Short Stories

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Alice in Businessland

(A very short story)

Alice had spent the day with her friends, picking flowers, walking, laughing, and now she was on her way home. Passing a building she hadn't noticed before, she went to the large up-and-over door that was open at the back, and peered in.

Inside she saw a lot of machinery and bath type things that held coloured liquid, and the place smelt of something that reminded her of ammonia. Curious, she ventured into the building and was greeted by a nice man called Ken.

'You must be the applicant for the line job,' he said and, before she could speak, he took her up some stairs to a hot, stuffy, noisy, smoke filled room.

'It's noisy in here,' she complained.

Ken looked at his watch.

'About half past three.'

He sat behind his desk and motioned her to a chair.

'Now,' he said, 'you do realise this is a very demanding job, don't you..?'

'I...'

'Right. Now do you have a science degree?'

'No....'

'A chemistry degree?'

'No. I.....'

'"A" Level mathematics?'

'No....'

'Have you ever worked in a P.C.B. plant before?'

'A what?'

'A P.C.B. plant,' said Ken, 'we make printed circuit boards. PCB is what we experts call it.'

'No...'

Ken sighed. What to do, he wondered? But Ken was an executive and made an immediate decision based on her qualifications and pleasing bust.

'You're hired,' he said in his most authoritative voice.

'But.....'

'No need to say thank you. I'll hand you over in a moment to one of my managers to show you round,' he said imperiously.

'What...'

'What do I do here? I'm the G.M. The General Manager.'

'So you're responsible for all this?' she said, indicating the works area. 'So if it runs well, it's because of you?'

'Of course.'

'And if it makes lots of money, it's because of you?'

'Of course.'

'And I suppose if things go wrong down there,' she indicated again, 'then you're to blame.'

'Oh no, that's the fault of my managers.'

'Why?'

'Because they manage specifically, whilst I manage generally.'

'But don't you also manage them?'

'Of course. But I can't be held responsible for something that they did, from a decision that they took, relating to information that they had, pertaining to events in which they were involved.'

'Pardon?'

'Look. If a mistake occurs on the shop floor, then the production manager is to blame. And if a mistake occurs in the assembly unit then the assembly manager is to blame. It's very simple.'

'Ah, I see,' said Alice, 'so you must be the person who looks after the overall financial well being of the company.'

'Now you're beginning to understand.'

'So if you make a profit, it's because of you?'

'Of course.'

'And if liquidity is strong it's because of you?'

'Of course.'

'Ah, so if you lose money it's your fault.'

'Oh no, it's the consultant's fault.'

'Pardon?'

'The consultant. If we lose money for any reason it must be because of bad advice. I obviously can't be held responsible for bad advice.'

'But what if you lose money in an area that he hasn't advised on? Then you are responsible?'

'Of course not! I can't be held responsible for areas that should have been advised on, but haven't been. That would be most unfair.'

Alice looked confused.

'But you said you were the General Manager. How do you generally manage?'

'Well I try and help the managers so that they perform efficiently. I allow them complete control of their own departments, and then when they make a mistake I tell them what they did wrong.'

'And then you tell them how to do it right.'

'Oh no. They are the managers; they are in control of their own departments. It would be wrong to be seen to be superior, don't you think? You obviously understand little of modern management techniques. Anyhow it's time to hand you over to Martin, who is in charge of Assembly. Oh, by the way, I've forgotten a most important question.'

'Yes....?'

'Are you good at making tea and coffee?'

Martin took her to the assembly shop, where she saw people, mainly women, assembling components on to boards.

'Do all these people work for you?' said Alice, quite impressed.

'Oh yes. I'm in total charge. The absolute ruler in my own domain.'

He looked at one of the women.

'Doris, stop slouching in your chair, and assemble more quickly.'

Doris lifted herself in her chair, got up and made a cup of tea.

'You've got to be firm,' he said, 'no matter who you deal with, be firm.'

The phone rang.

'Yes.?....no that's not possible..... we can deliver tomorrow .....we haven't any time today.....no not today.....I'm sorry that's all I can say.....thank you.'

He beckoned to one of the male assemblers.

'Jump in the car and take Global this board will you. And bring back all the rejects.'

'Rejects?' asked Alice. 'Does that mean you've done them wrong?'

'Oh no,' said Martin, 'it's the customers' fault.'

'The customers' fault? Why?'

'Because they haven't accepted what we sent,' he said tartly.

'And is what you sent, what they asked for?'

'Very close. Certainly close enough not to bother about. It would take them very little time to make the necessary rectifications themselves. Never mind, we can send them a credit note and re-invoice them next month. It will help next month's sales figures.'

'Next month's?' asked Alice incredulously.

'Oh yes, we have to make sure that the figures are good.'

'But they were in this month,' protested Alice.

'The two have no relation to each other. If we have a bad month this month, then it is hardly my fault. However if we have a good month next month it will prove how efficient we are.'

'But aren't you responsible for bad figures also?'

'It depends really. If we have a poor output through lack of assembly speed, then that is the fault of the supervisor. If there are certain items that hold us up because of late deliveries, then that is the fault of the suppliers. If the assemblers go on strike that is the fault of the supervisor for poor morale, and the General Manager for poor leadership.'

He thought for a moment.

'It's difficult to think of any situation in which the blame attaches to me. As you know I run a tight ship.'

Martin handed Alice over to Keith, in charge of p.c.b. production.

'What are you responsible for?' asked Alice tentatively.

'P.C.B. production.'

'And do you,' she said, knowing the answer, 'take the credit for good output and the blame for poor output?'

'Yes.'

'Yes? What do you mean yes?'

'I mean yes.'

He picked up a board and saw a blemish.

'Scrap the lot,' he commanded to one of the men.

'The lot? How much is there?'

'About 5000.00 pounds worth.'

'Bad for our image if we don't.'

'How much do you usually scrap?'

'We're doing well this month. Only eighty four.....' he got out a calculator, 'point three percent. I like to be accurate.'

'But isn't the quality your fault?'

'Yes it is, but only if it goes to a customer and is returned.'

'But what about scrap, before it gets to a customer?'

'Well that's obviously the fault of the equipment, for which I can't be held responsible as I didn't buy it.'

'You see,' he continued, 'I get good production because of the close bond between me and my men.'

He clicked his fingers and a worker rushed up, bowed, lit a cigarette for him, placed it in his mouth, bowed and left. Another finger clicked and a cup of coffee magically appeared.

'You see, as a manager I am loved.'

'Is this still the area with the most unemployment in Britain?' asked Alice.

'I believe so,' replied Keith, 'why do you ask?'

At this point the consultant joined them.

'And what are you responsible for?' asked Alice wearily.

'Everything,' he said, 'except the capital structure of the Company, which is the domain of my superiors. Unless of course they wish to involve me.'

'So you take the credit, and the criticism?' she asked suspiciously.

'Of course. And if I don't perform I get the sack, which I would expect.'

'But who do you blame when things go wrong?'

'Well on day-to-day matters I blame the managers, because I am not involved. But if they are continually at fault then I am to blame for not either retraining or sacking them.'

'But don't you blame the owners of the Company for some things?'

'Certainly not. I have always found them constructive and helpful. Indeed their business sense and strategic awareness continually impresses me.'

Alice smiled and realised that at last she could go home happy. As she skipped on her way she sang a little ditty that goes....

1 Business consultants never die,
They just gently creep away.
Smiling happy faces
Another bill to pay

2 He's here to save you money
To give a master plan
But a little at a time
Such a clever man

3 It takes many, many weeks
To find the remedy
It was obvious in minutes
There for all to see

Sales too low
Costs too high
People lost
Wondering why

Products crap
Too much scrap
Reps in lay-bys
Having a nap

And who's to blame
For this sorry story
The lack of cash
The loss of glory

What's for sure
It's not the boss
He's not responsible
For the loss

It's the recession
The Chancellor
Greedy bankers
Useless employees
Load of wa.....

It's not the boss!
The consultant agrees
He would, of course
He wants the fees

Chorus....
Business consultants never die,
They just gently creep away.
Smiling happy faces
Another bill to pay

Clarity

Through the cell bars a million stars shone in a bright black heaven. He stared at it in awe and his eyes moistened. He had no answer for this strange sight although he had, like any school child, read the text books that explained to the best of man's knowledge the mysteries that the Universe held.

But whilst these had given answers that he had no reason to doubt they had also left him unfulfilled. The creation of the Earth, E = MC2, Quasars, Pulsars, Gravity etc were all very well, but to him their technical explanation alone was enough to create a feeling within him that this was a subject that he would prefer to live, and live in ignorance of, so that its splendour and majesty could be enjoyed rather than analysed.

It seemed important to retain its value as a sensation rather than a subject, to be felt rather than known, to be seen rather than read.

He looked again into the night sky and prayed that it would soon take him, that he would become part of the stillness and peace that he ached for and maybe in some way he would also be allowed to shine a little light amongst all the other light that lit up the Universe.

Taking his eyes from the sky a feeling of despair swept through him and he looked at the hands that he could not feel. He put them into the light from the moon and stared at them with almost a child's curiosity. They looked like a crushed reptile's hand, bloated as they were with the broken and nail-less fingers and the loss of dexterity. On a logical plane

he knew that they had only been hurt and this kept him going, but occasionally there were times when his self control and self preservation systems let him down and his emotions, with all the imagery at their command, let him understand the reality of a man without the use of his hands, without touch, without feel. He sat down and somehow his body, understanding his needs, assumed a position like a question mark, allowing him the comfort that only a womb can bring and a child can know and protecting him within a million years of warmth and security.

Rocking gently he sucked a mangled thumb and sobbed soft tears that covered his useless hands and made them glisten in the moonlight, giving them an appearance that frost has in the early morning when caught by the rising sun when it comes to warm the Earth.

His rocking became ever slower and imperceptibly a warmth permeated his body, starting inwardly and moving out to his hands and feet, giving his body a feeling that he had not experienced before. It started to get lighter and he noticed the stars were getting bigger as though they were coming towards him.

He slowly understood what was happening but was unsure of his feelings, which surprised him. The way ahead meant all the things he had prayed for only a short while ago and behind was the suffering and despair that he had had to endure for what seemed like an eternity. And yet he hesitated, feeling somehow that this was not the time to die, that no matter what the circumstances, this was not the time.

The stars which moments before had been racing towards him, slowed up and then started to recede leaving him again with the light from the moon. He realised however that the warmth had stayed with him, the glow inside that a being has when they have established their own peace with the Universe and when, having looked over the edge of eternity, realise it is a friend to be cherished rather than desired.

Rough hands pulled him up .....

Ali the Alligator

The driving instructor raised his hands in exasperation, 'If I've told you once I've told you a thousand times. We've been in the car two minutes and what should we do?' he enquired with just the slightest hint of sarcasm.

The seventeen year old spotty youth sat behind the wheel, his knuckles white from his tight grip, and peered into the road ahead. He started to murmur something, got the first two words back the front and gave up.

'Well?'

The pause was endless.

'Well...well?'

The driver, which indeed was his official title although in seven lessons he had only managed to drive (that was the official term for his endeavours) a matter of several hundred yards, usually several inches off the ground as he lurched forward in ever increasing hops, fell deeper into his catatonic state.

As he was about to rant and rave in yet another fit of exasperation, the instructor suddenly felt a huge calm engulf him and he looked at his charge and no longer saw an imbecile but a child, to be soothed, coaxed, led gently down that road that we all have to travel, usually with an initial amount of trepidation (officially a motorway, he thought, amused at his own little joke).

'To help you remember,' he said gently, 'I'll tell you a story. Maybe that will help?' he said enquiringly of the ashen face by his side.

'Maybe,' a pair of lips silently mouthed.

'O.k.,' he said, 'sit back in the seat for a few minutes and relax.'

Catatonic became less atonic and more cat, his shoulders visibly relaxing.

'A long, long time ago, in the distant land of Bopalepolop, there was an enormous swamp in which lived a vast amount of alligators. There were tribes of alligators each with their own domain and within this domain there were families of alligators who in turn had their own territory.

In one of the families, comprising of about twenty alligators, there was one particular alligator called Ali. Ali the alligator. She was a lady alligator who was very, very sad because she was very, very fat, and it made her life very difficult.

Let me explain why.

The alligators got their food several ways. They caught animals that ventured too close to the water's edge to drink, and were not quick enough to flee. They ate geese that landed on the water. They ate large fish, although that needed a fair slice of luck. But their favourite dish was a succulent tourist, or a traveller trying to traverse the narrow swamp trails in order to speed more quickly to his destination.

'Tourists,' in the immortal words of Long Tail the Elder, 'are yummy.'

And indeed they were. The very agile alligators fed mainly on people, whereas the slower ones tended to mix their diet.

Ali, though, fed on none of these. She lived on a mixture of ice creams, beefburgers, chips, cakes and anything else that she could beg from the people who wandered the swamps. Ali was fed by the people she was supposed to be eating!

Now this had come about by one of those quirks of fate that happen every so often. When young, Ali had been cavorting in the swamp with

her young friends when, turning quickly, she had smashed her head against a tree stump and dislocated her jaw. The alligator on duty that day bandaged it correctly and in several weeks her jaw had recovered completely, and became again fully usable, except.....it clicked. Each time she opened her mouth it clicked. All over the swamp you knew where Ali was....click, click, click. It drove them all mad.

Unfortunately for Ali it ruined any possibility of catching animals or people. An alligator opens its mouth several times instinctively as it stalks its prey, but of course makes no sound. Ali sounded like a clock creeping up on them, and in due course she became a joke for the animals. Instead of playing tic toc toe, they played tick tock ali.

She despaired and became ever thinner, until one day, her now frail body was seen by two tourists, who not actually knowing what an alligator was, took pity on Ali and fed her banana sandwiches. Ali found it revolting but any food was better than no food. And so it started, her addiction into junk food. She became adept at fawning for the tourists, pointing the way for the travellers, and rubbing her tummy. More junk food.

But junk food isn't fish, or meat, or people. It was something she had never heard of....calories. She put on weight, then more weight, then even more weight until she became enormous. She no longer swam to the bank, but floated like a raft.

The bigger she became, the more an object of ridicule from her fellow alligators, the sadder she became, the more she ate. It was a vicious circle.

One day a visitor arrived from an alligator tribe who lived many miles away. He was their spiritual leader and recognised by all the alligators, even Long Tail the Elder, as the wisest of them all. He had come for consultations with the family elders, which was something he did every two years, so that each family understood the needs and aspirations of the others and therefore they all lived in harmony.

Late in the evening after the feast and a preliminary meeting The Wise One retired to the lair they had constructed for him and settled down to sleep.

'Click..excuse.. click..me..click.. would..click.. you..click.. allow..click..me..click..to..click.. talk..click.. to..click.. you.. click..for..click..a..click..moment?' said Ali full of embarrassment.

The Wise One beckoned her in and for the next hour and a half listened patiently to her tale of woe. She had not been listened to in a long time, only laughed at, and her words came gushing out. At the end of her story her eyes acquired a light that had not been seen for many years, as though the telling had exorcised a mighty burden.

'Well,' said The Wise One, 'there are many options that you can take and the decision is yours to make,' and they then spent the next few minutes looking at the options.

'I like the third option,' clicked Ali.

The Wise One smiled an inner gentle smile.

The next day a craftsman within the family built Ali a muzzle to the specification laid down by The Wise One and tried it on Ali. It fitted beautifully.

'Right,' said The Wise One, 'you know what you have to do?'

'Yes, Wise One,' clicked Ali, and off she waddled to try out the plan.

She went deep into the swamp until she spied a lone traveller near the water's edge. She put on the quick release muzzle and then swam silently across the water, her mouth trying but not succeeding to open and close. Just a few feet away from the traveller she stopped with just her eyes above the water and eyed her prey. Now was the moment of truth.

She rushed from the water and, as suggested by The Wise One, gave her tail a massive swiisshhh and swept the tourist off his feet with a loud cluunnk. Hitting the quick release button on her muzzle she quickly clicked off his head, killing him instantly. She sat back in amazement at

the result of her efforts and let a long ecstatic cry of joy. They had found the answer!

Over the next few weeks Ali ate tourists, animals and geese, and slowly her weight, due to the nutritious food, returned to normal. She became one of the family again and accepted by society. She was happy!

The driving instructor finished the story and looked at the youth.

'Now do you remember what you should do?'

Looking almost intelligent the youth turned.

'.....no.'

Rationality fled from the brain of the instructor.

'No! What do you mean bloody no? You mean I went through all that for bugger all?'

He saw the apprehension in the youth's eyes and realised he was shouting.

'What you should do,' he said in a menacing whisper, 'is belt up. Put on your seat belt. Clunk click every trip. Get it? Get it?'

The youth looked lost.

At the end of the lesson (that was the official term) the instructor again lectured the youth to remember the story and try again the following week.

Sitting next to the youth again the instructor said:

'Well did you remember what we were saying last week?'

The youth nodded wildly, reached down for a carrier bag by his side ..... and took out a muzzle!

The Piano

He stood looking at the room. Small items were missing and although he had them at his new flat, he somehow felt that they had gone forever. The room had lost its oneness, its completeness, and its identity.

He looked at the piano and noticed the raised lid. Moving over, he stood for a moment and then settled comfortably on the stool, his fingers moving over the ivory, bringing the piano to life, giving himself life. He rarely felt fulfilment doing anything else. This was his means of expression. After playing for a few moments, he sat up, placed his hands on his lap and looked sadly at the piano. It was time. He started to shut the lid.

'What are you doing?'

He stopped, startled, and turned round to find the unfamiliar voice. There was no one there. His hands trembled and he wondered whether the strain of the last few weeks had taken its toll. His hands tightened again on the lid. 'Don't shut the lid.'

He stood up quickly and looked at the piano.

'Yes, I am talking to you.'

'I wish you were,' he said to himself, 'but I'm afraid I'm just imagining things. I'm tired, so very, very tired.'

'It's not your imagination, I'll show you,' said the voice.

He watched as the keys moved up and down, playing a tune he had never heard before.

'Are you convinced?'

'Not really,' he said, feeling somewhat foolish to be talking to a piano.

The stool moved to one side, raised on two legs and bowed slowly to him.

'I think that is enough to demonstrate to you the reality of the situation, besides I am growing weary of these theatricals.'

'You can talk?'

The piano ignored the question. 'Why are you going?'

'You're so bloody clever, I assume you know.'

'I know many things, but knowing and understanding can be quite different,' replied the piano.

He thought for a moment.

'I have to leave; it's no longer my home.'

