thank the honey guide bird, which is now feasting on the bee grubs, and then resume their quest.

Several days travel brings them to a small tributary of the big river, which blocks their path. They cross on high branches that protrude from trees. Then they come upon another group of hominins, twenty or so including three adult males, feeding on tubers and grasses at the forest edge. The two approach warily and squat on the ground a few yards away. They offer to share the honey comb. Two childless females accept the offer and come near to eat it, subsequently grooming the two strangers and displaying their sexual receptivity.

The leader of the large group is an old male with grey hair. Suddenly he makes a decision. Having lived a long life and feeling the decent into helpless illness, he has no wish to live in this new world. He screams, raises his wooden spear stick and attacks, running at the two. His companions stay still and quiet. The two newcomers are young and swiftly agile. One, using his spear stick as a long bayonet, shoves it in the old man's belly, the other, whirling his stone in the basket in an five foot arc, brings it down just below the old man's ear. The heavy stone hits with a loud crack and releases its kinetic energy in a split second. The old man drops to the ground, his head lolling sideways from a broken neck.

The two retire, taking the females with them, and spend the night in a tree nearby. In the morning they drift back. The larger group has moved on, leaving the corpse of the old man for the scavengers. Vultures are already busy with the body; hyenas will arrive soon.

The two, with their females, swiftly catch up the larger group and combine to form one group, large enough, with spear sticks and whirling stones, to face down hyenas and lions and continue, for several million years, to make a living on the African savannah, before their species goes down to extinction, as all species, in due course, must.

A new species emerges, as Homo Erectus, to replace them and in turn to die out as Homo Sapiens arrives, a mere three hundred thousand years ago.

Seabed

The wind whipped across the wide estuary and made small sharp ripples on the surface of the water as it passed. The view was grey, flat and cold over the sea marshes. Tufts of long grass shivered on the top of the built up banks that prevented the river from flooding the fields. Across the river a solitary black capped gull rode the current head to wind, patiently waiting for the tide to turn. The only sound that penetrated the wind's hiss was a deep slow chugging of a large barge moored in midstream, where the river met the sea. A long crane projected from the deck of the barge. From the end of the crane dangled the bulbous black manlike shape of a diving suit.

Inside it Jim was clocking on for his shift. A voice came over the intercom in the huge helmet. 'How're you feelin Jim? Still remembering the scrumpy? You was a right sight when you banged into that dancer'.

'Oi'm OK my boy. Don't you worry 'bout me. Just worry about dropping me gently an' not from six feet up like you did las time. Near gave me a heart attack. And you might have sprung a leak in my fancy suit, which is worth nigh on fifty thousand pounds'.

'Sorry about that. And you're worth more than your suit. My mistake on the lever. The bloody thing stuck an when I gave it a whack it jumped. You OK to descend?'

'Yerss. OK to descend down to the seabed. Should be twenty five metres down to the bottom. Then I'll unclip from my air and coms lines, then I'll walk to the cable junction, which should be twenty metres North if you've put us on the right spot. I'll keep my guide line clipped on so I'll know where you are when I come back. That'll be right in the middle of the estuary under that red buoy. I'll have two hours with my oxygen tank. Then I'll replace the cap which some silly bugger knocked off with his anchor, walk back and you can bring me up for a cuppa'.

'OK here goes'.

The diving suit dropped gently to the surface and then below the water, the cable running out slowly from the end of the crane and clanking as it went.

'here we go again mucking about under water - its good money though - better than I could get working on the ferry - they say it's danger money but I don't see the danger just a little bit of worry till I hit the bottom- there we are - usual lousy vision -what do they put in the water to make it so dark brown- best not to think too much about that - now put the lights on -that's better -then take a bit of care to get the compass right - bit more bit more due North

-that's it -now twenty meters -should be twenty paces -this suit is a beauty for sure -slow and clumsy but I feel like a submarine captain -actually I feel like a go around with that dancer I accidentally on purpose bumped into last night -she could be right here with me in this suit - soft and squishy -focus Jim you dozy sod -it is a little bit dangerous -look at that ravine some channel cut into that and it's at least ten foot deep -this seabed is all mud except where it isn't mud but a bloody great ravine'.

The great diving suit moved slowly over the sea bed. Little fish darted round the mud bubbles that came up from the imprint of the feet. Strands of seaweed brushed against the rubber. There was life down here as well as mud. A big conger eel moved off to avoid being trodden on.

'look at that conger eel -he's a big bugger swallow a duck as soon as look at it- there's the cable -now where's the cap -is that it -no there it is -where's me tool -I'll have you off me beauty -gently does it -what a mess that anchor made of you -now the new one -there should last till the next idiot drops an anchor right here- what would I do without the idiots- I'd have no work -but no chance of that there's no shortage of idiots- right back we go- shit where's the guide line - where the fuck's the guide line - don't tell me I forgot to clip it on- don't tell me I've turned into an idiot - must have been all that scrumpy last night - screwed my brains this morning - now what do I do- of course reverse course of course - now I've turned into a bloody poet - scrumpy does that to you - that bloody scrumpy 'll be the death of me - then I'll never get to lay that dancer- perhaps she'll miss me when I'm gone'.

The great diving suit turned due South and began the trek back through the deep mud. Twenty meters to go - avoiding the ravines.

On the surface the barge crew were getting worried. The two hours was nearly up and there was no sign of the diver.

'For God's sake where is he? What's the margin on that oxygen tank? Must be some safety margin mustn't there?

The second dive crewman said, 'Yes there's a fifteen minute margin. Then you're a gonner. It's not a nice way to go. He's only twenty meters down so there should be no problem with bends if he surfaces quickly, but that suit is heavy and he can't surface by himself. He needs us to pull him up with the crane. It was always dodgy him unclipping the air and coms lines. He did it to save us changing our mooring. He's done it before with no problem. Something must have happened this time'.

There was a long silence on the barge as the minutes slipped away.

Then suddenly the crewman shouted 'Look! Look over there!

They turned. Under the river bank upstream a hundred yards away there was a great splashing. The great diving suit was visible above the surface as Jim clung on to the anchor line he had used to pull himself up the steep bank side. The crew got in the dinghy and rowed over to the rescue. Jim was pulled into the boat and helped off with his helmet.

He was philosophical as he sucked in air, 'OK my lads I owe you all a drink... But by God it won't be that bloody scrumpy.'

Fudge

'Well Prime Minister, I have to say to you that the British ship of state, like a stately galleon made by Mr Willie Wonka or perhaps by Messrs Cadbury, sails serenely on a sea of fudge, a veritable ocean of the sweet and sticky stuff, and has always done so'. Sir Humphrey smiled his icy smile and steepled his long slim fingers. He was replying to the new Prime Minister's objections that his latest proposal looked like a fudge.

Sir Humphrey's fingers projected from elegant white linen French cuffs, fastened with discreet gold cufflinks, that made a neat ending to the sleeves of a well cut dark blue pinstripe three piece suit from Savile Row's finest. Humphrey was new in post as Cabinet Secretary. He was a mature man, his hair was grey and swept back in well brushed wings over his ears. His shoes old fashioned polished black brogues from Church. The Civil Service hierarchy had decided things needed to change, after the recent disasters, and selected the most old-fashioned person they could find to fill the post.