'Why?'

'We, my wife and I, are being divorced.'

'But you were happy here.'

'Yes, very happy.'

'Why don't you stay?'

'My wife has the house as part of the settlement.'

'And what of me, why can't you take me?'

'It's rather complicated, but in essence my wife has managed to keep certain items, primarily you, that I care about. She has money and resolve, I cannot win.'

'But you made me live,' said the piano in a gentle, almost reverent tone, 'you brought me to life. The beauty of your music, the sensitivity of your touch, the magic of the sound created me. Your genius and my life made music that will never be heard again. As individual entities we are superb, together we transcend comparison.'

'I am not sure what that means?'

'It means that you were happy here creating your music.'

A remembering smile played over the man's face. 'That's true, so very true.'

'Then you must stay and continue.'

'It is not possible. I explained. This home, you, the other things, belong now to my wife.'

'If she is still your wife, why can't you stay?'

'It is an agreement between the lawyers. Everything has been apportioned. I moved out and in a few weeks we shall be divorced.'

'Could you buy me from her?'

'I tried but she will hear none of it.'

'I wish to be with you.'

'I'm deeply sorry, it's not possible.'

'Would you like to stay here?'

'Very much.'

'Will you visit?'

He thought for a long moment. 'If I'm allowed to.'

'Goodbye then, until we meet again.'

With moist eyes he went to the door, glanced briefly round and left.

Several days later he had a phone call from the Hospital. His wife had been admitted as the result of an accident and would he come quickly.

She died before he arrived.

He let himself in to the house and went to the room with the piano. It stood in the same position, but two of its legs were broken and the one side of its body rested on the floor.

'Hello?' he said, as though intruding on someone else's domain.

'You came back, are you alone?'

'Yes.'

He watched as the legs of the piano slowly, creakingly, straightened until after a little while they were as before.

'How did you do it?' asked the man.

'Now I am alive I can mend myself.'

'No, the other.'

'Other?'

'Yes,' said the man.

The piano hesitated, the silence grew. 'You mean.....?' said the piano.

'Yes.'

'You wanted to come back, you were unhappy,' the piano's voice paused and then said slowly, 'she had dropped an earring under the piano....the blow broke her neck, she felt nothing.'

'You killed her,' said the man softly.

'For you, for us.'

The man turned and walked to the other side of the room. He leaned against the wall, watching the piano.

'I don't understand,' said the piano sensing something wrong, 'you wanted to come back, you wanted to be happy.'

'That is true,' said the man, '.....you don't understand.'

He walked back to the piano and sat on the stool.

'I want to show you something.'

He placed his fingers on the keyboard and the piano thrilled at his touch. His fingers started playing and beautiful music flooded the room. After a few moments the piano cried out.

'There's something wrong.'

The man continued playing and the music slowly, imperceptibly, started to change, its richness becoming harsher.

'What is happening?' screamed the piano. 'What are you doing?'

The tempo of the music increased, the smoothness becoming more ragged.

'Stop, stop!' begged the piano, 'please stop.'

The music increased in pitch and the piano screamed in pain.

'Please,' it implored, 'why are you doing this, what is happening?'

Fingers went up and down the scales, faster ever faster.

The voice from the piano came slowly, pathetically. 'Please.....help.....me.'

The man stopped abruptly and looked at the piano.

'What... has.... changed?.... What..is... happening?... I ... don't.... understand?' asked the piano.

'You are dying,' said the man. 'I gave you life, I am taking it away.'

'How.....can.....?'

'How can I?....because I am dead. The only thing in my life I have ever loved was the woman who is now dead. You were right, knowing is not understanding, and you thought that I in some way loved you. But you were wrong. You were the object of my expression of love for her. You allowed me to express the incredible happiness that I felt being with her. I am a shy, undemonstrative person, I find giving difficult. I couldn't tell her I loved her.'

'She.....made.....you...go,' said the piano almost inaudibly.

'Yes. She said I spent all my time at the piano. Ironic, isn't it?'

The piano tried to say something, but its life was ebbing fast.

'Can you still hear me?' said the man, and watched as one key responded slowly. 'I want you to do one thing for me. Will you?'

The key responded again.

The man knelt down and crawled under the piano.

Assizes

'And as for you....'

He pointed a finger menacingly at the judge.

'....you white upper class nancy boy, what the fuck do you know....eh? What the fuck do you know?'

The judge, resplendent in his High Court robes, looked at him sharply. His back straightened. There were limits, he thought, and this was beyond them. A man had to have a chance, but this.. He opened his mouth to speak but was cut off by further tirade.

'You make me fuckin sick,' the man screamed. 'With the privileged life, the lackeys and flunkeys, the chauffeur, the fuckin enormous pay packet.... what do you know, what do you know...'

He turned and looked at the jury.

'You fuckin dickheads,' he shouted, 'you're as bad as he is. You sit there thinking about last night's football game or doing your hair or having a good fuck and you don't give a monkey's about anything, least of all this. You haven't got a brain cell amongst you....I use fly spray on things with more brains....and a damn sight fucking prettier.'

The judge rose in his chair.

'I think,' he said, 'that....'

He was cut off immediately.

'Think? Fucking think? That's a bit of lateral thinking, isn't it? You, think? Don't make me fucking laugh. You haven't had a good thought since this morning when your old bag of a missus gave you one. Think,

my arse. If it isn't in your fucking books you're lost. Think? What a fucking joke.'

The Judge motioned to a policeman.

'Remove that man from my Court. Immediately!'

'Your fucking Court now, is it? Own the fucking thing, do you? You may act like you do but the taxpayers would like to hear that you actually think you do. Or a fucking psychiatrist.'

Strong hands pinned his arms behind his back and began dragging him towards the door.

'Fascist pig,' he screamed at the Judge. 'Frigging dictator.....'

His words became muffled as he was ejected from the room and faded into the corridor beyond. The judge sat down and, with hand shaking, sipped a tumbler of water. The courtroom was quiet, tension and apprehension within.

'I have never,' said the judge slowly and with emphasis, 'seen such a disgraceful display in my life. Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, I must ask you, most strenuously, to ignore the last few minutes of Sir Charles Hardwicke-Brown's summing up for the defence.....'

Several hours later the jury returned a 'not guilty' verdict on the young, pimp lookalike, black lad.

It had been Sir Hardwicke-Brown's last courtroom appearance and he was now - he looked at his watch - officially retired. Thirty years at the Bar and this was his crowning glory. The youth would have got five years for being stitched up, but who could put him away after an outburst like that?

He grinned a silent grin.

And poor old Biffo, having to sit through all that. God, the Club would be talking about nothing else for weeks. What a way to go. What a way to go.

Well, he thought, damn fine show, damn fine show indeed. No that wasn't how he had rehearsed it. He remembered the American series

that he'd copied from. I'm fuckin 'BAD!'

Communication

Once upon a time, a long, long time ago, there was a beautiful Princess called Danber (the name of a mythical beast who roamed the Kingdom and, in later times, became the Unicorn) who lived in a remote castle deep in the forest a long way from the towns and villages of the land of which her father was King. The isolation was very difficult for her and one day she said to her father:

'I wished we had the Internet.'

'What's that?' said King Chodrum. 'I've never heard of it.'

She thought for a moment and said:

'I don't know. Neither have I.'

Her father went hunting and she went to her room and thought about their conversation. She saw the future. A box that you put to your ears and heard other people talking; a box that made sounds and you listened to it; a box that gave pictures that you watched and listened to; a network of computers that were linked sending information all over the world. All powered by electricity!

One of her handmaidens came in the room and started brushing her hair. Excitedly Danber told her the vision of the future she had had.

'What do you think?' she asked the handmaiden.

After a few moment the handmaiden, quite perplexed for something to say, said, in a very quiet voice:

'Only two things, my Lady. One, what is "the World", and two, what is "electricity"?'

Danber thought for a moment and then shrugged her shoulders.

'Don't know,' she said, 'don't know.'

Note: It should be pointed out that in the land of Chodrum everyone in the Castle whispered as it was seen as impolite to do otherwise. All this had started many centuries before and therefore no one questioned the practice.

One day Princess Danber decided to leave the castle and look at the world outside. She asked her father's permission and, although he was concerned, as she was only twenty-eight years old, he did agree on the understanding that she took a few guards with her.

As she surreptitiously moved through the countryside, travelling with fourteen coaches, twenty-eight ladies in waiting and eight hundred and thirty two armed guards, some on horseback, she chanced upon a man lying in the road.

The Princess got out of her carriage and went to him.

'What's wrong?' she said to the Officer in Charge.

'One of the horses kicked him, my Lady, but he will be alright.'

On saying that the man stood up, rubbed his kicked leg and hobbled off down the road. After a few moments, as the Princess was boarding the Royal Carriage, someone shouted 'Oy!' at the top of his voice.

They looked around and a distance down the road the injured man was raising his fist in front of him and holding the arm with his other hand.

'Stick it up your arse,' he screamed.

The Captain of the Guard rushed to her side.

'What was that, my Lady?' he asked. 'What did he say and do?'

'Oh,' she said, 'it's what the English football hooligans do to their counterparts to provoke them.'

He looked at her quizzically.

'It doesn't matter,' she said.

She was actually astounded at what he had done. It wasn't the 'stick it up your arse' that bothered her, it was.....

Note: The ladies of the Court were taught from birth how to control their bowel movements so that it only occurred once a month. On that day the Royal Cart arrived and the men went hunting. It also meant that the day after, the women left their size sixteen clothes and started again on the tens.

..... the fact that he had transmitted a sound wave more than five yards! This was amazing. This was the future.

'He,' she said to the Captain, 'has sent a sound wave more than two hundred yards.'

'My Lady,' he said, 'what is a sound wave and what is a yard?'

'Don't know,' she said.

However she was extremely excited and wanted to experiment.

'Get the troops,' she said, 'and put them fifty yards apart.....'

He looked at her.

'..... about ten squidgets, for as far as they will go.'

The Captain arranged it until his men were out of sight.

'Right,' said the Princess. 'I want you to send this question down the line until the last man answers it. The question is "What is the time?"'

The Captain gave the order and the question went down the line. Nearly an hour later the answer came speeding back.

'What do you mean? What is "time"?'

She had great difficulty keeping in her excitement. She had had eight hundred and thirty two men, spaced at fifty yards each which was twenty-three point six, zero, seven, nine miles. They had sent the message and received it in about an hour. Yet a man on horseback could hardly have done it in three. Amazing! If only she knew what a mile was.

They carried on through the Kingdom and in due course came upon a child who was swinging a piece of string on which were tied two tin cans. The string was held in the middle and so, as the two tin cans circled through the air, they made a long humming sound.

Princess Danber went to the boy and he stopped.

'Will you let me try?' she asked the boy, who nodded as he bowed.

The Captain offered his services and he took one end (not realising he needed both) and walked away leaving Danber holding the other. When he had gone to its full length he stood on an old bear trap and screamed mightily as his one leg was severed (it was designed for very big bears). Danber was amazed. She had heard his scream come through the tin can. Somehow the sound had entered his tin can, travelled down the taut string, and been reproduced again in her tin can.

She set up an experiment with a very long piece of string – and it worked.

She had now found two ways of communicating quickly.

Farther and farther into the Kingdom she went until they came upon a valley where they decided to rest. After booking into the Hilton she went out for a walk, leaving her guards behind, to meet the subjects. As she walked, chatting here and chatting there, the sky grew darker and ominous clouds moved overhead and a jagged shaft of lightning plunged from the sky quickly followed by a vicious crackle of energy. She came upon a man who was making a bear dance.

'That's rather cruel,' she said, 'let the bear go.'

'Push off,' said the ne'er do well.

'Do you know who I am?' she pouted.

'The Queen of Sheba,' he replied insolently.

'I am the Princess Danber and my father is King Chodrum and I command you to let the bear go.'

'Push off,' he said again and went back to tugging on the rope that tugged on the ring, that tugged on the nose of the bear and made it

dance.

'See,' said the man, 'he loves it.'

'You dreadful man,' said the Princess.

He made an obscene gesture that she did not understand and then, without any warning, a fork of lightning made its omnipotent way to earth and searched for the highest point on its route, which, unfortunately for him, was the bear owner. It hit him and the energy launched him into the air and he landed a scorched and very dead mess, fifty yards away.

The Princess took the ring from the bear's nose and it licked her hand gratefully. It lumbered over to the man and quickly ate him having, several years earlier, developed a taste for cooked meat when the man had one cat too many.

The Princess was dumbfounded. If lightning had the power to throw the man that distance then surely, if it was harnessed correctly, through a series of transformers with the appropriate switchgear and assuming the necessary multicore cable to convey the current then, presumably, that current could be sent down the string carrying the message and therefore it would arrive at the speed of light. Then a series of stations could be set up to relay the messages all round the world! She rushed and told the Captain of the Guard who was impressed.

'What,' he said, 'is a transformer?'

She screwed up her little face in concentration and then shrugged her shoulders.

'Don't know,' she said. 'I think I'll go to bed.'

They set off again until they came to a large, cool lake where she allowed the soldiers to bathe and refresh. She sat by a small pool on her own and looked into it. Looking at her reflection she smiled at herself and the smile looked back at her. A slide fell out of her hair and landed in the water and it set off a gentle series of ripples that fanned out across the pool. She looked at it excitedly. If an image in a pool could radiate

that image across the pool, and at the other end those radiations could be harnessed and gathered to recreate the image then it meant that visual images could be sent around the world coupled with her speech transmission and you could hear and see at the same time. She was ecstatic and rushed to the Captain of the Guard and told him.

'But Princess,' he said, 'what's.....'

'Forget it.....'

They went ever farther until they came upon a small hut deep in the forest. She went in and found a young peasant bending over a small table on which there were lots of wires and things.

'What are you doing?' asked the Princess.

'I'm building a computer,' said the peasant.

'What's a computer?'

'I don't know,' said the peasant, 'but when I have finished this it will be one.'

'What will it do?' she asked.

'Many things,' he said, 'but the trick is not what it will do but how it does it. I am going to make it talk in a language that only I understand and so everyone will have to buy it from me.'

'What kind of language?'

'It's a new language I am going to call Maisy, Susan and Doris or MS Dos for short.'

'But Dos is not short for Doris,' she queried.

'I know,' he said, 'but MS Dor just doesn't quite hit the note.'

'What's your name?' she asked.

'William,' he said. 'William the maker of gates.'

'Bill Gates,' she said.

'No, that's my brother. He's got this bloody enormous company over in Silicon Valley that makes ploughs.'

'Anyhow,' she said. 'Do you think this will allow for the eventual emergence of a new information technology established around and

within the Internet?'

'I'm absolutely certain,' he said, 'that it will. What's the Internet?'

The Princess was filled with joy and walked out of the hut into the summer sun. She bent down and plucked a beautiful rose, whose fragrance she smelled deeply. And then it hit her. She had travelled the Kingdom and had now established, after many miles and many months, where her future lay.

And that's the story of how the beautiful Princess Danber became the most accomplished rose grower in the whole world.....

The Lady

The Wedding March played as she entered the Church and he stole a quick glance back to the porch. His heart missed a beat as he saw her in her white flowing bridal dress, radiance playing on her face, a smile on her lips. She was, to him, truly beautiful.

It had been a long time getting here with many trials and tribulations...

They had met almost twenty years ago when she had become the girlfriend, then fiancée and ultimately wife of one of his friends. He was attracted to her from the first, not for romance but just another conquest, but he did not succeed, his attempts being rather half hearted, more than likely because she was with his friend.

Their paths crossed again when she had left her marriage after only one year and he took her out. From that time on, some, fifteen years earlier, he had seen her once or twice a year, even when she remarried and had a child.

And then that fateful time when they had seen each other quite often over a short period of time and had 'fallen in love'. It was a joyous time. He had been waiting for this moment forever, the opportunity to fall in love, be in love, feel in love. She likewise. Initially it was an affair but very quickly it was obvious that as an affair it was doomed. Her husband worked away in the week and occasionally at weekends and so there were many opportunities but it was not enough. It had to be all or

nothing. He needed her. Without her he hurt, his mind screamed to be with her, he died at the thought of losing her. Every weekend was a nightmare.

In due course she told her husband and he, waiting in the wings, did the right thing and wrote to him, apologising, offering solutions to practical problems to be encountered. The reply made him aware that she was playing a game. 'I love you but.....'.

What buts? They were in love, where were the buts? What was the problem?

They spent much time together, he, her, the child and life was good. Then hubby came back one weekend and it all fell apart as she, for whatever reason, had sex with him. It hurt, very much, but it was only sex. It was only sex. Regrettable but understandable.

Soon after she was ill and in hospital and he went to collect her, even though her husband was there, and he took her home and tucked her up to keep her warm. Then she rang her husband to sort something out and agreed to go back to him (she didn't).

And then the unfortunate time a few days later when husband came home again and asked her to choose, but she said nothing.

Bad times, but long gone. Since then they had been happy, with only the occasional 'I can't do this'. She had wanted to live apart until they were married which he had agreed to and, in due course, she had got divorced. At that time, he had promised her, he would make sure she had a lovely white wedding. And he had. Only three weeks after the divorce and he had arranged a lovely white wedding essentially by giving a 'donation' to the local church fund.

'.....and do you,' said the vicar, 'take Christine to be your lawful wedded wife?'

He looked at her lovingly, gently touched her cheek and kissed her lightly on the lips. Smiling, he said:

'No'.....

She looked at him, not comprehending.

'Now,' he said, 'you know what it feels like.'

And he walked back down the aisle.

Alone.

Head Start

He turned in off the road, in between the trees and up the gravel path to his house. The crunch of the gravel had always irritated him, and it did again. The sun shone low in the sky, cutting below his sun visor, making him squint and blurring the house in front of him. His head pounded, the headache that had started after lunch, and which had put up a magnificent fight against the pain killers his secretary had shovelled into him.

Getting out of the car, he pulled his brief case off the passenger seat, forgetting that it was unlocked, and spread the contents over the passenger foot-well, his seat and the gravel by his feet. The wind, choosing to swirl gently at that moment, started to remove the documents one by one, lifting them lightly to linger in the currents, and then to be deposited yards away in inaccessible places.

He grinned to himself - and kicked the car.

His head pounded.