His numerous predecessors had been battle casualties of a six year war between the dozens of special advisors, so called 'spads', who had come and gone from Downing Street like mayflies in June. The war consisted largely of vicious character assassinating briefings to journalists, full of innuendo, leaks of confidential government plans and downright lies. Bad mouthing tit for tat eventually saw them all off, as the biters got bit, but not before they had caused the dismissal of many dedicated and blameless high level civil servants; those who dared to disagree, or failed to jump high enough on command.

The spads had been the young friends of the five previous Prime Ministers, three men and two women, who had held the post, for very brief periods, before themselves becoming hors de combat.

Given executive powers by each PM in turn, the spads had run amok. The PMs themselves had little experience of business management prior to obtaining high office, being mainly journalists and public relations employees. They had then engaged as their advisors younger versions of themselves, fascinated by politics, possessed of high energy but little common sense; running about number ten in bare feet, dressed casually in T shirts and jeans, insulting the great officers of state in the Cabinet and causing general chaos as they wrecked their employers careers and destabilised the country.

It had been hard to believe as it happened, Humphrey had gasped as each scandal was trumpeted in the newspapers and on television. Now he was here and determined to fix things. He had outlawed any spud being given executive power.

Fortunately this latest PM had not come up via journalism and public relations but by a long stint as a lawyer that had worn him down and matured him. The task was not hopeless.

But there was more work to be done. The PM was not convinced. He said, 'But Humphrey, surely you can see that the facts are hopelessly muddled. Can we not have a white paper that makes things crystal clear? If we did that then public debate would be about the underlying facts of the case rather than the semantics?'

'Of course Prime Minister, we could do that, but it would be very brave of you.'

'What do you mean, brave?'

'Well I take it that you want to further your particular objectives, to make your policies come to pass?'

'Of course, I want to carry out my programme, the one that got me elected by the public. We live in a democracy, don't you know?'

'Indeed Prime Minister, there lies the nub of the matter. You have put your finger on it directly'.

'Thank you, but I still don't see your point'.

'Well then, though it pains me, I'll be blunt. You realise that the majority of the voters in our great democracy are, as Plato put it of the majority in Athens, ignorant and unskilled. These people, the salt of the Earth bless them, are, by and large and speaking generally you understand, not people with whom one can carry on a complex conversation, or expect to follow a sophisticated argument. What they have in common is their representation in the population, the population of voters. Their numbers completely dominate the vote. In a democracy they will get their way.'

The PM was now frustrated. He reined in his temper, which was rapidly rising to boiling point, and moderated his vocal tone. 'Believe it or not I do understand those facts Humphrey. I am, as you will recall, a politician. What is your point? Do please get to it. I am due at Cabinet in an hour'.

Sir Humphrey pulled in his cheeks and became even blunter. 'Of course Prime Minister. For you to get your way you have to deceive the public. To baffle them. To fool them. To fudge the figures. We public servants have internalised this basic fact of government and accumulated considerable expertise in the matter over the years. For

example this country has been in a recession for the last decade, but the public are unaware of it, because we insist that GDP has increased each year, which it has. Of course the figures are fudged. Note we do not say GDP per capita has increased. That has fallen each year for many years. The press and TV have failed to notice, which may say something about their ability to perceive basic statistical facts, or perhaps they too despair of explaining it to their readers. The solution to this puzzle is that the population has increased. Of course. Obvious to you and I. '

'Ah yes', from the PM, 'I see'.

Sir Humphrey had more to say. 'Another example if I may. You were debating the state of the nations' finances in the Commons last week. You claimed we were doing well as there was a large surplus. The surplus is true, but misleading. There was fudge in the figures. The figures for government borrowing exclude the Bank of England, which borrowed horrendous sums to rescue pension funds, after many of them (including the Bank's own pension fund I may say) had bet heavily on certain bonds. Horrendous sums. The bet went wrong when one of your predecessors, by threatening to spend large sums, and the Governor of the Bank, by refusing to raise interest rates, together so spooked the bond market that it seemed as if the pension funds would become bankrupt. Vast sums of interest are now being paid by the taxpayer on these huge borrowings, There is thus no money left for building the forty hospitals promised. No accurate exegesis of this event in press or TV was forthcoming.'

The PM was silent. He was thinking that all this was rather hard to understand. And almost impossible to explain in the House of Commons, whose members in general were not ignorant or unskilled, though many he knew did fall into that category.

Humphrey said, 'I should let you go Prime Minister. I hope you understand that fudge is always with us. We could perhaps add basic statistics to the school syllabus.'

The PM said, 'Thank you for the lesson Humphrey. I see that fudge will be with us until the much desired far off day when the majority is skilled and clever. I will cease fighting it and acquire a taste for its skilful use as my predecessors no doubt had to'.

Sir Humphrey rose to take his leave. 'Prime Minister I must reassure you that I do not look down on, or scorn, the stupid and unskilled. My own son alas falls into that category. He is possessed of an intelligence quotient well below the norm and still has trouble tying his own shoelaces. I love him dearly. He is a happy lad and well contented.' Humphrey laughed his sepulchral laugh, 'Unlike his poor father, who is consigned to swimming through fudge for the rest of his days in office. Until blessed retirement'.

Planck

Bob was hopeless at maths. He was not alone. Almost all his friends were the same. The topic never arose in conversation. Yet Bob and his friends were intelligent and well educated. Indeed they regarded themselves as intellectuals and not as a bunch of airheads fascinated by football and pop stars. Some of Bob's crowd even wrote poetry. Bob thought that was just the way things were. Until he met Alice.

She was a gorgeous, blonde, beautifully shaped creature, somewhat younger than him. He was instantly smitten. They met in a pub when Bob spilled Alice's drink and, of course, offered to buy her another. In part of his mind he remembered it was an accident; in the other, more demonic half, he knew damned well it wasn't.

It turned out that Alice was not hopeless at maths. Indeed she revelled in the subject in her job as a research physicist at the Culham nuclear fusion facility up the road. Bob was a lecturer in history at the local university. His subject was the Tudors. When Alice and Bob had sat down in a cosy corner of the pub, with their fresh drinks, in front of the gentle log fire provided for the pleasure of the pub's customers, she had been full of the latest news; the end of the road for the big research machine, which had just recently been retired from service, having burped its last gasp of plasma and broken the temperature record on its final test run.

'What a way to go out', she bubbled prettily through her delightful pink lips, sipping her drink and causing Bob's breathing to momentarily halt, till he wanted for oxygen and remembered to breathe again. 'Sixty nine megajoules for five seconds, a world record!'

'Wow', replied Bob, who had no idea what a megajoule was. It sounded like some kind of dinosaur. He said wow a few more times, before Alice took pity on his incomprehension and changed the subject. They searched for a common topic of interest and thankfully lighted on classical music, which both enjoyed. A date was made to visit a concert in the near future.

Bob knew he would have to brush up his science knowledge if he was to have any chance with Alice. She in her turn was very interested in Bob, and realised she must learn a little about the Kings and Queens of England.

After several dates they made a grownup decision. Each would teach the other. Tudor history came first. In several cosy evenings for the first hour or so Bob taught Alice about the Calais wool trade, Henry's spy masters, the theological implications of divorce - stuff like that - till they gave up and settled down to more serious matters. Alice quite enjoyed it - both

the teaching and the more serious matters - soon she could join in when Bob talked about his work as a history lecturer.

When it was Bob's turn to learn. Alice taught Bob basic manipulation of equations. Bob managed this well as Alice could help him with every little difficulty, unlike his school teachers, who had had thirty others to worry about. Soon he was on to basic calculus. That was when he hit a snag. The concept of infinity.

He knew what infinity was - it went on forever. The mathematicians had different ideas. They had to make infinity stop at some point, or calculus wouldn't work and that would never do. They had many proofs of how this might occur, but the simple ones did not persuade Bob that they made sense and the complicated ones (which Alice kindly looked up for herself so as to teach him) he could not follow. He was not a mathematician it seemed.

Alice struggled on with the explanations and refused to give up. She switched to physics, as she had herself switched and where she was on stronger ground anyway. At school, when faced with infinities she had had no trouble believing the teachers claims and simply did as she was told when they said 'shut up and calculate'. Physics was much more fun for Bob and he galloped ahead absorbing the general concepts. It turned out that he was no ignoramus regarding physics, somehow he had absorbed knowledge after he had left school.

Soon he learned much about the states of matter, especially plasma, the state that occupied Alice's thoughts; the nebulous soup of particles that swarmed in her Tokamak torus at Culham. All was well it seemed, but then Bob started asking questions about infinity again. This was after the lesson - when they had moved on to more serious matters.

'Oh Bob', she sighed, rolling over. 'You and your bloody infinities. We physics people know the infinities don't really exist - they are just there in the mathematics - as an indicator that we don't have the whole story on reality.'

'Tell me oh lustrous one', enlighten me who bathes in wretched ignorance'. Bob was actually bathed in sweat from the more serious matters. 'My brain won't stop speculating'.

'Ok - I'll give you the facts - at least the facts as I understand them. The fellow who made the breakthrough, the one that did away with infinities - at least as far as I am concerned was a chap called Planck - a hundred and twenty years ago'

'Planck - what kind of a name is that?'

Alice giggled and responded as intended - 'Please sir - it's Planck's name'. They had both just read Joseph Heller's novel 'Catch22', where his hero Yossarian had gone through the

same routine in the US air force. The pair laughed, exchanged Catch 22 jokes for a while, then resumed the serious matters.

Eventually the action died down. But Bob chirped up again. 'This Planck chap - how did he do it - get rid of infinities?'

Alice could see that she needed to explain, or Bob would become tedious. 'He discovered the quantum nature of reality. It was an accident. He invented a fiddle factor to make the maths work in his equation. The Planck constant. Then all the physicists got on board and by a hundred years ago they had sorted most of it out - Planck won the Nobel prize in 1918. They are still arguing about what it means though. They could teach the quantum revolution in schools but they don't. Maybe in another hundred years. Things in Nature are not continuous on and on to infinity but discrete - chopped up in bits or steps. And it's fuzzy - not exact - statistical, not certain - down at the very small level you really and truly can't predict precisely what will happen. That is a law of Nature.'

She stopped. Was that the light of comprehension in Bob's eye? The dawning of perception? Would he finally shut up about infinities?

'By Jove, I think I've got it, thank you Mr Planck', he burred. He sort of had. What he had got, more specifically, was that Alice had had enough of mutual education. He could tell by the glint in her eye. She had evinced more than a soupcon of boredom with the minutiae of Henry's divorce dispute with the Pope. He resolved on the spot to discontinue his further education adventure with his loving partner. Better to read a few popular science books by himself - or get on to youtube.

Joint

Gary Briggs walked up Ludgate Hill in the early morning sunshine. This journey always reminded him of the famous passage that opened Dickens' novel 'Bleak House', where the novelist imagines a giant dinosaur waddling up this very hill in the mud. No mud today, only gentle sunbeams and light winds, and Gary didn't waddle; he proceeded jauntily, as befits a young man setting out on his career, his shiny black leather shoes tapping merrily on the pavement. As always the traffic was slight and gentle, considering this was the heart of London.

Gary was of medium height, bespectacled, prematurely balding, and of nondescript appearance. He had been born into the working class of East London and was a graduate of one of the newer universities. It had been hard enduring the years of low pay as a trainee lawyer, but he would soon be clocking on at today's place of work, the Old Bailey, where he would earn a sizeable sum of money, his fee as prosecuting barrister. After many months the money would arrive in his bank account and he would be able to reduce his overdraft. Payment was very slow - nothing moved fast in legal circles.

He entered the court and met his instructing solicitor, Tom Garden, a silver haired old chap in a three piece suit, who waited for him by the robing room where he would change into his court dress of wig, gown and wing collar.

'Morning Tom. Witnesses all present and fired up?'

'Yes Gary, prepped and ready'. Tom Garden would have preferred to use Gary's surname when addressing him, but had become accustomed to modern informality.

'Right - see you in Court'.

The jury was soon sworn in. Gary looked dourly at them as he began his opening. They were a mixed and motley crew; to the casual glance a fair cross-section of the local population in ethnicity and religion: one man with a kippah, one with a turban, two women with headscarves, one woman with a prominent crucifix. People swore oaths by Gita, Allah, Almighty God and Guru Nanak. Some merely affirmed. These were the people Gary would need to convince if he was to win the case.

He glanced up at the dock wherein resided a man accused of murder, a youth of seventeen who had tried to rob a diamond merchant in Hatton Garden with his companion. The shopkeeper had objected to the theft of his diamonds, pulled out a baseball bat and, together with his fellow merchants, violently attacked the would be robbers. One of the pair

of robbers had produced a flick knife and killed the shopkeeper. Both denied it was them who did the killing, but the shopkeeper was dead. As a doornail thought Gary, still thinking of Dickens. That was a fact soon established in court.

The pair of robbers had been badly advised by the on call solicitor they had obtained, who seemed not to understand the law very well and encouraged them to plead not guilty. In his view the fact that the identity of the perpetrator of the 'actus rea', the physical act of murder, was unclear, meant that both could be presumed innocent. Big mistake. The law of 'joint enterprise' meant that both could be found guilty whether or not they had personally pulled the knife and stabbed the shopkeeper. Perhaps the lawyer had been confused by the recent clamour for a change in the law.

Or, a cynical thought, perhaps the lawyer hoped to make more money from a not guilty plea. Straight after that piece of cynicism, probably the result of Gary's hurried breakfast of greasy sausages and even greasier eggs at a cafe on the way to work, a correcting thought flew across his brain, followed by more cynicism. Perish all those thoughts. Just focus on the task before me. That's hard enough.

Gary finished his bit and the defence barrister, Ayesha Kalmadi, took over. She was a good-looking young woman in a smartly tailored, tight cut, dark blue suit. She had been to a posh private school and a very smart university. She was a colleague of his from the same chambers in the Middle Temple. She argued forcibly and passionately that the prisoner had no 'mens rea', or intent to commit the crime of murder. Gary watched admiringly. Perhaps they would have a drink together later in the jolly pub down the road where exhausted lawyers forgathered after work. Her eyes shone with righteous indignation as she sought compassion for the young man in the dock.