Today he had had enough. Today the world could go to hell. Today would now be taken up with vast quantities of something alcoholic, potent, and preferably terminal. Leaving the documents where they were, the car door, complete with dent, open, he moved towards the porch narrowly being missed by a tile from the roof. He looked down at the shattered tile and realised he was standing in the middle of other

shattered tiles. He moved back to understand the cause, another tile bouncing before him. Looking up at the roof he saw an overalled figure who prised a slate from the roof, peered at it intently for a moment, turning it over and over, and then discarding it over his shoulder, to slide down the roof to its doom below.

'What are you doing!?' headache man screamed.

He moved as another tile nearly gave him an extra mouth.

'You! What are you doing?'

The figure stopped examining another tile and turned.

'Me, sir?'

'Yes you, idiot!'

The man looked around the roof to see who Headache Man was addressing, and, not seeing anyone, let the next tile slide down.

'You, for Christ's sake, what are you doing?'

'Me, sir?'

He resisted an urge to shim up the drainpipe and strangle the man, then let him slide slowly down the roof and end up with the shattered tiles.

'Yes.'

'I'm mending the roof, sir.'

'There's nothing wrong with the bloody roof, you idiot.'

The man scanned the roof again for someone else.

'You, I'm talking to you!'

'Me, sir? I'm sorry, I misheard you. I thought you were talking to an idiot.'

He imagined the rungs on the drainpipe.

'What are you doing to the roof?' he asked, somehow feeling that he had been here before and it would end up the same way.

'I'm mending the roof, sir.'

He groaned inwardly, helplessness washing over him.

'There's nothing wrong with the roof,' he said in a determined whisper.

'But there may be, sir, better to check.'

'What's wrong with the tiles that you've chucked down?'

'Nothing, sir, it just allows me to tell them from the ones I've still to check. Where there's a space, I know I've checked. I like to be thorough, sir. It costs you more initially but saves money in the long run.'

'You're ruining my roof, who sent you?'

'Your roof will be better than ever, sir, when they come to do it.'

'Come to do it? You're doing it.'

'No, sir. I'm only here to check the amount of damage.'

'Who sent you, for Christ's sake?'

'No, sir, you're wrong again. I came for your sake.'

His head pounded more than ever. This was madness. Who was this maniac, ripping his roof apart? He turned quickly and went into the house.

'Darling? Darling, where are you?'

He went into the hallway to find it stripped of furniture. Rushing into the lounge the same sight greeted him. He ran from room to room to find - nothing.

'Darling?' he wailed.

Going back to the kitchen he noticed an envelope on the table next to the cooker. He snatched it quickly and ripped it open. It read 'have left explanation in letter on settee in lounge'.

He went through the empty hall with its gilded mirror, Persian carpet and exquisite hat stand to the bare lounge where he found the letter on the settee.

'Henry,' it said, 'have left you and taken the children. Please do not try and find me, I shall be out of your life forever, never to be found at the cottage by the lake. Georgina.'

He was stricken. She had gone, taken the children, forever and he had no idea where.

He sobbed, tears dripping down on the ornamental coffee table in the empty room.

Arthur dabbed his eyes with a blue primrose handkerchief and wished desperately that Susan would come back to him from their cottage they didn't have, with his children he had not yet sired. How he missed already their playful laughter, snowmen, fairgrounds, night-time stories.

Moving through to the empty kitchen, he made a cup of tea, found three aspirins, and took them with water.

What could he do now? He had a home with no roof, no wife, no furniture, nothing. He went upstairs and lay on the bed, but the slates sliding down the roof kept him awake, so he changed his clothes from the bare wardrobes and went again outside.

Outside the front door he nearly fell into a large hole being scooped out by a massive digger he had not noticed.

'The new moat, sir,' the man operating the digger said, beaming with satisfaction. 'Not many people these days appreciate the value of a good moat.'

'Moat?' he gurgled. 'Moat, moat?'

'Yes, sir. Re,' he pointed to the hole, 'moat. Get it, sir? One of the many hilarious "in" jokes of our profession, sir. Remote.... sir?'

'Re mote? Is making moats a profession?'

'Very much in demand these days, sir. Did a whole council estate the other day.'

His headache had been cunning with the aspirin. Usually it took the attack from the front, meeting it head on, fighting a war of extreme ruthlessness, and causing such pain that the vendor saw no point in continuing with further aspirin so as not to increase the pain again. This time, after seeing a Rambo movie they waited in ambush behind his eyes, letting the aspirin soothe momentarily and then, when their strength was diminished, rushed out and in an example of what Mrs Whitehouse would regard as gratuitous violence, hacked and kicked,

punched and gouged and only stopped when the aspirin either expired or agreed to change sides.

A pain started to throb behind his eyes.

He edged round the large hole which the digger was making bigger by the moment and stood on the lawn.

'Timberrrrrrrrrrr.'

The large oak crashed to the ground by his side, its branches slashing at him as they flailed around. The chainsaw started up again and its operator started on another majestic old oak.

He entangled himself from the branches and ran to the chainsaw operator, grabbing his shoulder and turning him round.

'Careful, sir,' said the one-armed operator, 'haven't had an accident yet and don't want one.'

'Why're you cutting the trees down?' he demanded indignantly.

'Dutch elm disease, sir. Terrible, terrible shame. But that's life, sir.'

'But they're oak,' he pleaded, 'old, very old, beautiful oak.'

'Oh no, sir, you're mistaken. You can tell a Dutch elm from the crash it makes as it hits the floor, and you must admit, sir, that was quite a crash. Now that one over there,' he pointed to a magnificent Silver birch, 'that may not be a Dutch elm, but we'll soon know from the crash. The crash always tells us, sir, wait for the crash, that's what we say in the profession.'

'Is tree-felling a profession?'

'No, sir, I'm talking about stockbroking.'

The headache had now shifted into fifth and was debating at what point the turbo should be switched on. The remaining aspirin were stoking the boilers and his eyes felt like the anvil of a blacksmith.

'Darling, darling,' the sound permeated his brain. Where was she? He looked at the roof but could only see the Morris dancers and the

maypole. He looked towards the hole, but the two lions eating the antelope obscured it. Running into the bare house he tripped over the yak and went headlong into the wall.

'Darling, darling.'

His head pounded, he heard her voice but found it difficult to believe she could shout all the way from the cabin they didn't have. His head pounded, another voice filtered through.

'It'll be okay, he's over the worst. A few days for his system to cleanse itself and then no sweat, so to speak. Then teach him the difference between blackcurrants and deadly nightshade.'

'Thank you, Doctor,' said a voice distinctly like his wife's.

His head pounded, turbo had been selected.

In agony now, he tried to decide what could be the cause of the pain. He had it.....it was obvious.....hunger.

He shooed away the feeding lions and started on the antelope, which tasted like blackcurrants.....

Waiting

He sat on the mountain, the warm wind moved past him, blowing his hair, brushing his face; clouds scurried overhead. Into the distance he looked, not seeing.

'What are you thinking about, my son?' said a voice to his side.

Startled, he looked round. He saw nothing. He looked all around him. Nothing.

'I am here,' said the voice soothingly.

He leaned back, looked up to the heavens and took a deep slow breath. Tiredness enveloped him and he closed his eyes.

'Be still,' said the voice, 'be calm. I cannot harm you.'

'If I can hear you,' he said, 'but cannot see you, I am already harmed.'

'No...' intoned the voice gently.

He opened his eyes and again looked upwards.

'What do you look for?' asked the voice.

'Nothing.'

'Perhaps you are looking for God?'

He paused.

'Perhaps.'

'Why?'

'There has to be something.'

'Why?'

He said nothing.

'Do you need a God?' it enquired.

It was a long time before he answered.

'I think so,' he said quietly.

The wind rose then calmed. The sun blazed, was hidden, then blazed again.

'Perhaps you are God,' said the voice.

'I think not,' he said sarcastically.

'Why not you? Why always someone else?'

He went to say something, stopped, then started again.

'What do you mean...always?'

'Don't you see qualities in others?'

'Of course I bloody well do!' he said angrily.

'Qualities you don't feel you have,' said the voice.

The man, exasperated and angry, stood up.

'Are you going?' asked the voice.

'I.....'

The mist surrounded him. He could see nothing. It should have gone cold but eerily he still felt the warm sun on his cheek. Anxiety started to rise within him.

'Why are you afraid?' asked the voice.

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

'You do.....' said the voice gently, 'you do.....'

He shook his head slowly.

'A God would know what to do,' suggested the voice.

'Yes, a God would.'

'Or perhaps a person with a compass and a map?' chided the voice.

'You make fun of me....'

'No. I am a giver of light...not an instrument of derision.'

'I can see only darkness,' said the man.

'What you see is light.... what you cannot see is darkness,' said the voice.

'You talk in riddles!' said the man angrily. 'You talk like a fool!'

'A fool may not make sense to you, but to him it is truth and belief.'

'Go away,' said the man, 'leave me alone.'

'To do what?' asked the voice. 'To contemplate, to reason, to consult a book, to consult others? Why?'

'To understand.'

'Why understand? Why not accept? Believe.'

'I do believe,' said the man pleadingly. 'I do believe.'

'But in God,' said the voice, 'in books, in others.'

'Yes, yes, of course,' wailed the man.

'But not in yourself...'

The Voice was all around him, surrounding him. It was inside him, permeating his being.

The man's face contorted with the incredible feelings raging within him.

'I do believe in myself,' he screamed. 'I am a success. I have everything a man could want or ask for. How else could I achieve all that if I did not believe in me?'

'Because you have two skills,' said the voice. 'The first skill is accomplishing the tasks you set yourself. You work hard, you make plans, you accomplish them, you succeed.....'

'What's wrong with that....?' interrupted the man.

'Nothing..' said the voice, '...nothing. But you have a second skill. It is highly developed, intense, and paramount within you...'

The man's face became expectant. He wanted desperately to hear and yet he knew to do so would destroy him. The voice gave him no choice.

'Your second skill...is believing that you have reached where you are through the accomplishments of others. Not through yourself!'

The man's face relaxed. Whatever he thought he was going to hear, this was certainly not exactly earth-shattering stuff.

'You are dead!' said the voice chillingly.

The man became scared.

'You are dead because you live your life through others. You believe that somehow they possess gifts that you don't and so you help them to achieve greater things, not understanding that without your gifts there are no greater things. You build a company, but fail to see the beauty within of its creator. Its symmetry, balance, harmony, precision and humanity. A mirror image of his body and soul. You succeed in life but forget that the building blocks for that life were set in the dream of a child many years ago and were followed by that child step by step.....'

The man's eyes filled with tears.

'Why do you reject these things?' asked the voice. 'Why can't you take the credit? Who will take it from you?'

The man opened his mouth to speak, but could not. Sobs racked him.

'I will tell you,' said the voice, 'who will take the credit from you...no one. Not any more.'

The man's face, tear filled, reddened eyes, started to change. The countenance became softer, smoother...childlike. His back straightened a little, his muscles relaxed like they had never ever been relaxed.

The mist around him cleared and he saw a long long way across the countryside. It seemed like it was the first time he had ever seen it. The colours, contrasts, hues, shadows took his breath away.

'Remember...' said a voice everywhere, 'there is a God. God is anyone, anything, that has an influence of even an infinitesimal amount on its environment. What God could give as much pleasure as a butterfly in the morning dew? What God could create such brutality as that when an ant is crushed underfoot.....?'

The man understood. It was clear.

'Thank you....' he said, '.....for listening.'

The Golf Club

'It was the time when nationalism was sweeping the country,' said the old man who was sitting in front of the fire in the large club lounge talking to newer members. 'Groundswell pressure had achieved parliaments for both Scotland and Wales in which their native tongues were spoken and the fashions were becoming distinctly polarised. It was a difficult time for us at the Golf Club because we were not only sitting on the English Welsh border, therefore having large numbers of both in the club, but we also had of course some Scots and Irish, plus members that obviously came from other continents. The club name "St George's Golf Club" became, as you know, "St George's and St David's Golf Club".'

He looked at the young faces. They had not known these times and in the winter months when the snows prevented even these young lions from having a round, they congregated in the lounge and asked the old man to tell his stories.

'The initial problem we were confronted with was dress. As you know, ladies are allowed to wear conservative skirts or trousers. Well, we had the situation that players would be on the fairways with these billowy tartan things that showed everything when the wind blew. It was embarrassing to the committee and so the committee demanded that it should cease. The men were upset as they saw nothing wrong with it and the women were furious because they enjoyed seeing the Scots in kilts. Confusion reigned. The Scots threatened to take the

committee before the Equal Nationality Tribunal, and the club, after taking legal advice, decided not to pursue it. Well, of course, it opened the flood gates. The Scots continued with the kilts, the English came in tweeds, the Welsh came in anything they decided was Welsh which included sheepskin jackets, and of course we had the foreign nationals.....'

He sipped from his drink.

'A Japanese came in traditional samurai outfit, a Nigerian in the tribal robes, a New Zealander in a grass skirt, an American in a cowboy outfit. It was getting silly...oh I forgot..one Indian gentleman, quite wealthy, who arrived one day on the back of an elephant (he'd hired it from the circus), caused quite a stir in the committee room when he announced that this was to be his golf-cart.'

The old man had another sip from his drink.

'Yes, things were getting silly. Then one day of course, in the Welsh parliament they rushed through the "Welsh Bill - Annexation of" and before we knew what was happening they built a wall the entire length of the England Wales border which would have been fine, except it cut our course in half!'

He lit his pipe and settled comfortably in his chair.

'The committee objected of course. Even the brick was the wrong colour, contrasting completely with the club house. Being dynamic people the committee felt that extreme measures were needed and so, throwing caution to the wind, they decided to appoint a sub committee to look at the problem.'

He paused for a moment as though assembling the memories in their correct order.

'Because the problem was one connected to the course it was felt that the greens committee were the best equipped to handle it, so they were given as much time as they thought necessary to arrive at an answer, and then to report back. They never did of course.'

He smiled to himself.

'Well, it was getting intolerable, especially for the high handicappers and the women, who couldn't get the ball high enough to get over the wall and even if they could they then found it difficult to climb over with their trolleys and bags. Yes, in those days the club champion was always young, strong and fit. One of the members made a lot of money selling light-weight stowaway ladders, whilst one or two of the juniors had lucrative contracts with the more competitive minded of the members to move their ball to a better position on the other side of the wall before anyone had time to get over it and see.'

He lit his pipe and took several puffs until he was invisible within the smoke.

'The five holes,' said a voice, 'that were affected by the wall were the long sixth, now the short sixth and seventh, the par three eighth, now the par four eighth, the par five thirteenth, now the par three thirteenth and the par three fourteenth, the par three fifteenth, now a lake, and the dogleg left eighteenth, now a dogleg right eighteenth.'

The smoke cleared.

'Well,' he said with gravity, 'it came time for the Extraordinary A.G.M. and judging by the mood of the members as they traversed the course you knew there would be fireworks. They were continually moaning about the lack of action of the committee and several of them were waiting for the opportunity to air their views.'

Another puff on the pipe and the bowl made a noise like a bush fire.

'Came the night and the club was packed and after the usual business, questions were invited from the floor. For a few moments nothing happened and then a member rose to his feet.

"Mr President, Mr Chairman, Lady Chairman, Captain, Lady Captain, Ladies and Gentlemen, I feel it is important to thank the Greens Committee for the valuable work they are doing in relation to clearing the bunkers of stones. Not only does this save the damage to members' clubs, but for the lower handicap golfers (he puffed out his chest although he played off twenty one) it gives more consistency of

shot," and he sat down to murmurs of "hear, hear".

'Another pause,' the old man said slowly, 'then a lady stood up.

"I have a complaint," she boomed, declining the microphone, and the assembled mass hushed in anticipation. This was it. "On the ninth hole the ground staff have weeded the pond and disturbed the frogs. I regard this as totally inconsistent with the conservation that this club has a reputation for and I believe whoever is responsible should be sacked!"

Much applause from the ladies' section. After heated debate the committee agreed to send a warning letter to the culprit, who had done as instructed by the greens committee, who were responsible for issuing the instructions as to what to do and how to do it, but were not responsible for the result if wrong, as that was regarded to be outside their technical expertise.

'Any more questions?'

A man from the back stood up.

'In relation to the wall.....'

He was interrupted by a past captain.

'I am not sure we should discuss this when a sub-committee is considering the situation,' he said, sitting down in a wise old way.

'But,' said the man, 'this is an extraordinary meeting called to....'

The past captain had stood up again.

'Sir, as a new member you confuse the situation,' he said in a sad, almost sympathetic tone, as though talking to an erring child, 'an extraordinary meeting is a meeting that is extraordinary, as rule 13-6, but is not necessarily to discuss extraordinary items, rule 15-8.' He sat down.

The Chairman stood up.

'I think we have spent enough time on that. We have to give other people a chance. Other questions?'

An imperious lady stood up.

'The wall,' she pronounced, 'is not a subject I wish to see brushed under the carpet at this moment. There are some harsh things to be said

and if no-one else will say them then I will!'

All heads looked to her. Even the past captain would not dare to interrupt the Marchioness of Wenlock.

'For many long, long hours, I and other lady members have toiled long and hard planting flowers in the bed we have dug beneath the wall. Now we find that the area has not been, as we were led to believe by certain people,' she said ominously, glaring at the president, who was not known for his memory, 'made an "out of bounds" area. I demand that this is done immediately or the ladies and I will stage a protest sit-in in the club until the situation has been rectified.'

The committee looked horrified as they remembered her last sit-in, over the use of yellow golf balls which she said were an insult to the Japanese race. This had only been resolved when the committee had sent a letter to the Japanese Embassy asking for comments and the Cultural Attache had responded by saying that it was an acceptable practice and that he and his fellow countrymen would endeavour not to think hostile thoughts when hitting a white ball.

The committee huddled. It was announced that as from midnight the flower bed under the wall would be out of bounds. The ladies cheered and hugged each other, but the men clamoured to be heard.

'Chair...chair...chair.'

'Yes, sir, your question?'

'Mr Chairman, we are overlooking the most serious point here. The flower bed is not symmetrical in its entirety. How will we know if we are in, or out, of bounds?'

In due course the committee agreed to set up a committee, who would appoint a sub-committee to examine the problem, should one be found to exist. In the meantime it was agreed that to avoid confusion, not only the flower bed, but the flower bed plus one walking pace would be out of bounds. It was a victory for common sense.

'Are there any more questions?'

No-one said anything.

'Well, I shall now wind up the meeting and thank you all for coming.'

On the way out the members gloated over the way they had routed the pathetic committee and the committee commiserated that they had never received such a rough ride before. The members climbed the ladders over the wall to get to the car park and went home.

Next day as they played, the members moaned about the wall and the fact that the committee did nothing about it.'