In Gary's personal view, which he was careful to prevent from contaminating his advocacy, both the offenders were guilty of gross stupidity. What did they think would happen when they grabbed the diamonds from the counter? These Hatton Garden types were tough cookies, unlike the poor corner shopkeepers the pair had no doubt been robbing for years, undisturbed by the police. Perhaps it was the fault of the police, or perhaps the schools, which the pair of robbers had attended on and off, or perhaps the fault of the lone mothers who had brought them up.

Gary listened as Ayesha droned on. He looked at the jury. They were ordinary folk, not middle class lefties. They wanted these guys off the streets. He was going to win this one.

Then Ayesha switched tactics. She began to use anti-Semitic terms. Very subtly. It was not professional conduct. The judge seemed not to notice. Gary had hardly noticed the racial and ethnic mix of the jury. Now he focussed on it as he recalled the oath swearing procedure at the start of the trial. Probably five Muslims. Ayesha was highlighting the strange dress code of the Hasidic Orthodox Jews who owned the diamond merchant shop. They were very distinctive in their long black coats and black hats. Many of the diamond merchants in Hatton Garden were Jews. That had been true for generations. They were indeed international, with close links to the diamond cutters in Amsterdam. But what had that to do with the case?

Then her tactic worked. The judge finally intervened to chide her for her unprofessional language. Oh Ayesha how clever you are.

The judge said 'I must ask learned counsel to discontinue the use of such irrelevant and categorising phrases as 'international Jewry linked to the Israel that is currently slaughtering Palestinian children in Gaza'. I direct the jury to ignore those remarks. Further instances of such remarks will be reported to the Bar Council'.

Too late. Gary could see the change in the faces of the Muslims, and several others on the jury, as they began to think of the tragedy in Gaza. They had a chance to do their bit for the Palestinians. What was one murder against all the other murders taking place.

Gary swiftly took instructions and reduced the charge to manslaughter; to which the accused then pleaded guilty and were sentenced to ten years in prison. The trial concluded. A win for Ayesha. The robbers would be out in six years if they behaved. Perhaps they would have learned their lesson, perhaps not.

Gary bought the drinks in the pub. A bottle of red plonk as usual. He lifted his glass to Ayesha. 'Congratulations on your win - you were brilliant'.

Ayesha was thoughtful. Let's see whether the judge refers me to the Bar Council. She lifted her glass to Gary. 'Here's to crime'.

Bananaquit *Coereba flaveola*

As a biologist Julie Jackson was an odd fish. She insisted on wearing two hats. For part of the year she was a field zoologist, observing and documenting animals in the wild. Wearing boots, canvas trousers and a sweat stained blue T shirt she would be up a tree in a South American jungle, binoculars in one hand and a notebook in the other as she studied some animal or other. This year it was *Coereba flaveola*, common name the bananaquit, a bird of the tropical forest. For the other part of the year, wearing a white lab coat, blue rubber gloves and a plastic hair net, she was a molecular biologist, working in a gene lab in London, surrounded by machines and test tubes, brandishing a pipette and squirting one liquid into another, both liquids colourless and nondescript but rare and expensive and with long complicated chemical names. She was the despair of Helen Rogers, her zoology PhD supervisor, who felt she would never get her research degree.

'Julie, you've got to specialise. It's what everyone does these days. Don't you want to get your degree? Every six months I have to hand you over to someone else because you're no longer in my field. It's driving me mad'.

'Sorry Helen', said Julie, who wasn't at all sorry. 'It's just the way I'm made. The way my brain works. Don't worry about me. I'll be OK.'

Six months later it was Richard Smith, her PhD supervisor in the molecular biology lab, also complaining. 'Julie, you can't expect to make much progress on gene editing in this lab in only six months per year. The field is moving very fast. You will run out of your research grant before you finish off some new research.'

'Yes Richard', said Julie. 'I know. But I'll live on beans and starve if I have to. Maybe I'll pimp myself out to some rich banker'.

'No need for that', said Richard, who admired her can-do attitude and was concerned for her welfare. 'I'll look out for some extra funds'. And he did. It so happened that the head of his lab was a Nobel prize winner, one of the people who had discovered the CRISPR gene editing method, and Helen was a friend of another Nobel prize winner, who discovered how to extract DNA from ancient bones. It took only a few phone calls between two fellow members of this select group and funds were magicked up for Julie to spend her next six months of zoology studying the forty one subspecies of bananaquit, and the following six months analysing the genes to discover what made the subspecies a subspecies in each case.

So Julie set out to get the specimens. Much of the grant went on third-class airfares on rickety small airlines as she dodged about the Caribbean and South America, checking in to

cheap lodging places and rising early to look for the local bananquit and get some DNA. This she could get from a dropping, or a feather, or a trapped bird, or caged bird, or dead bird. She was thankful that she had to organise the killing of very few birds.

It was a strenuous six months. At the end she was exhausted. She had lost two stones in weight. But she had a case full of small, carefully labelled test tubes with the DNA of all forty one subspecies.

Richard admired her stamina and tenacity. He gave her space in the lab and helped arrange for her to get all the DNA analysed. 'You've done marvellously well', he said as they sat together over a coffee in the lab cafeteria, now how are you going to plan the next phase of the work?'

'Well', she said. 'I shall have to find out which gene combinations dispose to each subspecies. There must be differences in genes as there are in behaviours. You know some birds are bigger, some smaller, some with different colouration patterns - and so on. The literature is pretty voluminous I can tell you'. She had indeed spent many days and nights reading it, as Richard could perhaps tell from the bags under her eyes. 'It has data on different habitats and feeding patterns, though they all seem to be nectar feeders and rather tolerant of humans'. She tried to keep the zoology stuff simple as Richard was no zoologist. 'I'm no expert on their habits but the species has been much studied. Nobody seems to have done the gene work, so that might be good research in itself. But I want to do more. Exactly what more I can't say just yet. It may not work out'. The she returned to Helen and zoological research.

Helen was happy to leave her, mostly alone, to work for six months, assisting as wanted with reports of behaviours and statistical analysis. Both were pleased when her genetic data mapped well onto the subspecies differences. Helen said 'Well we've got enough for your PhD now you know. Just need to write it up.'

But Julie wasn't finished. 'I need another six months with Richard', she said. 'I've got an idea that might work'. So off she went again.

The grant had run out and she was now, though not yet actually starving, reduced to eating many meals of beans. She stayed with Richard rent free, cleaned the place, did his washing and shopping and ate evening meals with him when he was at home, which was not often. He had several girlfriends, and she didn't feel pressure to have sex with him, though she felt he would not have refused given half a chance. She managed.

Her work now was with CRISPR, the new technique for changing DNA. She put genes from one subspecies into the DNA of another. Combination after combination. These were sent to a lab in the USA where one of Richards's colleagues, Boutros Ahmed, then placed them into embryos of bananasquits and reared the birds in aviaries. Eventually it became clear that she had achieved her target and, Godlike, created a new subspecies. A combination of many phenotypes. Number forty two.