The old man puffed at his pipe.

'But what happened to the wall?' asked one of his young listeners. 'It isn't there now.'

'Well, it is and it isn't,' said the old man with a gentle smile on his face.

'The wall, of course, was an ideological idea, and, as tends to be the case, impractical in practice. But it couldn't be taken down as there was a Welsh law that made it a criminal offence. But it restricted trade, divided communities, created tension. It was a bad wall. But the law said there had to be a wall. And if the Welsh rescinded the law it made it appear that it had been a bad law, so they couldn't do it. Everyone was stuck. Then one day at a football pitch that had been divided in two the wall suddenly disappeared. The owner was taken to court and in due course the charge was dismissed. And because of that we all lost our walls.'

'But you said,' spoke up one bright girl, 'that it is and it isn't. In your end, "it isn't". Where is the "it is"?'

'Well,' said the old man, 'the football field owner had realised a flaw in the law. The law said there had to be a wall. It didn't say it had to be above ground. So like everyone else we rebuilt ours underground.'

And he winked.

Matt's Story

Well, here it is. The unexpurgated tale of how I came to where I am now.....

It started when I was a baby, and I must admit I found it addictive. My parents were what was known as 'together but apart' and that helped a lot. They argued, they fought, he went out, she went out, and through all this I learned my first lesson on my road to power - how far you can get on guilt.

It was difficult at first because all I could do was bellow as long and as hard as I could, my speech being somewhat limited in those days. I bellowed when they put me to bed, got me up, put me on the loo, took me off the loo, fed me, didn't feed me, but that was essentially only strategic bellowing. That was merely to make them so tired that they were more ratty to each other. Divide and conquer, it's the only way. No, the main bellowing was more pinpointed, more .....refined.

If he went out I would open my arms towards him, say 'Daaa' as sincerely as I could and BELLOW. It didn't stop him of course but it helped me considerably in my efforts to extract the maximum amount of guilt. And if she went out - well you get the picture. The same of course when it was bed time - whoever it was that picked me up I would scream and hold out my arms to the other. It always amazed me that so obvious a ploy always worked.....

Time moved on and all things come to an end. My screaming and bellowing were having less and less effect and indeed were becoming almost counterproductive. In fact one evening after mom had gone out and dad had put me to bed I went into a mild operatic frenzy going from top C to even more top C. It was a classic to behold. However as dad came hurtling up the stairs (hurtling was actually the wrong word as he had been hitting a gallon bottle of rather dry red from the bottom shelf of the chip shop) shouting what I took at the time to be 'I'll fill you, you little custard' (and which I now know to have been something quite different), he tripped over the top step, went headlong into the loo wall, smacked his face, stood up, overbalanced and headed off downstairs again to be found later by mom.

Certainly a judicious bellow or two did not go amiss at that point.

However, a more potent weapon was needed and indeed I found it quite by accident.

'Has he been to the loo?' I heard one of them say.

'Don't think so.'

'Well, make sure he does before the babysitter arrives.....'

It was like a red rag to a bull (yes, I know they're colour blind).

Go to the loo..... No bloody chance!

So I became somewhat of an expert at not going to the loo. Oh, I went and had a good old pee, but that was just to fool them. Nothing else left my orifice for days on end, weeks even. When I say nothing that's not entirely correct. To not go to the loo (i.e. to shit) takes extreme will power. To have extreme will power one must concentrate. To concentrate one's mind must be solely on the job(by) at hand. When you play games or football you are not concentrating. When you are asleep you are not concentrating. What a mess! And even when you're not making a huge mess you still stink. No matter how much is still in, some always comes out and my God how you stink.

However my record was two weeks, three days, seven hours and twenty excruciatingly painful minutes.

But it was worth it!

The attention I got was amazing. Neighbours, relatives, doctors, all had a 'cure' to stop me being 'constipated'. Bullshit! (And after all that time it most certainly must have been something similar.)

Boy

They, Arthur and June, had given up all hope of having a child and had resigned themselves to their love for each other. There were of course ways to achieve their objective but fertility drugs, insemination or adoption held no appeal. Theirs was a natural love, it would be a natural child or nothing. When they were in their mid forties she became pregnant. The doctor said that because they had given up and the pressure was off it may be that nature had been allowed to relax and get on with it. Either way it was going to be a boy.

The birth was easy and it was indeed a boy. Healthy, smiling and without the usual histrionics of the new born. The child, however, developed differently from other children. Within a very short time it was walking. Not only that it appeared to understand what was said to it, responding to simple instructions, smiling and frowning where appropriate. But it made no attempt to utter a sound.

By the age of four he was obviously a highly intelligent child, always inquisitive, reading everything he could lay his hands on, watching, listening. When watching a television programme, usually science or nature, if he could not understand something he would look at his parents and frown. They then explained.

No attempt at coaxing induced him to talk. Medical examinations showed that he was capable of talking, but for some reason chose not to.

When it was time to enter school he still refused to talk, making him the butt of cruel jokes that seemed to bother him not one bit. After six months he refused to go again, indicating his disdain at the level on offer. They tried to get him into a special school for gifted children but there were no vacancies.

Home tutors were hired. He ate them. Even though he refused to speak he continually demanded more, more, more....

At the age of nine he and his parents were watching a programme trying to explain the start of the universe using the 'big bang' theory.

'I am afraid,' said a small voice to no one in particular, 'that they are wrong.'

His parents looked at him and cried in unison, 'You can talk...' They laughed and cheered and hugged him but he said little else other than, 'I will write down what I believe to be the true cause. Would you please send the letter for me tomorrow?'

They nodded dumbly and he went off to bed.

The letter, published in the following month's 'Scientist', caused a sensation. Whilst the explanation and mathematics were rudimentary, the concept challenged existing theories and indeed appeared to fill in many of the anomalies that 'big bang' failed to address. He showed that big bang never occurred and that what appeared to be universes ever expanding, was actually a vast revolving drum of universes whose apparent expansion was actually time distortion that was occurring between the inner and outer edges of the drum. Or put another way, outer planets were indeed going faster than inner ones, but not in an outward direction. That was a time mirage caused by the cylindrical motion of the universe having a greater pull on time as it moved towards its edge due to its higher speed. This meant that the time measurement was not straight line but curved and in the outer reaches time had to 'catch up'.

The entreaties for him to give interviews, or statements, or anything, to a waiting public were ignored, as were the invitations to Oxford and Cambridge.

A crowd, meanwhile, had gathered outside his house chanting for him to see them, talk to them, touch them, deliver them.

He said nothing else for another four years until one day he wrote a letter to 'The Times'. In it he advocated the end of child maintenance, compulsory schooling in child care for pregnant mothers and their mates, the automatic percentage of salary that a person (male or female) would pay to their spouse and children in the event of divorce (thus taking away all uncertainty as to the consequences of divorce), an upper limit on unemployment benefit and many others. It was denigrated as the ranting of a child and, of course, it was not new. In print he agreed it was not new. Just logical and honest. In the next session of parliament many of his proposals were taken up to herald in a new social era.

There was no longer a crowd outside his house but a veritable throng. Over the period of time it had grown and no amount of summonses by the Council had managed to remove it. They had made camp down the road on a field and hundreds were now living there. They even had a small hand printing press and bulletins were sent to followers all over the world. They were the 'listeners' waiting to hear the next incredible utterance of the 'unspeaking one'.

His parents still could not understand why he would not talk to them. They would ask, plead, implore, but all he did was smile, give them a kiss and a hug and go to his room.

In his late teens the large double garage was converted into a residence just for him. In it was the usual paraphernalia of life but he also installed a video camera, hooked up to the house, so that he could be seen by his parents if necessary.

At the age of 29 he went unannounced to the leading cancer research hospital in Britain and asked to see its Head of Research. He was about to be thrown out when they realised who he was and he was granted a brief audience. He gave the woman concerned a drawn picture of a molecular strand and then he walked out. The woman, unimpressed, threw it into the bin. Two weeks later the woman's young assistant arrived at his house with the creased piece of paper and asked if it really was a possible cure for cancer? He nodded. The young man asked permission to sell it to the highest bidder. He nodded again. Five months later a large American corporation paid fifty million dollars for the rights to research and manufacture. The young man sent a cheque for half to him. He took out a modest sum which he gave to his parents and sent the rest back with a note of thanks.

At age 43 a low, long wavelength sound reverberated around the neighbourhood in which he lived. A black light hovered above his house, pulsating in inverse intensity to the sound. The house became transparent and then its structure slowly dismantled itself, tile by tile, brick by brick. As each layer peeled away it vanished so that the house became lower and lower until there was nothing left but a lone figure standing in what was once its centre.

The blackness lifted and a beam of light shone from the heavens. Down the core of the light floated a white dove until it settled gently on the solitary figure's shoulder. He looked up into the beam of light.

A deep booming voice from above said, 'This is my beloved son in whom I am not well pleased. I told you to be home for tea decades ago and there you are still trying to impress people with your silly tricks and follow the leader psychology. I warned you about this only a couple of thousand of years ago. Now get your arse up here quick, my lad!'

The beam of light turned to black again and a loud whooshing noise was heard.

And he was never seen again (until the next time).

The Scene

A man mows his front lawn using a motor mower.

As seen by the Sun.....

Neighbours in a sleepy English village are up in arms at the antics of one of the residents.

David Jaundrell, who is believed to be of German extraction, habitually cuts his lawn at least once and sometimes even twice a week. Villagers believe that this regularity hides a more sinister reason than keeping the garden tidy.

One neighbour (who wishes to remain anonymous for fear of reprisal) said, "He's single and you know what that means...! We don't need his sort here, what with Aids and all."

Another said, "He used to be married but I was told on the best authority that when she left she was covered with bruises and had one arm in a sling, he wants locking up. From what I gather that used to happen after his drinking."

The village vicar confirmed that 'the german' had never been to church, but had been seen on one occasion looking around. He felt there was not enough evidence to link that episode and the mysterious fire eighteen months later that burnt the roof.

In the village pub hatred and resentment was building against this man of mystery. "Although the people call him Otto," said the landlord, "I believe he's actually Asiatic. Look at that tan he gets when he goes

'away', you don't get tans like that on the Rhine. One of my locals said that the name originates from Russia and is really Jodrelski. I believe there are good resorts for Russian high-ups and other people on the Black Sea, if you see what I mean."

When we asked Mr Jaundrell(?) to reply to charges that he was a homosexual arsonist Russian spy he declined to comment.

As we left this Shropshire village with its fine honest people, seething at the predicament that had befallen them, a petition to the Home Office to deport 'Otto' was being circulated.

As seen by the Times.....

Whilst the world digests the ramifications of the new US-Soviet initiative regarding the de-escalation of nuclear arms, and the no less important escalation of hostility between Iran and Iraq, it is perhaps an appropriate opportunity to examine an issue that in time may have a greater impact on the fabric of our society than either of the former.

The recent disclosure that a man in an English village systematically cut his own lawn with a petrol mower raises some important social issues.

Internally it may be the first signs that the socio-economic building blocks are being rearranged.

A report from the World Health Organisation shows that the majority of lawns in Britain are located outside of the London area. Indeed in the Metropolis, the current insistence of home buyers for houses with lawns has resulted in a dramatic drop in general house prices to the point where the average mortgage now exceeds the actual price of the property.

From an ecological viewpoint it has been estimated that if each home had a lawn, the extra amount of oxygen produced would more than offset that consumed by smokers.

In relation to the grass-cutting itself, the person concerned, a business consultant, had not, as would have been usual, been using a

part-time gardener, but had been doing the job himself. The far reaching effects of this are not too difficult to read. From one point of view the action is the epitome of the Cabinet view that initiative and drive are the motivating force for the renaissance of Britain. But is this at some point self defeating? Citizens that do not or cannot aspire to become above average earners have excelled in the traditions of practical self achievement. Are they now to be denied the opportunity to sell their skills?

The final point is one of scarce resource. The petrol driven motor-mower is one very small example of the extravagant waste of our finite oil supply. It must now be time to take stock of this modern day dilemma between self sufficiency and self deficiency.

Emma Bemma & Mr J

It was the last year of the ladies' finishing school for Emma Bemma and her friends. They had been taught all the social graces (most had them, being from well off, well to do families) but more than that they had been instructed, in this PC age, how to deal with the masses. Whilst knowing that they would rarely actually deal with the poor masses they were aware that nowadays many of them would be rubbing shoulders with us on the circuit because of their wealth (no doubt acquired through dubious drug deals or, worse still, manufacturing).

They had been, as part of their education, to meet the masses in such places as Ascot, the Royal Ballet, the slopes of Val d'Isère, the beaches of Southern France and the Queen's Garden Party. Now, as time approached for their entrance onto the world stage, it had been suggested by someone well connected but with an addled brain that they should visit an old folk's home. Emma and her friends were under the impression this could mean the Queen Mother at Balmoral and were slightly miffed when the principle of a large home full of old, poor people was explained to them. Emma's friend Sophie asked why they could not stay in their own homes and be looked after by 'downstairs' like everyone else?

The fleet of limos pulled up outside the Telford Home for the Elderly and the ladies were ushered to the front door by their respective chauffeurs. On entering, their noses twitched dramatically. 'What,' said

Samantha, 'is that ghastly smell?'

'What smell?' said the Matron who was by this time totally inured to the stench of imminent death that permeated the Home.

'That,' Samantha's hands waved frantically, indicating the immenseness of it all around her, 'smell,' she choked.

'There is a slight whiff,' agreed the Matron, 'that may have been old Ethel.'

'Is she ill?' enquired Tamara sympathetically.

'Died the other day,' replied the matron, 'but it took a while to get in her room and so she was a bit...er.....off.'

Emily looked around frantically for a ladies' loo sign, saw one and headed towards it holding her mouth. Unfortunately her years of breeding had made her every movement a graceful one, thus slowing her down and therefore it was just outside rather than inside that she vomited. Poor dear.

The young ladies were shown around the home and they met some of the old folk. Room after room they went in to show their responsible attitude to the people but when they got to one door the Matron refused them entry.

'Best not,' she said in a pained voice.

'Why?' asked Rebecca.

'Best not,' repeated the Matron apologetically.

'Excuse me?' Rebecca rejoined, using her 'but this is Harrods, you must have it' voice.

'It's Mr J's room,' said the Matron, 'he doesn't like company.'

'I'm sure it will be spiffing for him,' said Lucy.

'No,' said the Matron. 'Mr J and spiffing are not compatible.'

'Gosh,' said Tapanga, 'is he hideous or something? Like the hunchback of Notre Dame or someone from one of those "boy groups"?'

'No,' said the Matron, 'he looks ok, it's just that he's a bit.....odd.'

The girls looked at each other and then one of them opened the door.

'Bugger off,' a voice screamed from inside.

Even for ladies from a finishing school it is difficult to look elegant whilst retreating furiously.

'Sorry,' said the Matron wincing with embarrassment.

The young ladies looked at each other, not talking, as though communicating on a different level. One or two nodded. They walked into the room again. Ladies of a certain background are not used to being ignored.

'Hello, Mr J,' shouted Louise above the noisy television on which an American soap about a dysfunctional family was blaring out.

Mr J, who had been cackling hysterically at the show (and had done the seven other times this particular episode had been repeated), stopped instantly still and glared at the ladies.

'I don't know who you are, I don't want to know who you are, I doubt whether,' he glared at them contemptuously, 'you know who you are, so sod off and leave me alone!'

The ladies may have been short of worldliness but not of strength of spirit. Skiing, paragliding, ballooning and dancing all night made you pretty damn resilient when the chips were down. Sula turned the television off as the others sat around him. Mr J turned purple. Not only had they turned his beloved television off but at the critical point where Al Bundy is about to slip off the roof and fall on his son Bud. Mr J could see it in his mind, but he wanted to see it on his tele.

He gargled something incoherent and pointed at the television.

'It's a television,' said Joanna helpfully.

'I know it's a friggin tele,' said Mr J, 'it's my friggin tele and you have turned the friggin thing off so turn it back friggin on and sod friggin off.'

The ladies giggled. They only heard bad language when they were a bit spiffy or when their men had taken E.

'Now, now, Mr J,' said Becky, 'we've come to talk to you.'

'Sod off.'

He moved to get up to put on the tele but even he was not about to force his way through a throng of nubile young ladies. Indeed at that point something clicked within him as he realised that although they were women, that loathsome of creatures from whom all ill befalls, they were also very attractive, bosomy women (busts were in that year, according to Dior) and he calmed appreciably, his eyes resting for more than a moment on one of the more bountiful of the bunch.

'You don't look very old, Mr J,' said Emma.

He growled something.

Emma turned back to look at the Matron who was half hiding by a chest of drawers, expecting Mr J to massacre the women at any moment, and ready to flee to the nearest panic button.

'He's not very old?' said Emma.

The Matron hesitated. Mr J would kill her when they left. At least.

'In his early fifties,' she whispered.

'Speak up, Matron,' demanded one of the throng.

She whispered just a touch louder.

'Then why is he here?' demanded Emma who was warming, for some inexplicable reason, to this pathetic creature in front of her.

'He wants to be,' said the Matron feeling bold.

'Why?' demanded Emma again.

Mr J was looking to and from Emma and the Matron looking quite perplexed with the conversation they were having about him in his presence but without his participation.

'He doesn't live in the real world, you see,' said the Matron, warming to the theme and seeing an opportunity to stick one up the mean, cantankerous old bastard at last, 'he either lives in the past, or in the future, in his head this is, but never in the present. He's also a woman hater!'

'Why do you hate women?' asked Emma.

Mr J shook his head as though they were not only in the room but also in his head and he was trying to shake them out. They didn't go.

'Why do you hate women?' repeated Emma.

He shook his fist at Matron who visibly shrunk in size.

'Bastards,' he said, 'bastards, bastards, bastards.'

'Quite,' said Justine, 'but we were looking for something a touch more informative and less descriptive.'

He glared at her.

'Mr J,' said Matron, 'doesn't like women because he cannot control them. Not only that, he ascribes all his ills to his mother and his auntie and anybody else he grew up with. He is,' she said, starting to enjoy the baiting, 'a weak little man who cannot stand on his own two feet and has to blame the world for his lack of understanding. So there!'

Mr J looked as though he was going to have a heart attack. His eyes bulged, his heart thumped a not too regular rhythm and his hands bunched. 'The bitch,' he thought. 'It's bad enough being talked about but there was no need to slander him in front of everyone with the truth. Bitch.'