She wanted to name it either *Coereba flaveola rogersii* or *smithii* in honour of one of her tolerant and helpful supervisors, but was disappointed when they refused to accept the naming honour. Indeed they both refused to accept joint names with her on the paper she published with Ahmed, who was not so fastidious. Somehow both of her supervisors felt ashamed of the work. Though neither was religious they felt the creation of a new subspecies to be somehow shabby, if not indeed demonic. Julie could not understand their hesitation.

So *Coereba flaveola ahmedii* it became. Ahmed released the birds into the wild. They did very well.

Cream

I sat by the old woman's bed and listened as she told me of her life. I was ghost-writing her autobiography for her. It would likely be popular and quite a big seller, as it would reveal the secrets of the foundation and rise of one of the world's most successful private companies. I paid close attention as she rambled on, occasionally asking a gentle question. My recorder was running.

The room was dripping in luxury, as befitted the old woman's wealth of several hundred billions. The ceiling was high. The rich curtains were drawn against the light. Several servants moved softly around the room. The old woman was dying.

Her name was Anjali Gupta. Her white hair hung loose over her silk dressing gown. Her sharp brown eyes looked at me over her sharp brown nose. She wanted me to get it right.

Her husband had founded the company in the 1960s. He was a white Englishman, who had met her when in the British army as a signaller. He was much older than her when they married and moved to Reading. The little company was in the business of hiring out staff to set up telephone switchboards.

She had done the bookkeeping: sending out invoices, running out to pay cheques in to the bank, paying the staff at the end of the month. She graduated to recruiting the staff as the business grew. More were always needed. The nationalised telephone company was inefficient. The proverbial whelk stall that the government could not run. Technology was changing fast. People found the quickest way to get a telephone system installed was to bribe a nationalised phone company engineer. The alternative was to wait for years. Anjali recruited phone engineers from the nationalised company by offering a higher salary. That was how capitalism worked.

At first the profit margin was somewhat low - around double the salaries she had to pay the staff. This would have been fine if a hundred percent of the staff had been profitably hired out to customers, but invariably some were left on the shelf every month. As her husband phrased it, 'eating hay but not working'. He found an occupation for those staff on the shelf. He put them to work making little bits and pieces of software products that he could also hire out. What are now called 'apps'. This was the era of the beginning of computing software for business. When he hired out the apps the profit margin grew. Each app cost money to build in the first place but, once made, it cost nothing to reproduce, such is the joy

of software, and the rental fee went on for ever- 'money for old rope', as he put it. After a few years he had a successful business.

Then Anjali had a great idea. Her home town in India, Bangalore, had developed a software industry. It competed by paying wages to its staff much lower than those in the West, though high for India. She would have apps built in Bangalore. She went out and fixed it up. The business grew and the profits grew even faster. Soon the company was employing thousands of staff in both countries.

Then her beloved husband died. She grieved for a while, then threw herself into running the business. She loved her two children but they were well supplied with nannies and happy at boarding school.

She had a second great idea, for a large speech recognition app. This product would pick up an incoming phone call, ask the caller his or her business and ask basic details. Then it would retrieve or add the relevant records to the business database. Then it would put the caller through to the particular business person needed, with basic work accomplished and displayed ready on a computer screen. By this time there were very many competing products that purportedly served the same function, but they were invariably feeble, of poor quality and annoying to customers who typically became heated on being asked for details again, which they had already given out once, or when the system failed to understand a word, as happened with many of the competitor products. Her product would be better. It was. It spoke and understood speech rather like a real person. So much so it had often to explain that it was an automated programme and ask if the caller wanted to be connected to a real person. Usually, because it was so efficient, the customer was happy to continue. She expanded her business to almost all the countries of the world.

She had many more add on products planned. But the Bangalore staff were becoming expensive. Then she had a third great idea. India had the largest population in the world. Most of people much poorer than the computer programmers in Bangalore. All that was needed was training - and time, She was still a relatively young woman. She had the time.

She selected thousands of schools in the poor districts of India, provided satellite internet connections to the schools and smart phones to the students - to be used as internet connections and not as phones. English and computer programming were added as extra lessons for those who wanted. No teachers needed - it was all there for free on the net. It didn't cost much.

Then she built and operated dozens of secondary schools. Exams were held in the junior schools and the most able one in a thousand selected for entry. More exams at the end of secondary school as the young students became men and women. This cost much more - the buildings and teachers had to be paid for. But she invested for the long term.

The brightest students were creamed off, regardless of sex or caste. One in each thousand from the primary schools went to secondary school. One in each five from the senior schools, the cream of the crop, now one in five thousand of those that started, were offered a job with the company at very good wages for them. Some of the cleverest people in the world at one tenth of Western wages. How could she lose. She didn't. Most recruits stayed with the company, happy to be relatively rich in their home town rather than one of the average crowd in a foreign land.

Anjali smiled as she told me how the company grew even faster when she had effectively solved for ever the staff recruitment problem she had been battling for forty years. Her ultra bright recruits fashioned ever more advanced products. As the company grew enormous the profit margins grew to ninety percent. Very little was subject to tax as intellectual property was shifted to zero tax countries. What would she do with the billions? Why plough it back to more software development and more schools in India. She could not exhaust that resource, but she would try. If India were to run dry there was always Laos, Cambodia, Indonesia and all the other poor countries of the world.

As I listened for week after week and built notes for my book I grew to like the tough old lady. One day I turned up to finish off but she had died.

My job was to write it all down. Cream does not necessarily rise to the top to be creamed off. For many, especially the girls, save for Anjali's interventions, life would have remained dirt poor as they grew sour in their villages. Obvious really.

Citrus

It was a fine morning when my friend Hercule Poirot, the famous detective, first came across the case of the Citrus Fruit Poisoning. The poisoned victim was Lady Maria Cavendish, the society hostess. The morning sun was shining outside, innocently regardless of the horrible crime, and reflecting a rich green glow from the lawn. The lawn was in the private gardens adjacent to the flat I shared with Poirot in Belgravia. We were companionably eating our breakfast and perusing the morning papers.

I am Captain Hastings. I like to think of myself as something of a detective too, though by no means famous. Poirot often asks me to help with his more difficult cases, and this case was certainly in that category.

'Well Hastings *mon ami*', said Poirot, delicately tapping the boiled egg that Mrs Hudson had provided for his breakfast, and then slicing off the top with a silver knife, 'what do you think of that?' He inserted a teaspoon of boiled egg into his mouth, wiped his lips carefully with a napkin and pointed to the newspaper headline that announced the murder of her ladyship the night before. She had been poisoned after drinking a glass of orange juice which had been found to contain cyanide. The article went on to say that Chief Inspector Japp of Scotland Yard was in charge of the case and had arrested the maid.

'Looks pretty open and shut Poirot', I said. 'Japp seems to have solved it already.'

'*Mais oui*, but do we not know that the good inspector is often known for jumping on the wrong conclusion?'

'I suppose he has been known to be a bit hasty.'