'But why are you here?' asked Emma, trying yet again to make sense of the situation and understand this lost soul before her.

'Because,' said Matron, 'he is lost in the world. He does not fit, does not know how to fit and refuses to acknowledge any actions other than his own. He has therefore retreated to here, to grow old and die in splendid misery and solitude.'

Mr J sent her a glance that should have turned her to stone but came nearer to jelly.

'Poor Mr J,' said Emma and the others cooed and aaahed and ooohed.

'We can help you, Mr J,' said Surita, pulling out a gold/platinum/titanium/nuclear credit card with matching chequebook, 'how much do you need?'

They looked at him expectantly.

'Well,' he said sarcastically, 'I need a new car and I'll need a house in a bit of nice land, preferably by the river, and a job....no forget the job....and a few quid to last me for a while.'

'How much is that?' enquired Surita of her ladies.

There was much mmming and aaaring and then one said to Mr J, 'We're not sure how much that is and her guarantee card is only good for half a million although we can add to it if you want. Is that enough?'

Mr J had had enough of being made fun of by women.

'Get out,' he screamed, 'get out. And as for you,' he glared at the Matron, 'do call in later.'

Her face told of her inner terror.

The ladies were about to mount an all out assault on this uncouth man when Emma said, 'You carry on with the tour and I will spend a few minutes with Mr J. I'm sure he misunderstands our intentions.'

They filed out and left them alone. Matron stood in the corner but Emma told her to leave.

'Now, Mr J,' said Emma, 'we can do this my way or we can do this my way.'

'Piss off.'

.....

'Ok,' said Emma Bemma. 'I will see you next week,' and she left.

Mr J was totally confused. He was expecting a hard time from this woman but she had gone. Bloody typical weak woman. How he hated weak women. All good films never had women in. Never. He thought for a moment and realised that he was a little put out by her leaving. He would have loved a good argument, demolishing her ridiculous logic and sending her home empty. Hah!

The next week Emma Bemma arrived and went in to Mr J.

'Piss off,' he cried, just a touch less acerbic than before.

'Ok,' said Emma Bemma, and left.

'What?' screamed Mr J. 'What?'

But it was too late, she had left.

This was not the way it should have been. He sat quietly for a while and then shuffled over to the sink to make himself a cup of tea. In the mirror over the sink he saw a reflection of himself. He involuntarily winced as he saw the bedraggled, unshaven, unkempt person before him.

It had not always been like this.....

Once Mr J had been a moderately successful small businessman who had paid for his house and had a little property investment that kept him going. Nothing to write home about but ok. But he had made a mistake. Mr J had not realised that having his own companies allowed him to be.....him. The him he was, was ok when he was in control of the situation. Once he left business and then tried to sell his skills on the open market he found a lack of social skills stopped him being employed. If he did get employment that same lack of social and political nous got him sacked. It was ever thus. Whilst Mr J could sort out a strategy for any company in moments he was totally incapable of sorting one out for himself that saw his role in life.

Retreating into a half world of unreality he struggled on for a while until he found that his efforts, or what he saw as his efforts, merely produced deeper and deeper gloom and frustration. His sorties into relationships, whilst full of good intentions, also ended in disappointment. In the end Mr J realised that he couldn't beat them but neither could he join them. That being the case he would have no more to do with them. He retreated into the Home and there he stayed. Unhappy but unhindered.

He looked again at the reflection.

Emma Bemma returned a week later.

'Morning, Mr J,' chirped Emma.

A grunt emanated from the chair.

'Sorry, Mr J,' said Emma, 'what did you say?'

There was a long pause and then a 'morning' was heard.

Emma went round to face him and noticed that he had shaved. She said nothing.

'What would you like to talk about, Mr J?' she enquired.

'Nothing.'

'Ok, well bye bye then,' and she swished out of the room and was gone.

Mr J sat in his chair for a very long time and then, very slowly, he moved over to the mirror.

'You arsehole,' he said in a choked voice to the reflection, 'what did she do to you?'

He had done it again. This was his life personified. His being screamed for her company and screamed for her departure. He went out of his way to hurt her, the reality being that he hurt himself. It was not her that was stuck in this God forsaken hole. But that was that. It would be unlikely that he would ever see Emma Bemma again and though he tried to suppress it he felt a sadness envelop him.

The next week Emma Bemma arrived as usual.

'Morning, Mr J,' she said.

'Morning, Emma,' came the reply.

'Emma,' said Mr J, 'would you mind waiting outside for ten minutes, I just have something to do?'

'Ok,' said Emma Bemma.

As soon as the door had closed he rushed to the wardrobe. Mr J had decided that if she did come back he would respond accordingly and he had found out his best suit and had it cleaned and pressed. His hair had been cut although he had hidden this from the staff with an old baseball hat. His shoes shone back at him like black diamonds. When he had finished dressing he took a package from the dresser and laid it gently

on the small table in the middle of the room. Opening the door a little he saw her back only a few away and called her in, moving behind the door before she saw him.

She went in and saw Mr J in all his finery. He moved to the table and picked up the box that had been neatly wrapped and tied with a very feminine bow. 'Make it pretty,' Mr J had insisted to the assistant in the store and, being Mr J, made them undo it three times until they got it 'right'.

'This is for you,' said Mr J as he held out the box.

'Thank you,' said Emma Bemma and promptly put it in her Harvey Nics carrier bag. 'I just popped in to tell you that I can't stay this week but I'll pop back next week when I have more time.'

She walked to the door and he heard 'bye bye' as she went through it.

He couldn't believe what had just happened. He shook his head as though to clear an unwanted bug from his ears. He blinked several times as he stared, face screwed, at the door.

'What?' he said. 'What the ..... was that all about?.....What did I do?.....'

He scurried over to the mirror and put his face up to it. He checked what he thought should have been there. Shave, yes. Haircut, yes. Combed, yes. Clean, yes. He moved away a little. Suit good, yes. Shoes clean, yes. Tie straight, (and with Windsor knot) yes.

For several days Mr J was vile. In his head he constantly argued with Emma Bemma, indeed he replayed every argument he had ever had in his life and then fought any that he thought he might have in the rest of his life. Those he won he replayed. Not to glory in the winning but almost to fight again so that he could lose. Mr J liked winning but somehow he also expected to lose. Losing was the necessary consequence of winning. Winning was being given an ice cream and then dropping it. Winning was buying a new car and then finding the hidden rust. Winning was ..... disappointment.

When Emma returned Mr J was too ill to see her and so she went away. Mr J had actually worked himself up into such a state that he had turned off and inward, the thought of her repulsing him. He had become non-feeling, an automaton that did as though a robot. He could have pressed the button that destroyed the world and yet felt nothing. She had become a non-being, of no consequence, a pathetic human being.

When he heard she had gone away he was relieved. The pressure became suddenly less. His whole mood changed and he wondered why she had gone. Why had she not enquired about him? He could have been very ill. He became annoyed again and his head started to hurt. The hurt became unbearable so he sat on the bed, put his head in his hands and tears rolled down his cheeks.

The following week Emma did not return, nor the next. Mr J became frantic. His need for control and for information overwhelmed him. He asked the Matron for her address and phone number but it was denied as being 'confidential'. He argued in his best logical and overpowering way but Matron was on a winner and knew it. He stormed back to his room.

Later that night Mr J entered matron's office quite forgetting that she went home several hours earlier. As he looked in the filing cabinets to see if she was there he accidentally found a letter from Emma's residence requesting the initial visit.

Emma received the grovelling, apologetic and yet somehow grandiloquent letter. She smiled. Putting it down she decided to let the bastard stew for a while.

He expected a letter or phone call by return but received nothing. He was lost. Women were beyond him. He had been to bed with many women over the years but a 'proper' relationship eluded him. In the company of a woman, initially, he was wonderful. Witty, polite, gentle and loving. After a while he shut off. The woman before him no longer

represented that which he wanted. She was too fat/thin, her hair too long/short, her dress sense lacking. There was always something. Usually it was because they 'did not talk' to him. In his mind he should be having incredible intellectual conversations with his partner but in reality if they did he was even more ill at ease and would hardly listen. Mr J was a sad, sad man.

After two weeks of waiting he gave up. It confirmed what he already knew, that he should have been a homosexual or a Welsh hill farmer.

Four weeks later Mr J's door opened and in walked Emma. His heart leapt at the sight of her but he showed no interest.

'Mr J,' said Emma. 'I thought we could go out. How long,' she looked at his unkempt appearance, 'will it take to get ready?'

'Where are we going?' asked Mr J suspiciously.

'Just out,' said Emma. 'I'll tell you what, you shave and I'll find your clothes ready for you.'

'Huh?' Mr J gargled.

'Just get on with it,' said Emma.

Mr J, just for a moment, debated whether to tell her to sod off, but didn't. He shuffled to the basin, paused, took off his shirt and started to shave.

Emma started rummaging about in his drawers while Mr J tried to see himself, and her, in the shaving mirror. He gave this up after he sliced his face several times.

'What's your name, Mr J?' asked Emma as clothes flew out of drawers and landed in graded heaps all over the place.

'David Charles Jaundrell,' said Mr J in a compliant, yet surprisingly strong, voice that surprised him and then added, 'MBA,' conferring, he thought, gravitas and intellectual ability.

'What did you get the MBE for?' asked Emma innocently.

'MBA.... MBA,' emphasised Mr J. 'Master in Business Administration... a Masters Degree in business.'

'Did you get it from one of those postal courses?' asked Emma, winding him up even further.

Mr J went red.

'Mr J,' said Emma, 'it's a joke. I know what an MBA is. The point is you do not have to justify yourself to me. You are what you are. A cranky old bugger that seems to have something to offer but gives nothing. Anyhow, if you're so good at business, what are you doing in this dump and not shacked up with some leggy blonde in Monaco?'

He turned quickly and yelped as he cut himself again.

'When you've finished shaving,' she said, 'put these on and meet me in the canteen. I'm going to get a cup of tea.'

The door closed behind her. It opened again.

'And by the way,' she said, pointing to the pile of clothes on the settee, 'take them to the charity shop...where it looks as though you bought them.'

Before Mr J could think of anything to say she was gone for her tea. Something that sounded like 'bitch' or 'witch' or both rumbled around the room.

She sat drinking her tea and a look of amusement spread over her face. There was indeed no need for Mr J to tell her about himself. She knew already. Daddy had 'contacts' who could tell you anything about anybody. From Mr J up to the Pope if necessary. In daddy's line of business it was necessary to know your enemies, and your friends.

Mr J was nothing special. Womaniser, relative failure at business but good enough to portray a modest degree of 'success', only measured against the 'have nots'. Seen as argumentative and a 'rebel'. Realised he would never be rich and decided to work for others where his skills were excellent but his temperament and refusal to accept authority usually got him sacked. Mr J was indeed a sad, sad man. But Emma wanted him, and what Emma wanted, she usually got.

A few minutes later he arrived in the canteen looking embarrassed. He was dressed in casual trousers, casual jacket, open necked shirt and loafers. He wondered whether they were his, as he could not remember the last time he had worn them. In fact had she arrived on the scene six months ago, before he had the bout of flu with sickness and diarrhoea that lost him a stone in weight, he would have not even got into them.

She looked at him.

'Let's go then,' she said and got up and went to the door.

It was all beyond Mr J. Usually the good, automatic and instinctive seducer that he was would have taken over and taken charge. Holding doors open, stopping traffic, lady on the inside when walking, slight pressure on the arm for guidance, charming smile for reassurance, low gentle voice (down an octave) for security, etc etc. And here he was, impotent. Being bossed around by a woman. He felt panic rising within him. He paused, his every fibre telling him to go back to his hidy hole. She turned and looked at him. He knew she knew. Her look taunted him. It said you can give but you can't take. You are a coward, a bullshitter, a fraud. I dare you.

He froze. His legs would not move. He bent down and tied a shoelace that did not exist and then, with immense self-control he stood up, smiled (at least that's what he thought he did) and followed her out.

He realised he did not know where he was going, what he was going to do when he got there or who he was going to meet. All he knew was that he was in an old Morris car and being driven by a woman driver. At one point, when she had been in the third gear for what seemed like ages, he had, through clenched teeth, suggested she change gear. The car stopped immediately.

'Are you driving this car?' she enquired.

'No, but.....'

'Then shut the fuck up,' she said and off she went.

Mr J was stunned and appalled.

She said 'fuck', thought Mr J. His fantasies of this lady were spiralling in his head causing immense confusion. She was a tart. This was no lady. His condemnation of her continued apace until at some point his brain decided to give him an inkling of what he would like to do with this woman on the kitchen sink and from the rear. He stared ahead blankly as he watched her naked bum rear up enticingly, wiggle and then open up into a vast black chasm. Then he saw her in front of him, dominant, and he squirming on the floor, pleading. His stomach started to churn and he felt sick. He went white.

'You ok, Mr J?' enquired Emma.

'Fine.....'

An hour later Emma hurtled left off the main road and swept up a long shale drive for perhaps half a mile. At the top stood a large house, possibly a mansion or grange but from a period when they knew how to build 'residences'. Mr J was impressed and wondered whose house it was. Its beauty was only slightly marred by the security cameras. Mr J counted at least seven at the front alone and half expected to encounter machine gun turrets should he ever venture round the back.

She led him into a vast oak panelled hall and through to a large lounge with a blazing log fire. In an easy chair by the fire sat a man.

'Mr J,' said Emma, 'this is my father.'

The man stood up and with a nod shook Mr J's hand.

'I'll leave you two to it,' said Emma and walked the thirty yards to the other end of the room, her heels clack clacking on the wooden floor, and left through a side door.

'Sit down,' said the man. 'So you're the man that's going to look after Emma.'

'Pardon?' squeaked Mr J.

The man said nothing.

'Look after Emma... Me?.....Not that I know of.....I don't know Emma.....this is a ride out.....I'm not well.....I'm not.....' His voice

trailed off. Mr J had gone somewhere else. The day, the woman, the ride, the house, the man, the statement left Mr J with nothing of reality to hang on to. He sat like a puppy waiting for his next morsel.

'She hasn't told you? Typical..... Emma has decided that you will be her assistant. This means that you help her with her business activities, her social activities and anything else she wants. As part of this you can live in the grounds and we have a cottage spare for you. It's a good size and you can feed the deer by your door in the morning. A reasonable salary and car is obviously no problem. You can move in at the weekend and start on Monday. I think that about covers it.'

'Thank you,' said Mr J, who then got up and went to the door. With his hand on the handle he stopped, came back and said, 'Could you say that again, please?'

On the way back Mr J, knowing a good thing when he saw one and never wishing to look a gift horse in the mouth, said, 'I'm not interested.'

'That's ok,' said Emma. 'It's your decision. We'll take you back and I'll employ one of the others.'

'Others?'

'Yes.'

'What others?'

'The ones who came to interview.'

'Interview?'

She looked at him. 'Mr J, you said you don't want the job and that's ok. If you can't do it, you can't do it. There's no shame in that.'

They drove for a while.

'I didn't say I couldn't do it.....'

She said nothing.

'I can do it.....'

She pulled up in front of the Home and saw Mr J looking extremely agitated.

'Mr J,' she said, 'you are a pathetic arsehole with masochistic tendencies. You deserve everything you get out of life, which is sod all because you give nothing, accept nothing, fight everything and pull everybody's chain. Now get out, get packed and you will be picked up in two days' time.'

He got out.

'And one more thing,' she shouted from the window, 'don't ever fuck me about again.' Two old ladies standing near by blushed. She roared away and the gravel from the back wheels slashed into him.

For the next two days Mr J's life was one of misery, horror, hope, joy and despair. He veered from the joy of being wanted and appreciated to the horror of being owned and used. His loss of independence gnawed away at him and his logic told him to appreciate what he was being given. He looked to the future and saw blackness and terror. He looked to the future and saw a brilliant career ahead of him, mixing with the great and the good and, at last, recognition. He savoured the recognition until the enormity of it hit him and then he was scared again. And what the hell was this 'business' thing? He thought she was a deb. Business thing? Business thing? He felt inferior again.

His move to the cottage terrified him. He did not like the new; he liked foreseen, accountable, quantifiable and understandable things. Things that would not hurt him. The unforeseeable future was a terrifying place, full of danger and hurt.

But he was there and it wasn't so bad. It was big enough not to be claustrophobic but close enough to the big house to be constantly reminded of one's lowly station and lack of success. Mr J suffered yet again. He was a lackey. A child's plaything. A woman's plaything.

At 6:30am on Monday morning as he slept fitfully, the phone rang by his bed.

'Are you up?'

Mr J would have liked to have said 'up what?' but he had given himself a stern talking to over the weekend and had grudgingly decided to be a 'good boy'.

'Nearly,' he lied.

'Good. Do you have a passport?'

Mr J's innards nearly weren't. She was suggesting rushing off to faraway places. Places out of his control. He started to sweat.

'Mr J?'

'Yes, I have a passport,' he said weakly.

'Good. I will pick you up in an hour,' and the phone went dead.

He put the phone down and sat for a second. Then he rushed to the shower and feverishly did his hair and selected parts. Mr J had a theory that if the body, like hair, was not washed, it would keep itself clean. For almost all his life Mr J had only washed his hair, under his arms, his genitals and his bum. As no one had ever complained he thought it proved a point. Drying himself he went to the wardrobe and picked a suit. It then occurred to him he did not actually know where he was going, perhaps to Cairo or the Amazon rain forest or.....where....? And that being the case what should he wear? He decided to ring her back and ask but realised he didn't know her number and where the hell was she ringing from anyhow? Panic enveloped him again and he seriously considered legging it back to his hidey-hole at the home. He took several deep breaths and his mood changed. Bollocks to her. She would just have to wait while he changed after she told him the destination. He was no-one's dogsbody! Cow!

With ten minutes to go he lost his nerve and quickly put on a suit. She arrived an hour later. He was fuming that she dared to keep him waiting. People shouldn't do that! Ever, ever, ever! She saw his anger and ignored it.

'Did you find your passport?' she asked.

'Yes,' he said quietly.

'Good, you may need it next week.'

Inwardly he seethed. May need it, may frigging need it? All that panic, all that fear and he may need it.

He knew what to do now. All his life had trained him for times such as these. It was what he wanted, prayed for, existed for. It was time to tell her to stick it up her arse. Straight up, all the way until it crushed her heart and she died a slow and lingering death.

'Forget it, Mr J,' said Emma.

It jolted him, the thought that she could have known what he was thinking. No chance. She was obviously thinking of something else. Mr J's thoughts were his own and if he wanted to leave it was important that it was a bolt from the blue to cause the maximum impact.