'Hasty, *mon dieu*, the man is like the lightning with his deductions and the swift action that follows. In this case he has got it wrong. My little grey cells have worked upon the situation. I am sure of it. Please to telephone the good Japp and instruct him to release the maid and arrest a Sicilian who no doubt is at this moment boarding an aeroplane for Sicily.'

I applied myself to my kipper. Poirot had an amazing brain but even he could not possibly solve a case by reading a newspaper. He had gone too far this time.

'Come Hastings, the telephone, there is no time to lose.'

'I'm sorry Poirot, I can't see what you are on about. You'll have to give me more before I call the Chief Inspector, or he will take absolutely no notice of me.'

Poirot sighed and wiped his mouth again, where a tiny trace of egg yolk had fastened itself to the slim black moustache of which he was so proud and which he kept immaculately waxed. 'Very well Hastings. I shall explain my logic. Please to pay attention.'

I lay down my fish knife. The kipper would have to wait.

'You will notice on the society page of the newspaper that the Lady Cavendish has just inherited a large estate in Sicily. An estate that consists of an abundance of citrus groves and a cement factory. Her elderly relative himself recently inherited the estate and now he too has died. Lady Cavendish is of course Sicilian. She was Maria Sinagra before she married. The Sinagras are a notorious Sicilian mafia family, well known for corrupt involvement in the Italian cement trade, where many bridges fall down because of substandard cement. The cement factory is no doubt controlled by the mafia. It seems that Lady Cavendish had wished to divest herself of criminal connections when she married Lord Cavendish and moved to London. No doubt the mafia family had feared they would lose control of their asset, as Lord Cavendish, the English gentleman, was most unlikely to want to participate in criminal activities. They must have decided to eliminate her. For them the murder is a casual affair of business'.

I was none the wiser after this explanation. 'But Poirot old friend, how do you know the maid is innocent?'

'I shall tell you of a question that is the most interesting. The one that one must always ask oneself in the case of murder. The question of *cui bono*. Who is it that benefits from the murder? Look there and you will find the murderer. The maid, according to the newspaper, is about to be married. How could she benefit from the death of her mistress? She would lose her job and gain no money. No my friend, she may have brought the fatal glass of juice to Lady Cavendish but she did not put in it the fatal cyanide. In the paper she protests her innocence and refers to a Sicilian gentleman who visited that morning and brought a gift of a small box of oranges. Now please to telephone.'

I abandoned my kipper and made the call.

Japp was hard to convince, but his respect for Poirot led him to intensify the search for the Sicilian, which in truth he had already started. I myself had an idea that I put forward. That the glass, the jug containing the juice and the oranges should be checked for fingerprints. But apparently Japp had already done this. The maid's prints were on the glass and the jug but not on the remaining oranges.

I persisted with Japp. 'Perhaps the Sicilian's prints will be on the oranges. And take care with them. They may also contain cyanide.'

I returned to my breakfast, asking Mrs Hudson if she would be so good as to prepare me another kipper. She had laid in the finest kippers from Loch Fyne. Large, fat and silvery - a treat not to be missed. Poirot was not a fan of kippers. He was however, when I reached the table again, indulging in a dish of chausson au pommes, for the making of which he had punctiliously instructed Mrs Hudson. As usual he was topping them with Mrs Hudson's strawberry jam preserve. An excellent confection but very sweet. Poirot's sweet tooth often required him to visit his dentist, which visits he delayed as long as possible, enduring the inevitable pain of toothache.

'Japp has responded to your suggestion Poirot. Hopefully Scotland Yard will have their man before too long.'

'Good. Murder is a wicked crime. To deprive a person of life is a diabolical thing to do. Let us hope they try the Sicilian with the good British justice. If the trial were to be in Sicily there would be little hope of justice.'

Mrs Hudson arrived with my kipper. 'I see you gentlemen are enjoying your breakfast this fine morning. Will you be working later or going out to enjoy the lovely weather? Are you not drinking the orange juice I made for you today? '

There was a short and perhaps understandable pause before I replied. 'Well Mrs Hudson, as a matter of fact we have both already done a good days work I believe'. I explained the case. Poirot ate another chausson de pomme and glowed with satisfaction. He was perhaps just the tiniest bit too full of himself, as he must have been of the pasties, but I forgave him that. Great men must be allowed their little vanities.

Pond

A cold day in March. In the early evening light the blue sky is full of fluffy cumulus clouds that move in a swift caravan, blown by the wind from horizon to horizon. Each cloud with a dark grey top and pink undersides from the setting sun.

A chill breeze whistles through the rusty iron piping and stained brown concrete of the structure adjoining the mighty edifice that is the decommissioned Windscale atomic power station. The structure is the PFSP, the pile fuel storage pond, wherein lie the spent uranium fuel rods that once provided electricity for much of England. The fuel rods are turning to dark radioactive sludge, twenty feet down at the bottom of the pool of water. Weeds grow through the cracks in the concrete and seagulls splash in the green translucent water.

An odd place for romance one might think. But for Roger Wool and his girlfriend Daisy it is ideal for their private tryst. There was nobody about.

'Will you marry me darling?', said Roger, through clenched teeth as he was feeling the cold a bit.

'Oh yes please', said shivering Daisy. And the two cuddled together and exchanged a passionate kiss.

Roger reached into his pocket and produced a large and expensive diamond ring, set in platinum, which he fiddled on to Daisy's finger. Fortunately it was a good fit.

The two went off for a cup of tea and some cake, in the works canteen that catered for many of the ten thousand people or so who worked at the Sellafield industrial site for nuclear materials processing. Daisy took off the ring and put it in her phone wallet. She wasn't ready to tell the world just yet.

Roger was an engineer and Daisy an admin clerk. They lived together in a small flat in the neighbouring town of Seascale and both worked at Sellafield. Neither was well off. The diamond ring was a major item for them as it delayed the purchase of a house, but they were both romantics. They felt deeply about things. Perhaps that was why Roger had proposed at the desolate storage pond. They both felt the romance of the gloomy and dangerous water. They smiled at each other, over their teacups, as they warmed up in the overheated air of the canteen.

Daisy's friend Karen joined them. Karen was Daisy's supervisor at work. Karen was tall and thin and Daisy short and not thin. They had been friends since school. Karen fancied Roger for herself, which Roger well knew. He had been out with her quite a few times in the

past and they had had sex on many occasions. The sex had been spectacularly excellent. But for him there was something missing in the way their two personalities meshed together. He had stopped going out with her and assumed the relationship was finished. But Karen stubbornly wanted it to keep going. She had not been happy as a spectator to Daisy's growing romance.

'Hello gorgeous hunk', said Karen, showing her even white teeth which she felt were her best features. 'I thought you weren't taking your tea break here today, and I would have Daisy to myself for once'. Roger was indeed rather a gorgeous hunk, tall and broad with wavy brown hair. Hazel eyes above a long slim nose and pale complexion. He smiled back at Karen. Not done to look embarrassed, which he was increasingly whenever they met. Daisy looked at her teacup. She was also well aware of Karen's interest in Roger, which she felt was becoming unhealthy. Surely Karen could see that Roger was plighted. He was not available. Karen should find a man of her own and not continually hanker after her man.

'Hello Karen', said Roger, smiling as a friend might smile, 'We've just been up at the storage pond. It was freezing up there. No heat at all from the radiation'.

Karen laughed at his joke. That was the way to a man's heart wasn't it. Laugh at his jokes, however feeble and worn out. 'I've not been up there for ages. Last time I went it reminded me of what we do here and why it's important. Helps to make the job worth while.'

That made sense to Roger and Daisy. Most of the people on the site were imbued, however slightly, with some feeling of the spirit of usefulness and scientific service. When they ventured out of this small patch of Cumbria they were often treated as pariahs by the anti nuclear brigade, so they tended to stick together.

Daisy had an idea. It might convince Karen that her cause was hopeless. The idea was rather dramatic, but perhaps the drama might drive home the message. 'Let's go up there after clocking off. I have something to show you'.

'Something to show me', said Karen, 'I can't miss that. You're on'. She smiled at Roger and walked jauntily off back to work. Roger raised his eyebrows at Daisy, who also smiled. 'You can come too', she said.

Later that evening the sky was much darker. The wind was still cold. The sun had set but the great pond was lit by yellow flood lights. The water was clear and faintly green under the lights. Karen arrived first and gazed down through twenty feet of water to look at the spent rods in racks at the bottom. She knew that although they had already lost much of their radioactivity they would still be emitting deadly radiation in ten thousand years. Her humble

work in admin contributed to the production of safe and climate friendly electric power and she was proud of it. How do the workers in coal power stations think of themselves she thought.

Daisy and Roger arrived. 'This is where Roger proposed to me just a few hours ago', said Daisy. She was wearing her ring. 'I thought you should know. I know you have always fancied Roger. I'm sorry but you'll have to live without him. It's just one of those things'.

She took off her ring and handed it over to Karen to inspect.

Karen took the ring in her hands. She looked at the great diamond and then at Roger. This looked like a year's savings for him. She understood the strength of his feeling for Daisy. And the lack of his feeling for her. A great wave of emotion took her. She clutched her breast and wailed in anguish, a low moan of utter despair. She threw the ring into the pond. It drifted down to the bottom as Daisy and Roger watched in stunned silence.

Then Daisy screamed. Roger shouted, 'You stupid, stupid woman!' Karen sobbed and fled.

Roger rapidly took off his clothes. He was tanned a deep brown for the most part, but remained an intense white where his swimming trunks had covered him. He dived into the pond, heading for the depths. Daisy tracked his progress down through the clear green water by the white backside, which she could see going steadily lower and then moving slowly across the base of the pond as he searched for the ring. Time passed. Would his breath hold out? Then the white blob disappeared. Daisy gasped, but quickly realised it was because he had now turned round and was coming up. Had he found the ring or would he have to dive again? She wouldn't let him do that. It was only a bloody ring.

His head appeared above the water and he let out a great breath like a surfacing whale. He held up the ring in a triumphant hand. Then climbed out via the rusty ladder on the side of the pond.

'We'll get everything checked by the radiation guys but I think we'll be OK. Thank God it fell at least six feet away from the rods. The job of the water is to absorb radiation and it will have done that after six feet'.

He put the ring back on Daisy's finger. She dried him with his shirt and trousers, gently and tenderly rubbing the white area. A tale for the grandchildren she thought.

Violet

A pair of crows had built a nest at the top of a tall oak tree in my garden. I watched them build it. Crows are large birds, not quite eagle size, but prominent when swooping low round my garden with spread black wings, like Lancaster bombers round the Möhne dam. One crow (I imagine it must have been the male) brought large twigs in its beak, and the other (one presumes the female) built the nest bit by bit. In a week or so they were done. There followed vigorous sex between the pair, on a big branch next to the nest, accompanied by much loud squawking. Then there was silence. No doubt the female had laid eggs and was incubating them. The male brought food at intervals, arriving with a hundred yard glide to perch by the nest and touch beaks with his mate, before diving off again. I waited for several weeks, hoping to see the chicks come out. But there was nothing. Just more silence. Well it had been a very cold and wet April. Clearly the chicks had not survived. The parent crows gave up. No more squawking.

The incident made me sad and briefly philosophical. April is the cruellest month is it not. Especially when it turns cold after promising an early Spring.

I thought of the hecatombs of early deaths of young creatures. Nature's way of evolving the stock of living beings. Improve them by birthing more than can be supported, killing most of them before they reach old age, generation after generation, eon after eon, back to the dawn of life on Earth some two or three billion years ago. The survival of the fittest. And presumably the same trick is employed, because it is a Law of Nature, by Nature herself, or by the Great Creator of All Things, on all the other planets throughout the universe where life has seeded itself. No joy for me in that contemplation.

All that put me in mind of Mr T S Elliott, the creator of that very memorable phrase naming April as the cruellest month, in his famous poem 'The Waste Land'. And then I recalled he had used the word 'violet', this week's word, in the striking phrase 'violet hour'. I wondered if he had any more thoughts on the subject of 'violet', He was himself a more or less studied philosopher as well as a poet. He was indeed very fond of the word 'violet' and created more memorable phrases using it. 'Violet' occurs in all four times in the poem.

'At the violet hour, when the eyes and back
Turn upward from the desk, when the human engine waits
Like a taxi throbbing waiting,'

'At the violet hour, the evening hour that strives
Homeward, and brings the sailor home from sea,
The typist home at teatime, clears her breakfast, lights
Her stove, and lays out food in tins.'

'What is the city over the mountains
Cracks and reforms and bursts in the violet air
Falling towers
Jerusalem Athens Alexandria'

'And bats with baby faces in the violet light
Whistled, and beat their wings
And crawled head downward down a blackened wall
And upside down in air were towers'

All in all a good excuse for me to read the poem and his biography to boot, which I enjoyed, but which provided no philosophical insight to comfort me in my contemplation of the stark reality of the 'survival of the fittest' truth. Or at least none that I could make sense of.

Happily I like Elliott's poetry. I can feel it has great quality. I feel relief when I appreciate a piece of art that is highly regarded by the cognoscenti. Often it happens that I do not. Picasso's horse faced women, Francis Bacon's smeared out faces. Much of modern poetry. Then I feel alienated. My old schoolmaster used to pontificate to us boys, 'When you visit the National Gallery it is not the paintings that are being judged.' What is it that the others, the knowing ones, can see in this piece of art that leaves me so cold? Am I lacking some sense that works for them and not for me? Am I being judged and found wanting?

But I am no longer an eager schoolboy. Around the year 2000, for my sins, I studied the squeaky gate school of the once much feted post war composers: Dallapiccola, Berio, Stockhausen, Nono. Now all but forgotten. I learned that the verdicts of the cognoscenti are not to be relied upon. I must judge for myself. The audience that matters to me.