'You're not running anywhere. We've got work to do,' she said matter of factly.

He was jolted again. She put down a profit and loss account in front of him and said, 'Tell me what that means.'

Totally lost he did as he was told. He summed up and waited.

'Aren't the stocks too high?' asked Emma.

'Maybe,' said Mr J, who at last had something he could relate to.

'Yes or no?'

'Maybe.'

'Why maybe?'

He reeled off a list of technical reasons for varying stock levels.

'At last,' said Emma, 'you've used your brain instead of your ego.'

Mr J was stung but said nothing. This woman, he thought, has the ability to really piss me off and I reckon I will be here until about (he instinctively looked at his watch) the end of the week. Cow!

On another level he admired her strength and intellect. Mr J could not abide weak women neither could he abide strong ones. Mr J was slowly coming to the conclusion that deep down he actually hated women. All his life he had spent seducing them and being admired by them but he was now wondering if it was all a facade to hide an incredible hatred and anger towards them. He had to control them so

they could not control him, and thence kill him. Bastards! Yet interesting. He made a note to look at this topic again later.

'.....don't you think?' she said.

'Quite,' said Mr J, 'quite.'

Over the next few weeks Mr J got to know Emma Bemma.

Mid twenties, slim (touch heavy on the hips and tummy through a propensity for cakes), nice legs, lovely ankles, 34c bust (Mr J could tell bust measurements in a fog at three hundred yards), green eyes, intelligent. She careered from child-like to matronly in seconds depending on her point of view and needs and rarely seemed to be her actual age.

Emma had 'gone into business' whilst quite young after being left a 'small' amount of money from her grandmother. Unlike her father who was a maverick (which was why she liked Mr J) who did things the 'wrong' way, she was really more like her mother. Relatively formal, relatively correct but with a strength of character that served her well.

Emma had bought and sold little things, companies that seemed under valued and then passed them on to bigger fish for a profit. That was fine but not as rewarding as finding 'little things', making them better and then selling them on. That was where, although he did not know it yet, Mr J was to come in. Somebody had to do the work and, in Emma's eyes, if she was the brains and the money then Mr J was the gopher.

'You can stick it up your arse,' said Mr J, looking horrified at the proposal in front of him.

'Isn't it great,' said Emma, totally ignoring the look of horror in his eyes.

'No,' he cried in anguish, 'absolutely not.'

Cont.....

Mr J worked for Emma Bemma for just over a year, getting on quite well, with ups and downs. At the end of the year Mr J, being old, was knackered and decided to pack himself off on holiday. Mr J suggested to Emma that she might like to also go but she declined although she did take him to the airport.

At the end of two restful weeks Mr J returned and was met at the airport by Emma Bemma who was strangely quiet. He enquired if anything was wrong but she said nothing.

On the following Monday Mr J arrived at the office to find a younger man sitting in his chair.

'Who are you?' asked Mr J.

'Your replacement.'

'Replacement?'

'Yes.'

'Where's Emma?' asked Mr J.

'She's not around for a few days.'

Mr J tried phoning her but there was no reply so he went to see her father.

'I've been dumped,' said Mr J.

'You went on holiday,' said the father, 'and I think you must have upset her at some point.'

'Possibly,' said Mr J, 'but don't we all get upset at some point? Why is that reason to dump me?'

'Mr J,' said her father sympathetically, 'did you honestly think you would stay with her?'

'Why not?'

'What is her prime concern?'

'To get things right so they fit in.'

'Quite, and you weren't quite right and now you no longer fit in. Someone else will be quite right for a while and then they will not fit in. It's her way of protecting herself. She has a dream in her head and things have to fit it.'

'Why does it have to be like that?' asked Mr J.

'She had a good teacher,' said the father but would not elucidate.

'Perhaps if I talked to her,' said Mr J, 'she would change her mind.'

'There is no point, you no longer exist. The dream with you has evaporated. You are old news.'

The father looked at Mr J's eyes.

'You loved her very much, didn't you?'

'Yes.'

And he continued to do so for a long time.

Inherit

The house was big and old and although dimly lit it had a warmth and security about it that only old houses have. The fire, in front of which the old man sat, was stacked high with wood logs and their flames cast long flickering shadows across the room giving the impression of moving statues involved in an ancient moonlit ritual. Outside the night was still, the wind gently rustling the pines who spoke to the moon of their day. In the distance a train whistled a forlorn warning of its impending arrival and the trees were once again reminded of their immobility.

The old man had a book on his lap but at this instant his mind had wandered to times past and errors made. He had made few in his life, as his large house and obvious wealth would testify, but admitted to himself of his greatest error.

He looked back at the book for a moment but soon drifted. Ray, his son, had always been a problem and he knew that the fault was his. It was his driving desire to make a fortune and keep it, and when you have a child whose mother has run off with someone else, one is going to be neglected at the expense of the other. True he had spent a minor fortune on schools, nannies and God knows what else his guilt urged him to do, but he knew that he had never loved the boy as many fathers do.

However he was never quite sure why the guilt should rest with him, as though his son had been led like a puppet on an invisible string. 'How could this be,' he asked himself, 'if I hardly ever remembered him, how

could I influence him?' He felt weary and knew this was due to the unanswerable qualities of the question.

Recently he had wandered into the boy's room (actually a misnomer as the 'boy' was in early middle age and the 'room' a wing) and found a materialistic collage of boredom, gold watches, suits by the dozen, shoes by the hundred and, as though by another hand, rows of neatly stacked 'penny dreadfuls'. Thrillers of all shapes and sizes in alphabetical index. 'Should have been a bloody librarian,' he muttered.

The warmth of the fading embers with their soporific effect beckoned him to bed and slowly pulling the guard in front of the fire he moved towards the stairs. Since his last 'warning', as he put it, he did most things slowly, remembering the adage 'death is nature's way of telling you to slow up'.

At the bottom of the stairs he heard the door bell ring. He glanced at the clock, it was nearly midnight, and then at the gun case on the wall with its pre-loaded guns, but after a moment's hesitation he shuffled towards the door either not worrying or not caring about the possible consequences.

He looked through the spy hole but could see no-one, then sliding back the bolts he opened the door. His old eyes peered into the dark until out of the shadows, only feet away, a grotesque sight threw itself in front of him, screaming like a crazed animal with fangs bare.

The old man stared for a second and then clutched his heart and staggered backwards into the room, his face writhing in pain. Pursued by the beast he fell into the furniture as he headed for the gun-rack. The nearer he got the slower he became until barely managing to smash the glass with his shoulder, with guns falling to the floor, he looked to the sky, rolled his eyes and fell heavily to the floor.

The beast peered down at him with intent eyes and then kicked him hard, watching him jerk like a rag doll. It resumed watching and when seemingly satisfied removed its head.

Ray peered down at his father with contempt, that one so strong should be beaten so easily gave him an immense feeling of power, the more so in his Gorilla suit. He moved quickly round the room, righting the furniture and straightening the carpets, making it apparent that it had been a straight forward heart attack. Satisfied with the effect he put the mask back on and went to the door. 'Ray,' a whisper from behind him. He froze and slowly looked back at the heap on the floor. It was still there, as before. His heart pounding he turned again to the door. 'Ray,' the whisper again. In blind panic he darted to the motionless body, a feeling of terror engulfing him.

He was still staring as the body opened its eyes, smiled and put a .38 bullet through his head.

The old man finished telling the police about the shot intruder and put down the phone. Making a mental note to look suitably shocked when the police took off the mask, he went to sit again by the fire.

'Life is full of coincidences,' he thought, looking at the cover of the book he had taken from Ray's room, with its heading 'An Attack of the Heart'.

The Boat Trip

We were on a pleasure boat going out to see the dolphins and the pilot whales. Round trip, two hours with some food thrown in. Fine.

I was with Bo, Mrs Bo and Jake, their grandson, but because I had already had too much sun in the ten days I had been there I went and found a shaded spot on the side, leaving them to their own devices.

After a little while we came upon a small school of pilot whales (not sure why they are called that but I would like to think that many years ago the old schooners were helped to navigate dangerous reefs by watching the direction the 'pilot' whales took).

'Hello,' I heard someone say faintly and looked around but only saw the passengers milling around to get a better look at the whales. 'Hellooooooeeee,' I heard again and again looked round and saw two groups of passengers moving towards each other. Question answered, I thought to myself, settling back against the bulkhead and closing my eyes. When you've seen one pilot whale you've seen them all.

I dozed gently, aided by the sea sickness pill that I had taken.

'Look!' someone shouted. 'The dolphins.'

I struggled between staying half asleep and actually doing what I was here to do, look at the dolphins.

'Come on, lazy bugger,' I heard someone say, presumably my friend Bo. I shook my head, removing someone's bust from my fantasy and looked out to sea. Thirty yards away were a school of dolphins, perhaps a dozen or so.

'Hello,' someone was shouting again. I looked over my shoulder but could not work out who, among the melee, was talking, or even why it was important to find out. Watch the dolphins, go to sleep. Sounded good.

'For Christ's sake, wake up, you idle bugger, and talk to me.'

I ignored it. Whoever the cretin was was of no interest to me.

'Do not call me a cretin!' the voice said.

'Sod off,' I thought.

'I will not sod off. You sod off!'

At that point I began to realise that I was talking to myself.

'Oh, for Christ's sake, let's give up,' I heard a voice say. 'We'd get more sense from a mollusc.'

I hadn't said anything. That wasn't me. What was going on?

'It was me, you prat,' said a voice in my head, 'over here.'

I looked behind me.

'Wrong way, idiot.'

Totally lost, I looked the other way, towards the sea.

'At last, now can we have your attention?'

All I could see was the waves and the dolphins.

'Exactly,' a voice said, 'it's us, the dolphins, that are talking to you.'

I peered at them. One winked. Dolphins don't wink, I thought. I was sure I saw a look of despair cross its face.

'What do you want me to do, a reverse pike with double twist?' the voice said in exasperation.

'Yes.'

And it did, or sort of.

'Let's stop messing about,' said the voice. 'I will prove that it's us talking to you. I will tell you something few people know. You are from Dawley.'

My heart stopped still.

I looked at them. There were more now and they were all looking at me.

'How did you know?'

'You can hear us. Only people from Dawley can hear us.'

'Why only people from Dawley?'

'That's where it all started. That's where we came out of the sea all those millions of years ago. Why do you think we're called Dolphins? It's a distortion of our original name, "dawlies".'

'Dawley?' I was amazed. 'You must be joking.'

'Not at all. Do you remember the story of the city below the sea, with fabulous wealth etc etc.'

I nodded. 'Atlantis.'

'No,' one said. 'Atlantis indeed, a load of bollocks. Dawley! And do you remember the city in the South American jungle supposedly full of gold and silver?'

'Yes. Where the Incas lived but I can't remember its name.'

'Little Dawley.'

'No?' I gasped. 'Really?'

I thought about this for a moment and then said, 'How come it's only me that can hear you?'

'You're from Dawley. It's something to do with your brain. Only people from Dawley can hear us.'

'Do you get to talk to many people from Dawley?'

'Naw. There used to be quite a few two or three hundred years ago on boats going to Australia but not now. In fact, if I'm right (I felt it enquiring of others) the last time was at least a hundred years ago. Unfortunately the fellow had two heads which gave us lots of conversation but it was all a touch confusing.'

I mulled this over for a few moments.

'If we both originally came from Dawley how come I'm a man and you are dolphins?'

'Strategic error,' said one. 'We thought that the future was the sea, not the land. The land was hard work, all that tilling and this and that. And the weather.....who needs that. So it had to be the sea. Bountiful food, stable temperature, meat or plant life to eat and no boundaries and with our size no predators. The sea it was.'

'Why error?'

'Because we never dreamed you bastards would come along and screw it all up. Ironic really when for a long time we actually controlled what happened.'

'How?'

'Think of any powerful people you have heard of.'

'Superman.'

They said nothing.

'Sorry. Napoleon.'

'One of us.'

'No?'

'Yes. More?'

'Julius Caesar.'

'Ours.'

'Hitler, Churchill, Hannibal, Joan of Arc, Kennedy...' I babbled on.

'All ours with the exception of those in this century. They let us down badly. Somewhere about the late 1800s we lost control. Maybe it was the fact that they had been human for so long that the link was becoming weaker. More than likely. And of course although they were descendants of people from Dawley the line was getting ever more diffused. Either way we lost them and they started to do their own thing. Up to that point we had managed to keep them away from the oceans other than a bit of fishing and the odd looting and pillaging but soon all hell broke loose. Whales slaughtered, the oceans used as garbage bins, rain filled with acid, oceans warming up through ozone contamination, coral and plant life dying, and worst of all those frigging noisy jet powered water scooters. They just drive you nuts.'

'So you lost control.'

'Not entirely, or so we thought. It became obvious we had to find a way of slowing it all down. We needed a form of energy to stop you lot from polluting everything. We were lucky in that there was a very strong Dawley link with a fellow called Einstein...'

'Albert...' I gasped.

'No, Fred. Fred was Albert's second cousin but he was a bit dim, that was maybe one of the reasons we could get into his mind, there was very little there to stop us, and so we got Fred to sit down with Albert and tell him all about relativity and things like that. Fred hadn't got a clue what he was rambling on about as we put the thoughts in his head but Albert caught on quite quick. But it was a waste of time. The next thing we know half of Japan has gone and even more crap, glowing crap, is being stuck in the sea.'

'Bummer,' says I.

'Bummer,' said the dolphins in unison.

It went quiet for a while. They swam along side the boat putting on a show for the tourists and I sat and thought. Bummer.

'Why are you telling me?' I asked in due course.

There was no reply.

I thought for a moment. I went back over the 'conversation'.

'No chance,' I said.

Nothing.

'Forget it. This is the year 2005 and I am not Hannibal or Caesar. I am not taking over the world for you.'

'We'd help,' they chorused.

'And how would you do that?' I asked sarcastically. 'March into Russia and squirt water at them until they submitted? And there's the minor point that I breathe air and you.....er.....do.....er.....occasionally. But I walk and you swim. What kind of army is that? What do I do, run up and down the

shoreline issuing orders? Who will that defeat, the crabs?'

'We have a secret weapon,' one said.

'How do you mean, secret weapon?'

'We have built a secret weapon that will annihilate everyone in the world who is not directly descended from Dawley.'

'How?'

'It's very technical.'

'I'm technical.'

After a moment one said, 'The theory behind the weapon is one relating to the quark diffusion differential which, when put into conflict with the irridium totality continuum, creates a.....'

'Right, got it. What am I supposed to do?'

'Well, to start with you have to spend some time with us so that we can get you to harmonise your brain links, understand the strategy and teach you how to use the new weapon.'

'Spend some time with you? Where?'

'In here with us. It's ok. As you are a Dawley original you can automatically change to one of us as long as we allow it. You just dive in and we change you. It's that simple.'

'Just like that....?'

'Just like that.'

'But what about my friends, my family.....sex?'

'You will only be here a short time and then you'll be back on land and ruling the world. Then you can get all the sex you need, and more. Don't forget you will be ruling the world.'

It sounded great. Be with friends from Dawley, the natural rulers of the world, use a new secret weapon, get rid of the baddies, rule the world, lots of women, lots of sex. I dived in.

It was wonderful. They took me down in to the depths and to their homes. Each had a balcony with a beach view and wonderful Parker Knoll reclining chairs. Television was taken from the telephone cables

that traversed the oceans and so there were four thousand channels to choose from. The day I looked there was nothing worth watching.

'Can I see the secret weapon?' I asked.

They took me to a giant underwater hangar and, underneath an enormous sheet, they showed it to me. It was enormous, with flashing lights, whirring hard drives and at the one end a long gun like barrel.

'What's it do?' I asked excitedly. 'How's it work?'

'Calm down,' said one, 'and we'll show you.'

They wheeled it out and pointed it at a stone ridge in the distance. We sheltered behind a small rock and watched as a button was pressed. Immediately a long plume of green shot from the nozzle. I was amazed! I was shocked. I was astounded!

'It's a bloody pea shooter!' I said with horror.

'Isn't it great. Ecologically friendly and non toxic.'

'It's a pea shooter.....!'

'Wake up, wake up.'

My head felt muzzy. The secret weapon must have exploded and concussed me.

'He'll be alright, just get him out of the sun. Fancy going to sleep in the sun, stupid sod. I bet he's from.....'

Complexity

In all societies there is the joker in the pack, the black sheep, the aberration. And this society, exalted though it was, was no exception.

With these two something had gone wrong, some cosmic force had warped, perhaps only for a micron, but its effect was obvious; they were lacking in certain qualities.

They had been moved and physically stranded in a part of the Universe that was of no importance. Their energy, immense though it was, was neutralised by a force directed from a billion billion likars away, so that their influence was infinitesimal, at least by their standards.

And they were bored.

Then, one likar, one of them had an idea.

'Let's have some fun,' it said.

'How,' asked the other, '.....here?'

They had no names, no sex, no identification. They were separate and one, component and whole. However, to reduce further their power, their energy transference molecules had been reorganised by the others so that they could not combine in all precise ways. Where they had come from, which was everywhere, what one thought, was added to the knowledge of all. Not so with them. Now what they 'thought' had to be communicated.

If possible.

'Let me show you,' said the first. 'It will only take several likars. Come with me.'

They went where a great mass of gas swirled around and it directed a force at it. The gas cooled and slowly became solid.

'Forget it,' said the second. 'I threw planets when I was but a sprogue.'

'No, this is different. Much different.'

The solid revolved around its axis. Alive but dead. It looked around within itself. It knew what it needed.

'In sekta drej, it's about nef likars, there is something I need. Help me.'

The other locked on to his emanating energy field and out into the vastness it went. Finding the object it was brought back and positioned.

The hot globe radiated its heat to the solid planet and warmed it. And because the planet rotated around itself, and also around the hot globe, the planet, whilst having varying temperatures, remained constant.

'Watch,' said the first. 'It won't take long.'

The planet, due to the carbon and the mixture of gases and heat, started to produce basic forms of life. It was minute, but it was a start.

'So what,' said the second derisorily, 'first lengen physics. Big deal.'

'This isn't about physics,' said the first, 'this will involve two elements that have never ever been used before. Keep watching.'

The planet evolved further. Fish, reptiles and animals became widespread. Dinosaurs came and went. One branch of the ape family evolved into man.

'Wait a likar!' shouted the second. 'There's something wrong. Look! There's a malfunction.'

It felt the other's power intensify.