Of course 'The Waste Land' is easy to criticise. Lots of intertextuality - chunks in Latin, Italian, French, Sanskrit and German. I can manage the German and French, and a bit of the Italian, but the rest I find opaque. Never mind - lots of editorial help available - and there is always the dictionary. I don't have a Sanskrit dictionary, but there is always the

internet and the wondrous Wikipedia. But none of this difficult, pretentious and barely intelligible intertextuality matters to me. What delights me in the poem are the small phrases created by the poet's genius, whose meaning and rhythm speak to me via the nerves in my lower back and thence straight to my emotional brain, bypassing any rationalisation and giving pleasure. 'And bats with baby faces in the violet light Whistled, and beat their wings'. Such is art.

As for philosophy, it is hard to penetrate the obscurity. Such is poetry after all. It's all a bit miserable. The land is a wasteland.

If Elliott can supply me no suitable philosophy then I must turn elsewhere. Alas Daniel Dennett, one of my favourite current philosophers, is no longer current. He died last week. So I must needs bring out my own.

It occurs to me that, for every great poet or artist that is lauded, there are many millions who go unsung. The survival of the fittest in art, in an analogy to biology, requires the oblivion of the great majority. A Law of Nature. A diamond cannot shine in a mountain of diamonds. In every generation some few artworks are singled out for fame and praise. Many millions fail to register. As the statisticians describe it, the distribution of fame in artworks is very strongly skewed. Most goes to the top one in a hundred thousand and almost nothing to the remainder; starving in their garrets. With the internet the skew intensifies. Taylor Swift gets a 10, Katy Perry and Dua Lipa perhaps a 3 and the rest less than a 1.

Elliott was a great artist. His fame was helped by his self publishing of 'The Waste Land' (in a magazine of which he was the editor), by his then fashionable eroticisms (which we now consider tame), by his inclusion of learned and obscure intertextuality, which allowed the readers (subsequent to consulting their dictionaries) to consider themselves learned, though in truth he himself knew little of science. And he worked before TV.

I am one of countless millions of artistic dabblers in the modern age with a ranking on the fame scale that is microscopically low. My operas are unperformed, my music unheard, my paintings unregarded. It is best to count one's blessings, reject desire and seek comfort in Buddhism. And carry on dabbling. No doubt the crows will have another go next Spring.

Police

On most Saturday evenings I take a drink or two in the Wetherspoons pub in town. I like it because they don't play silly music all the time. Just blessed silence so customers can have a good old chinwag over our pints. Or halves in my case. I'm past drinking pints now at my age. I'm usually joined by a couple of old biddies who used to run the riding stable down the road. They sold it off for a housing estate so they're well loaded - and often good for the odd drink. I keep it fair and square by providing the entertainment with the odd story or two. Often we're joined by an old queen who drinks sherry all evening. It can't be good for him but he looks well on it. He's got a few good stories to tell as well.

So I'm going on about the police encounter I had recently. That was very entertaining...

Now the principal fact about WPC Barnard is her height of five foot two. Just a tiny little thing. I see her occasionally when I am doing my little bit of shopping. She is quite a pretty young woman. As an old git myself I can not get over the fact of her height - and her being a police person - on active duty and all. I treat her with great respect for the uniform.

'Morning constable. Lovely day for a patrol in our fine city'. Then I get a smile out of her. She knows me a bit I think. Maybe not.

In my day - about a million years ago - all the coppers were at least six feet tall. They had to be big and strong to intimidate the rowdies, yobbos and ne'er-do-wells - especially when the pubs would kick out on Saturday nights and all those good citizens had had a skin full. If the intimidation didn't work, and it usually did, but if it didn't then the coppers would have a go with their truncheons. A poke in the belly would mostly sort them all out. All apart from the toughest, or bloodiest minded lunatics, who would then need to be clubbed half unconscious, before being chucked in the Black Maria to be taken down to the cop shop for a nice night's rest on the hard bed of a cell floor.

I do speak from experience. I used to be a bit of a tearaway as a young man. On Saturday nights I would take pleasure in going out with the lads and pissing away a large chunk of my hard-earned wages as a bricky. Stupid really. I could use some of that money now to pay the gas bill and get a nice bit of beef for my little dog rather than that muck in tins.

I stopped being a tearaway when I got called up for National Service. Amazing what changes in a man's character are provided by a week in the Glass House. Even more by a spell in an infantry battalion shooting commies till our Bren gun barrels grew red hot in the depths of a freezing Korean winter. But that's another story.

No really - I'll tell you about that another time. Right now it's the police story. Anyway after that I became a good boy. Model citizen. Wife, kids. They all grew up and flew the nest. The wife flew off with the postman. Ah well.

As I was saying WPC Barnard is a pretty young woman. Nice blonde hair. If I was fifty years younger, back when I had some hair of my own, I'd take her out for a drink. I wonder if she's got a boyfriend.

We had a little encounter the other day. Put another half in there and I'll tell you about it...

I'm walking down the road by the Post Office when she pulls up in her blue cop car with a screech and jumps out with her two male colleagues. Apart from her cute, curly brimmed cap, she is dressed like a paratrooper yomping across the Falklands: padded flack jacket, webbing belt and straps with pouches holding radio, torch and taser.

The bules are all worked up about something. Another two cop cars screech up, parking themselves in the middle of the road, blue lights flashing, siren blaring. More police jump out and start charging around. They are after someone. They are all shouting on their

radios. I can hear the radios blaring. Maybe there are ten of them. It's all very confusing.

They reach a decision and most of them rush down the alley opposite.

WPC Barnard is left behind, by the cars. Perhaps they've seen too many cop movies where the villain they are chasing doubles back and steals the cop car.

Now they are coming back down the alley - this time walking and retreating slowly backwards. In front of them is a bloke waving a machete. Yes I kid you not. A bloody great machete - with real blood dripping from the blade. He's obviously mad as a hatter. A right nutter. He's probably chopped somebody's arm off or some such. To get all that blood on it.

The nutter makes little darts towards the coppers They fall back a few yards to keep their distance. They've obviously got to arrest the nutter, but nobody wants to get near that machete. Then another little dart and another group pull back. It's like a sheepdog herding sheep. I would have laughed as it was so funny, but I stopped myself. Some poor bugger was lying back there missing an arm or something. No joke...

Yes please I will have another half. I thought you would never ask...

Aah that's better. Lubricates the tonsils don't you know. All the better to tell my story with. No I know I don't need tonsils to tell my story - just my tongue. But my tongue comes out in sympathy with the tonsils. Now where was I ?

Oh yes - the sheepdog worrying the herd of sheep. Well they keep backing off till the nutter gets out on to the road. From there he can go many ways. Probably chop off a few more arms as he pleases. Somebody has to do something. I consider having a go myself. But I would be hopeless. I'm too slow these days. Time was I'd have kicked him straight in the bollocks and then chopped his own arm off with the machete - to teach him a lesson. But not any more...

No the one who stepped up to the mark was none other than WPC Barnard. She marches with determination straight towards the nutter. Then he decides to back off. He turns

his back to walk away, but she isn't going to let him escape. She holds out her taser at arm's length and lets him have it in the back. He goes down twitching on the pavement.

Then all the other coppers rush in and have ago with their truncheons till the bloke drops the machete and is well handcuffed and shoved into a car. One takes the machete.

Barnard stands still. She is ignored. In my view she is a heroine...

Well yes, that is the end of the story. What do you want - justice?