'Look,' it said again, 'the two legs without the fur. They are curtailing the life cycle of each other. That does not happen. It is not possible.

According to the Zek Convention it is not permissible and therefore cannot be.....That is one of your elements?'

'Keep looking.'

The two legs without fur evolved more. Whilst they still curtailed each other's life cycles, they made machines which were designed to do the same thing but over vast areas resulting in vast curtailing.

The second was unbelieving.

'Why are you doing this? What is the point? If you have somehow programmed them to be destructive to one another, all that will happen is that they will find more and more efficient ways of curtailing and the planet will be doomed. It is self defeating.'

'Not so,' said the first, 'they will curtail forever. Watch.'

The planet evolved more. Curtailing continued. To a greater or lesser degree, but it always continued.

'Why,' asked the second, 'does it continue? Why does it self perpetuate? Why is there never an end?'

'Because,' said the first, 'of the introduction of my second element to some of the two legs.....'

He paused for effect.

'.....Hope.'

Bliss

The restaurant was large but intimate, expensive and fashionable. The meal delightful, the champagne cool, tantalising, relaxing.

It had been a lovely evening and it was nearly time to go. She looked at him tenderly, lovingly, with the merest hint in her eyes of the passion that would follow later. Her low dress allowed him to see the swell of her breasts, as he did quite often, and she saw him admire her.

'Ready?' she asked.

'Nearly.'

She started to take her wrap from the chair back.

'Did you enjoy tonight...?' he enquired tentatively.

'Oh yes..' she purred '....wonderful....'

'Should we do it again.....?'

'Oh yes....'

'Often.....?'

'All the time.'

'Like a married couple would.....?'

'Yes. Like a romantic, madly in love married couple.....yes, definitely.'

'Good. Then you will marry me?'

She stopped moving. Her eyes watched him as though she had missed something and was trying to catch up. She pointed slowly at him and then at herself. He nodded. She repeated the movement. He nodded again.

It was a combination of the screamed 'yeeeeeeeeessssssss' and her flung up arms that made the waiter lose control of the tray. A dreadful mess but the recipient was more mellow when they explained the circumstances. They even bought the couple's meal before they went happily on their way.

'Where shall we go on our honeymoon?' she asked. 'Somewhere exotic?'

'We've been most places,' he said. 'We could do with going somewhere different.'

He poked the large log fire and a myriad sparks flew heavenward. Shadows danced around the cosy lounge.

'Where...?'

'Not a clue.'

'Let's be different,' she said.

'In what way.'

'We could go where we don't know we're going.'

'Excluding the fact that's not in English, how do we make arrangements to go to somewhere we don't know where we're going to?'

'No, I don't mean that. Let's pick a place to go at random.'

'How do we do that?'

She thought for a moment.

'We get out a map of the world and stick pins in it...also..' she carried on quickly, warming to the theme, '....we could throw a dice for the month of the year and the day we are going to set off.....?'

She looked at him expectantly.

'Let's go for it.....' he said.

The island was everything it should have been. Only a few miles long in either direction, waves lapping sandy beaches, English speaking and English food if you wanted it. What else could you want on a honeymoon?

'Somewhere a bit bloody hotter than this,' he said icily.

'Well...' she shrugged.

'And a bit less bloody wet,' he said dryly.

She grimaced.

'The island's quite nice,' she ventured tentatively.

'It's not fucking nice,' he exploded, 'it is not fucking nice. The Isle of Wight in February can not be nice. Barbados in February can be nice. The Maldives in February can be nice. A million and one places in February can be nice, but the Isle of Wight in February can not be nice!'

'It's not my fault,' she said, her voice raising, 'we both agreed to stick the pin in the map and be bound by the result.'

'You stuck the bloody pin in,' he said accusingly.

'You held the map,' she exploded.

He muttered to himself and thought dark thoughts. His mother was right; this woman was an idiot, a complete idiot. He must have been mental to propose. It must have been the wine or maybe she had put some kind of drug in his meal. No, that couldn't be right as he already had the ring. Maybe she had been drugging him for months? Wasn't she into the occult, Tarot cards and all that? Perhaps a spell had been visited upon him. He looked furtively at his hands to see if a green sheen or something else was apparent.

She put her hands defiantly on her hips. He noticed the posture and felt uncomfortable. She never defied him. This was another example of a woman, once married, who turned.

'What,' she said quietly, 'about the hotel.....?'

'What about the hotel...?'

She said nothing, her hands dug deeper into her hips, her gaze more penetrating. The silence exploded all around him.

'It's a five bloody star hotel!' he shouted in a voice that he had never heard.

'And one of them,' she said, 'is your anus.'

She forced back the triumphant smile that wanted to form around her lips.

He looked aghast. Who was this trollop, this harridan, this harpy that was unveiling herself before him? It was fine, nay wonderful, to talk dirty in bed, but this was in a main street on their honeymoon, for Christ's sake. She was supposed to be.....well....virginal.

'Well.....?' she enquired pointedly.

He looked at her uncomprehendingly.

'Well....?' she said again.

'Well bloody bloody bloody what.....' he said, exasperated.

'The hotel.....is complete and utter crap!'

His eyes widened and he looked at her as though anew. He didn't recognise her. Crap! She'd said crap! He'd never heard her say 'crap'.

'It's the Isle of Wight, for Christ's sake. What do you expect, the fucking Savoy!'

'You are pathetic,' she said, 'soft, flaccid, pathetic. Pathetic here, pathetic there, pathetic everywhere.'

For a moment murder seemed to him by far the obvious option. He settled for abuse.

'Me, pathetic?' he screamed. 'Me....hah....what about you? I don't spend hours in the bathroom...'

'That's obvious...' she cut in quickly.

'...or putting on clothes.....'

'I think everyone would agree with you there....'

'....and....'

The word flaccid entered his brain. Flaccid, as in.....well.... what was she implying? He had been tired, he worked very hard, life in the city was.....tiring.....but he was certainly not.....

He stopped. This was wrong, so very wrong. The woman before him, the new Lady Rebecca Fyonnes was not as she should be, not as she was, not as she was intended to be. He looked at her again. Her bright blue eyes were glacial, high cheek bones skull like, delicate nose like a ski slope, full red lips thin and tight, elegant long swanlike neck scrawny.

She was a witch.

He had made a mistake but mistakes could be undone. He was not, under any circumstances, going to stay married to this cow! It would be a bit pricey but money was hardly a problem, and anyway, she hadn't got the brains to take him to the cleaners.

'You can stick this..' he waved his arms around him, 'and our so called marriage, up your arse.'

'No, my darling,' she said sweetly, 'we will be married forever.'

'You must be joking.'

'We will have five or six children and be happy forever. We can go fishing and shooting and golfing with you. All of us.'

He looked appalled. The enormity of the scenario engulfed him. Panic enveloped him. He looked around quickly for the hire car and felt in his pocket for the keys.

'I'm off,' he said, 'the hotel's paid for another seven days if you want it. Forget the marriage. You will hear from my solicitors.'

He ran hot foot into the street and to the car.

'What about our love,' she shouted after him, 'and our children, and the dogs, and playing golf together, and coming to your Club with you.....?'

She got back to the hotel and went up to her suite. After ordering a snack to be brought up in half an hour, she filled up the Jacuzzi, undressed and reclined in it.

She heard the phone above the roar of the bath, leaned over and picked it up.

'Hello..?'

'Beccy, it's me, your mom,' the voice said, 'how is everything going?'

'Exactly to plan, ma, exactly to plan.....'

She put down the phone and grinned, remembering how long and how many maps she had gone through to be able to skewer the Isle of Wight with accuracy.

Listen please, questions later

The large red truck thundered down the roads, its rear end swaying dangerously on the corners. Reaching the motorway, the driver changed down, roared onto the slow lane, changed up, accelerated hard and moved over to the middle lane, changed up again and then, as a car quickly gave way, went into the fast lane. From then on it was foot to the floor and any car doing under eighty was quickly intimidated out of the way.

It was several miles before the police car, with its two occupants smoking idly in a layby, spotted the missile hurtling along the motorway. The driver looked at his compatriot and a smile thinly creased his lips.

'Mine...' he said.

It was several miles further before the police car got into a position behind the truck, its lights flashing and high pitched American siren screaming. The truck took no notice.

The police came within a yard of the truck's rear end but its quarry neither slowed down or pulled over. The police driver, who luckily had recently finished a refresher at the Police Driving School for high speed driving, waited for the right moment, nipped into the middle lane and came level with the passenger in the truck. He waved frantically, signalling for the truck to slow down and pull over.

The passenger raised his palms indicating puzzlement. The policeman raised palm up and down and then pointed diagonally at the

hard shoulder. He then mouthed the word 'Now!' and pointed at the man menacingly.

After several moments the truck started to slow, the police car moved out of the way, and it pulled over on to the hard shoulder. The driver leaned out of the truck and shouted to the officers walking towards them.

'What the fuck's going on?'

The officers reached his window and one said quietly, 'Pardon?'

'You fucking deaf or what?' said the driver. 'What the fuck do you want? We're in a hurry, for Christ's sake.'

Without warning one of the officers suddenly opened the truck door and the driver, who had his arm dangled over the open window, fell out.

The officer dragged him to his feet by his lapels, banged his head against the truck and said, 'You've got a big mouth, sonny.'

His sidekick went around the other side and opened the passenger door, gesticulating for him to get out. As he jumped to the ground the officer swept his feet from under him and he landed squarely on his back on the hard tarmac. The wind exploded from his lungs and the sound of his head cracking against the road could be heard above the passing traffic. He kneeled on his chest and the man groaned in agony.

'Got something to say?' he asked.

He pressed down harder. The man groaned.

'I can't hear you....'

The man very slowly shook his head.

'Good, then you stay there, don't move and you may see your fuckin mother again. Ok!'

He walked back to the other two.

'How are you doing?' he asked.

The officer smiled.

'Sonny here hasn't said much yet, Mike.' He nodded to the man's face which was puffing around his eyes and with blood seeping from his torn mouth.

Mike's partner moved around in front of the man and put his face directly in his.

'Perhaps he'll talk to me....?'

His knee raised viciously and the man screamed as it embedded in his testicles. He slid down the side of the truck, tears flowing from his eyes and small moaning whimpering sounds emanating from his throat.

'Now, bastard,' screamed Mike, 'now you'll fuckin' talk.....'

'Lights...'

The lights went on in the hall and the sound of the projector whirred slowly down.

'Right,' said the uniformed officer, 'we will analyse and scrutinise what we have just seen. Now I realise that you have only been at the Police Training School a few weeks, but you were hand picked as some of the most promising candidates and so you should be able to spot the major mistake in that film.'

He looked around the fifty or so recruits in front of him.

'Right, who's going to start....?'

A low murmur permeated the throng but no-one actually volunteered to be the first to speak.

'Come on now,' said the Instructor, 'there are no penalties for wrong answers.'

They relaxed a little. An arm at the back went up tentatively.

'Yes...?' the Instructor enquired.

'Er...the patrol car driver shouldn't have gone on the inside of the truck to get him to pull over.....er.'

'Good point,' said the Instructor, 'but why not?'

A hand went up. The Instructor acknowledged it but stayed with the speaker.

'Er.....because the driver should have had both hands on the wheel in case the truck tried to ram him.....er....er..'

'Good,' said the Instructor, 'bloody good.'

He looked around the hall.

'Any other points...?'

Several hands shot up. They were getting into it. He pointed.

'I think the police driver was daft to let the man fall on to the road like that. If he had hurt himself it may have looked bad for the officer...'

'What would you suggest?' asked the Instructor.

'Take him to the nearside where no-one could see and then "lean" on him.'

The Instructor shook his head slowly. Bloody animals, he thought.

'If,' said the Instructor slowly, 'the man had been "leaned on" round the other side what would have happened in Court? God help us! How did you get those injuries, the Prosecution would have asked. I was hit, sir, he would have replied. But.....' he paused for effect, '.....if he had actually fallen out of the lorry...'

He raised his palms and shrugged.

'I understand what you're saying, Sir,' said a voice in the audience, 'but if that's the case surely it is too much to expect a Court to believe that both men fell out of the lorry...?'

'You are right,' said the Instructor. 'Once was good policing, twice was carelessness.'

Another hand went up.

'Don't you fink, sir, that the officer who first approached the truck was a little careless.....? I mean they could have had shooters or anyfin....?'

'Right again. Just remember, anybody could have been in that truck. The IRA, Red Brigade, Baader Meinhoff, some nut who's just wiped a village, who knows? Always be careful.'

cont on p.27

The Party

It was a warm, gentle afternoon and there were many at the gathering. The parents sat or lazed generally and the children, dependent on their age, slept in the afternoon sun, ate or frolicked with their friends.

What a wonderful day.

The grass was dry under them, the earth cool. All around was a vast ocean of scenery. They could see for miles across the plain in every direction. The sky was a beautiful blue, the occasional cloud like a soft puff of cotton wool.

What a wonderful day.

The food, cooked or baked freshly that day, was augmented by cool wine from the chill bucket. The children were devouring cakes, trifles and other things too sweet to mention as though they had not eaten for a week.

What a wonderful day.

In the background one of the group played an instrument and sang. In due course, when too much wine had been drunk, others joined in and everyone sang and laughed and was happy.

What a wonderful day.

'Let's play charades,' said one of the children, and everyone thought it was a good idea. And so they all sat around in a big circle, but divided into two. One group against the other.

'I'll start,' said one of the children. She stood up and did the sign for a film, two words, first word. She raised her arm and moved it in front of

her and then slowly turned in a full circle indicating the expanse all around.

'Bush.'

'Plain.'

'Steering wheel,' shouted one idiot.

'Sky.'

'Car window.'

'Grass.'

'Sunroof.'

'Where we live.'

The child pointed to the person who had given the last answer and beckoned excitedly for answers in the same vein. Offers came in thick and fast and then someone shouted:

'Home.'

The child pointed urgently at the one with the right answer.

First word was obviously 'home'.

Second word. The child thought for a moment. Second syllable. She held up a finger.

'Look,' shouted one, but no one took any notice.

'Look,' he cried again, but was hardly heard above the giggles resulting from the stupid answer.

'LOOK!' he screamed and they turned to look at him.

He pointed and they moved their heads in the direction of his finger.

'Oh bloody hell!' said one, 'that's blown it!'

In the distance a cloud of dust was rising. Though the perpetrators of the dust were not yet in sight they all knew what it meant.

'Tourists!' the cry went up.

Although the males were dominant they all looked at the matriarch of the group.

'What do you want us to do?' one of the ladies asked Croneila.

Croneila, although not the oldest of the ladies, was the undisputed matriarch of the group. She had an intelligence and an.....elegance that commanded respect. She was looked up to by all, even the most dominant male.

Croneila looked down at her young daughter Keta and thought for a moment. This was Keta's ninth birthday party and Croneila was reluctant to end it. Keta, her beautiful long hair cascading over her shoulders and down her back, looked up at her expectantly.

'There are many of us,' said Croneila to the mass in front of her. 'This will appear quite wrong unless we are very clever. That being the case, this is what I want you to do.'

She explained in simple, but hurried, detail what she expected of them. Several looked pained, one or two horrified and one was actively sick.

'But....' said one male, but she looked at him in a way that only she could and he stopped immediately. His natural male instincts welled within him but he fought them. There were times when you battled, others when you used your talents for defence. He kept quiet. She nodded to him to show her respect for his discipline. The rest of them noticed the subtle gesture and the fact that yet again Croneila had demonstrated why she was matriarch. She had a strength that needed no showing.....

The Land Rover came over the brow of the hill. Peering through the open top were the tourists, some of which had obviously been there a week already as they had brownish skins, others a painful shade of lobster. They bristled with still cameras, movie cameras, microphones, binoculars, bug spray and anything else someone, from a country whose most dangerous animal was a dog on heat, could carry.

'Look, look, look,' shouted one of them. 'Look! Over there!'

They all craned their heads.

'Lions!' the cry went up. 'Lions.'

The lions were some hundred yards away and so the Land Rover turned and slowly moved in that direction. There were about thirty lions in all, mainly females, some males. Several antelope were lying prone on the ground near them, blood covering their necks. Two male lions looked in the direction of the Land Rover and stood up. They sniffed the wind. One raised his head, opened his massive jaw and, giving out a ferocious roar, moved towards the tourists. The Land Rover stopped.

'We have to be very careful,' said one of the guides, 'the lions have killed but not yet eaten and so they will still be excitable and very hungry. That makes them incredibly dangerous.'

Several of the tourists quickly sat down and peered at the lions through the windows.

The experienced guide felt uneasy. There was something dreadfully wrong here. Dreadfully wrong. In the trees close to the lions were three leopards. Three leopards! Leopards, he knew, were solitary animals and would not be near lions. And the hardly eaten antelopes! Why? Why hardly eaten? He suddenly realised what had happened. The lions had ambushed the antelopes at the nearby watering hole, dragged them here, but had refused to eat them. That meant only one thing. The watering hole was poisoned. The lions knew it, the leopards knew it. He scanned again into the bright sunlight and saw, a distance away, but waiting patiently, a pack of jackals. This was a war about to happen. The predators needed food and they were going to devour themselves. And they had stumbled into the middle of it. Oh Christ!

The male lions were getting closer to the Land Rover and the guide knew what was going to happen. He looked across and saw other lions moving towards them, slowly creating a circle.

'Hand me that gun,' he said to one of the tourists who, in the excitement and eagerness to please, promptly dropped it over the side of the vehicle. The guide looked at him in despair.

'Sorry.....' said the tourist sheepishly.

There were now about fifteen lions circling the vehicle and the guide knew they had to get away; however it had to be done gently as a running lion would smash any of the windows and be in the midst of them in seconds.

'That way,' he pointed to the driver, 'gently.'

The Land Rover edged forward to be confronted by an enormous male straight in its path.

'Keep going,' said the guide.

The lion jumped up on the bonnet and stuck its head against the windscreen, inches from the terrified driver. It roared and its large, strong, vicious teeth were plain to all. Tourists screamed. Another lion batted the side of the vehicle with a large paw. Occupants sunk to the floor in terror. The lion on the bonnet decided to have a chew of the windscreen wipers, which promptly broke off, and it leapt after them to the relief of the driver who desperately needed a change of underpants. Seeing the opportunity the guide pointed and screamed to the driver:

'Go! Go! Go!'

And the driver put his foot to the floor, the Land Rover lurching forward along the rutted plain. The lions pursued but they were no match for the acceleration and continuing speed of the vehicle although one did manage, for a second, to hang on to the back by its claws. The driver went flat out, for as long as he could, to get away from the scene. It was at least a hundred miles to camp and there was no way he was stopping anywhere. If anybody needed the toilet it was tough luck!

The lions went back to the area they had occupied before. Their aggression etched in to their faces, they took their original positions. The dominant male looked at another, then at the others that had been involved and then he convulsed with laughter, tears streaming down his eyes. They all laughed hysterically, their stomachs heaving with mirth and they lay on their backs kicking their legs in the air.

The antelope moved from their lying position and stood up, shaking themselves. A baboon swung down from a tree and, with the leaves she had brought, started to wipe the tomato sauce off the necks of the antelopes.

A lioness opened her jaw and out popped several squirrels.

'Christ,' said one. 'You should change your toothpaste.'

Three other lionesses moved and from a small pit in the middle of them emerged more animals. The pack of jackals moved back to join them and so did the leopards. In due course all the animals had taken their original positions and the food was brought out. The fake tree stump that housed the fridge was raided for the MacDonald big burgers and Kentucky fried chicken. The microwave was plugged in and everything heated up. Cool wine was brought from the other fridge in the large termite nest sticking up behind them.

They gathered again and continued charades.

'Me first,' said one of the baboons.

One word. Not a book or a film or a play or anything. Just a word.

The baboon jumped up and down, pointed, looked terrified, hid its eyes behind its hands and rushed over to a small depression where it pretended to go to the loo.

'Tourist,' shouted one.

The baboon pointed in confirmation and everyone laughed and clapped.....

And so the day continued. As Croneila had decreed, each animal, no matter that they were usually hunter and hunted, enjoyed the company of the others. This was the one day in the year when it happened.

It was Keta's birthday.

Germans

Just had an unfortunate altercation with a German couple who were, in mock Churchillian English, accusing the English of being not only stupid, but dumb. According to their childish remarks you could sell the English anything. I, of course, interjected, telling them plainly that not only were we not stupid but we also won the war. 'What room are you in?' they asked as though that had anything to do with anything. 'Bottom floor, overlooking the road,' says I. They fell about laughing.

Were a little disappointed at Halfpenny Green airport as Concorde did not arrive to collect us as the Travel Agent led us to believe it would. I put in quick phone call to them and was relieved to hear that the extra we had paid could go partly towards our next holiday which should also be on Concorde. It shows how clever the English were to build a plane that not only is very fuel-efficient and low noise but can also land at small airports.

The hotel is quite nice but it would appear that, due to translation difficulties, the five star description was not of the hotel but the star cluster you can see from our room. We are assured that even if it rains the hole in the ceiling will let in little water.

We went on our first excursion today (it was very expensive). We got up very early in the morning and, with some food in little Tesco plastic bags, we trekked for several hours. As we neared the city outskirts the

guide told us that we should turn back as, due to the poor pace of one of our party in a wheelchair, we would not get back in time for tea. When we protested that we had not seen any wolves he explained that, should we be outside the city limits after dark, our lives would be in considerable danger due to their formidable strength and voracious appetite. We thanked him for his foresight and I organised a whip round to help him and (he had reluctantly told us) his extremely bright child who he was trying to send to Oxford when he had raised enough money. I told him that when I got home I would start an appeal to raise all of the twenty thousand necessary for his son's education.

The other day we went to the beach for some swimming. We had only been in the water a few minutes when a local rushed in and pulled me out quickly. It would appear I was about to be eaten by a shark! I thanked this poor person and gave him some money (indeed he accidentally walked off with my wallet but I am sure he will be back tomorrow, putting his life at risk heroically saving other people).

Buying an ice cream here is quite quaint. You tell them the flavour then they ask you what nationality you are? They then take out a calculator. It would appear the ice creams are so expensive because they are the milk from the local cow fish. These fish are only found here and you need at least fifty to make an ice cream. Incredibly the local men dive down very deep and actually milk them on the seabed. The divers can hold their breath for up to half an hour and some of them have been doing it for so long they have webbed feet and gills.

Anyhow, time is flying and we have to get some sleep for another early start tomorrow when we go on a big adventure. The safari into the mountains will be very exciting and our guide tells us that if we are lucky we may see a lioness with cubs although it is actually their time to hibernate. I hope we are lucky.

Ted the Teacher

Ted shifted his position slightly to ease his neck, aching from the constant vigil and height of awareness. He scanned the area, making sure there were no problems, looking for the extra concentration, glassy eyes or vacant stare into space. He hated the telepath cheaters with a vengeance. They had only recently started to be a problem and there were very few of them in the whole system but one was enough to cock up the averages, and you had to have the right averages. If the score was too high you were pandering to an elite strata and you needed to be 'modified', too low and you were obviously either being a slackster or trying to bring down the system with your proletariat views. You couldn't win!

At the end of the exam a buzzer sounded and he quickly pressed the button to lock his cage. You couldn't be too careful in this day and age. If one of them had smuggled in a 73X or something like that, well.....thankfully the sensors were pretty damn good and located them pretty quickly... long before they could create any mayhem.

He waited a few minutes for them to have long gone and then he unlocked the cage and went, via the secure corridor, to the staff room.

There were others already in and he viewed them with pity. They looked like ghosts, too much stress, too much work, too little time off, too little pay. He grabbed a chair, sat down with his cup of cha with just a hint of sedative and his body moulded to it. It felt like being with an old friend from a long time ago.

A long time ago..... How Ted yearned to be back in the good old days when he first started teaching. It was great!

It was just after the year 2000, over thirty years ago, and he remembered it as if it were yesterday. He enjoyed going to school and so did his colleagues. The children were bright, cheerful and happy with hardly ever a bad word said about them. In those days, he remembered with a smile, the most stressful thing was going on holiday and missing school. Teachers actually argued with each other about who should man the school in the holidays, they were so reluctant to leave.

The system then was a good one. The Prime Minister of the day (he couldn't remember quite who but he thought it started with a 'B' – Briggs? Bright? Brown – it didn't really matter, they were all superb) was totally committed to the education system and pumped zillions of pounds into it, raising standards, improving education, creating a better educated and a more socially coherent individual. The males went in as boys and came out as perfect young men ready to contribute in any way possible to the commercial system. The females likewise went in as girls and then became mothers, doctors, accountants, leaders of industry, polar explorers, deep-sea divers, even astronauts. Indeed anything they wanted to be. Some even did it all at the same time!

He sighed and inwardly puffed himself out with pride. Those were the days when everyone was behind you, urging you on to ever greater things; for the good of the pupil, for the good of the system, for the good of education!

At that time he taught English (he now taught Language 8,001,002 – or put another way, European Language Harmonisation Directive Number 8,001,002). This had been introduced in relation to European Harmonisation Directive Number 7,987,135 which, in essence, stated that all member states should have a language that did not in any way have precedence over any other member state's language (this had been passed in the early hours of one extremely cold snowy morning when

the representatives of Britain, France and Germany were warmly tucked in bed and a representative of one of the smaller Baltic States had put it through for a bet. She won the bet and since then everyone had to speak Harmonised European).

Unfortunately it also meant that more was less as the main tenets of each language were dropped and replaced with a sort of European shorthand. Initially there were jokes about it would 'harm' the pupils but in fact it turned out not to be a joke. So much accentuated grunting was taking place that Harmonised European had become 'Harm' to those who dare whisper it. Of course 'European' no longer actually applied since the Russians and Japanese had joined but what the heck.

Whispering was what one did nowadays if you were 'critical' of something, otherwise the Department for Integral Results in Education (DIRE – 'be our buddy, do your study') picked it up on the monitoring equipment and you were 'reassigned' to another 'post' (the younger recruits thought it meant another job and it came as quite a shock when they found out it actually was a post).

He looked across the room and saw his friend Clarkley enter. Clarkley was a huge man with a grizzled beard and air of intellectualism (he called it intellectuality) that belied his wonderful kind nature. Clarkley had a way of understanding one's position with total empathy, finding common ground with everyone and coming up with a solution that made everyone happy. Everyone said that had he been in politics he would have made a good Minister.

He looked up at the cameras on the walls and then rubbed his stomach, touched his nose and smoothed his hair. Clarkley appeared to ignore him but the movement of his left foot by fifteen degrees to the south indicated that he was well though a touch hung over, had played badly at darts last night (losing 4 – 1), was impatient to go home and get his fishing kit and would meet Ted about 6:30 by the north shore of the lake where the weed was thickest and, rumour had it, there was a giant

pike. Clarkley always was a touch terse.

His mind wandered again to the good old days. The magnificent sports facilities, well-stocked libraries, abundance of superb teachers and resources to back them up. And the field trips – he loved the field trips. He remembered one year they had trekked up Annapurna with some boys and girls. It had gone well and then, who knows why, it snowed quite heavily. In fact very heavily. At that point it became obvious that short skirts and high heels were of no use and so they had to make their way down again. Of course, not having been there before he had no idea what a crevasse was and it was quite perplexing when one minute you had thirty pupils and the next you had ten. Quite perplexing! But no matter. At the end of the trip there were still four pupils left with nothing wrong with them other than a touch of frostbite in their fingers and toes and everyone totally understanding. The thirty parents, from what he could remember, had had a whip round for him so that he could convalesce in Barbados for a month.

In fact most parents were an absolute delight, helping wherever they could and regularly chastising their children if the grades were not good enough – which was rare.

Those were the days.....

The bracelet on his wrist emitted a small shock to tell him that break was over and he had exactly two minutes so he shuffled down the safe passageway to his next class. Before he opened the door he activated the scanner to see if anything was waiting to detonate behind it. Nothing. He exhaled. As he was just about to enter, his years of experience made him hesitate for just a second and a sophisticated, but poorly constructed, remote nerve dart flashed past him. He saw it embed close to him and he scanned it for DNA as they hadn't got the brains to keep their bodily detritus off the missiles. He recognised the signature on the scanner and rushed into the room, into his cage, activated the lock, found the console with the individual cage buttons on and pushed one.

A 'pupil' (the educational term for mindless thug) screamed in agony as the microwaves gave him a quick fry and his hair smouldered. They never learned.

He gave them their project for the session, which was technically the 'Understanding of Tectonic Plate Theory in relation to the rise and fall of Venetia' but was actually how to spell three and four letter words (with difficulty).

Unlike previous governments this one cooked the exam figures and so it hardly made any difference what you taught them as long as it kept them off the streets for a few hours each day.

When they were 'settled' he secured their cages and settled back, happy in the knowledge that he was safe in his cell, they were stuck in theirs until released and life went on.

Not life as he would have planned it, certainly not the idyll of the early 2000s, but life did indeed go on.

His mind wandered back again to those halcyon days. He remembered as though it was yesterday the way they used to look forward to.....who was it now?.....he remembered they all used to put on their best suits.....ah yes, the people from Ofput (The Office for Pupil Utilisation and Tabulation....or something like that).

What days they were. Up they would come from some city or other and it was a joy to see them. Whilst ostensibly they were there to 'Utilise' and 'Tabulate' because literally every school was academically excellent, they always arrived with huge amounts of gifts for the staff and presents for the pupils. It was like a day with a favourite uncle. The staff and the people from Ofput would allow the children to go early and then they would head for the enormous and wonderfully manicured playing field, with its vast array of sports equipment scattered around, to be greeted by a sumptuous feast laid on by the local parents in appreciation. The parents would serve food and drinks of all varieties and the merriment would continue far into the night until many were

quite tiddly. Indeed it was on one such occasion that he met Mrs Ted and the resultant young Ted was conceived. Mrs Ted was the widow of a Rottweiler breeder and unfortunately had acquired many of the breed's characteristics. Ted hadn't heard from Mrs Ted for many years, literally since the day she ran off with a drug company rep who, it was rumoured, had found the secret of getting the sexually predatory but emotionally unstable Mrs Ted on an even keel by lacing her drink each morning with one of the company's sedatives. Unfortunately they'd split up when the rep lost his job and the sedatives dried up. He survived the axe attack (just) but his lack of sleep (he wasn't sure whether he was going to be attacked or ravaged) made him call it a day.

Ted ducked as a 327z hurtled past him, its homing device obviously faulty. 'Dolt,' he thought as he pressed the button of the cage of the assailant. His hair went vertical and his eyes bulged and then the timer stopped and he sank back. For good measure he pressed the button again and the 'pupil' shook violently for a bit and then lay still on the floor. This wasn't actually allowed but some things needed doing.

He giggled to himself; at times this was better than the old days.....and hit the button again out of pure malice.

Mr. Borderline

He entered the room and sat diagonally opposite the other solitary chair. The room that had been his home for one hour a week, holidays and illness excluded, for eleven years. Books lined the shelves; Masturbation - second hand experience?, Id or Idiot, Freud or Fraud, Rape - Every woman's dream?.....

His eyes wandered from the shelves of books across the Spartan walls of the psychotherapist's room to the window of the seventh floor room. In the distance he saw the clock on the tower of the local prison; it was one minute to six.

In a moment his deliverer would arrive, to lighten his load, to claw him back from hell.

In all the years success had been gradual and painstaking but nevertheless apparent. His desire to rape, loot and pillage had all but subsided. Rapes indeed had become a thing of the past, well almost, whilst looting was now bordering on the petty, and pillage non-existent. He no longer bore the guilt of the death of his father, whilst accepting that he was the one that actually put the electric fire in the bath. And it was now true that his feelings towards his mother had softened. No longer the denial of her existence, now an almost warm 'Fuck off' should they happen to meet. Yes, improvements indeed.

The door opened and Rupert Borderline, renowned psychiatrist, walked in.

'Michael,' he said, extending an arm.

'Rupert.'

They shook hands warmly and sat down.

Michael looked across at Rupert and wondered what to say next. He knew that Borderline would say nothing, that wasn't the game, and so he had to think of something. But what? After eleven years, original opening gambits were a bit thin on the ground.

'Gave a woman some ear rings the other day,' he said.

Borderline looked at him impassively.

'Came in both ears....'

He grinned inanely.

Borderline said nothing.

Long moments passed. Michael tried again.

'I was wondering the other day whether I was a sadist with masochistic tendencies or a masochist with sadistic tendencies..?'

'What were you doing when you thought this?' whispered Borderline.

'Burying the cat.'

'It had died?'

'No..'

'Then why bury it?'

'To put out the flames.'

'The flames...?'

'From the fire.'

'Fire...?'

'Next door's rabbits.'

'Rabbits...?'

'They were cold....'

He rubbed his hands feverishly then blew on them.

Borderline nodded slowly, his eyes deep in primeval thought.

'Perhaps you think I am cold,' he said.

Michael saw an instant image of a snowman before him.

'I don't think so.'

'Perhaps you would like to burn me...?' asked Borderline.

Michael's face was impassive as he saw himself pouring gallon after gallon of petrol on the flaming, screaming form of Borderline.

'Certainly not..' he said with complete conviction.

Borderline said nothing. He closed his eyes and let his fingers go up to his temples, rubbing gently. Silence enveloped the room for several minutes.

'Did you see the footy match at the weekend?' asked Michael.

No response.

'Great match, one end of the field to the other, and Gazza.... bloody hell, what a mover.....'

'Up and down the field?' queried Borderline.

'Yeah, bloody magic.'

'And....' he looked questioningly. 'Gazza?...' Michael nodded, 'is a mover?'

Michael nodded.

Borderline nodded imperceptibly to himself.

'You like garters...?' he asked.

'Garters..?'

'Yes, you know, they hold up women's stockings.'

'Never thought about it.'

'And yet you say that garters, moving up and down, are a wonderful sight.'

'I did...?'

'Unconsciously, yes.'

Michael tried hard to make the jump from Gazza to garters. A look of intellectual searching spread across his face to hide his lack of understanding. Nevertheless there was mileage in the subject.

'Would this therefore demonstrate a repressed female hostility coupled with latent homosexual tendencies...?' he asked.

Borderline said nothing.

'Garters...' mused Michael, 'garters...'

His imagination went to a woman's inner thigh. His hand had slowly, caressingly moved to her garter, beyond which he knew were incredible delights. As he gently undid the fastenings she moaned a little in resistance but it was a facade, a stimulus. He slid the garter and stocking down her proffered leg and then repeated it with the other.

'Rip my panties off..' she whispered hoarsely, 'rip them...'

He put his hand inside and ripped them from her and she convulsed in orgasm. He undid his zip, unleashing the dreaded one-eyed snake. It slithered out, looking this way and that, rearing up to its full height. It looked him full in his eyes.

'Well...?' said the one eyed snake.

'Fetch,' he commanded.

'Shouldn't that be "come"?'

'Whatever...'

The one-eyed snake moved over to the other side of the room to get a proper run-up. It revved up its engine, its two little wheels spinning madly, as it lined up on the appropriate orifice.

'Three...' it said, 'two...one...'

Luxor

In Egypt, in the ancient city of Luxor, there stands the remains of the fabulous Karnak Temple erected by succeeding Egyptian Pharaohs and spanning 2000 years. Over the years each succeeding Pharaoh has tried to outdo the previous dynasty and so the monument to wealth and power has become ever larger, ever more spread, ever more grandiose. Time and visiting marauders have depleted the site but it still remains an impressive valediction to perhaps the greatest civilisation the world has ever seen.

Nowadays, each night in the Karnak Temple, the tourist authorities put on 'light shows' and guide tourists through the history and glory of those Pharaohs and how such industry was, flawlessly and with great efficiency, turned into architectural wonders.

But as I sat there listening to all this under the clear Luxor starlit sky, I thought, was it really like that?

Or perhaps it was like this.....

And lo the mighty Hariramasden IV did look at his mighty palace and say unto his many wives, 'Lo, I am no longer happy here. We are now much wealthier than we were and the tribes to the East are poorer and so verily we must move and conquer other lands therefore to find a new and impressive palace in which to reside and thence to invite King Heesacreep II who will gaze in wonder and fawn accordingly before setting off and telling the world of our new palace.'

So he sent out an edict telling his subjects far and wide of his search for new lands and he was visited by an ancient tribe called Agentuscommissunus who said, 'O mighty Lord, we know of a place that is just waiting to be exploited in the far off land of Culdisacus.'

'Whereabouts?' asked Hariramasden IV, but they were not exactly sure, but eight gold talents jogged their memory.

So Hariramasden IV set off with his vast armies to conquer Culdisacus but after many months of invading, being seen off, invading again, he eventually had to retreat back to his own kingdom as the massive advantage of the dreaded armies of the Gazzumpites gained the land.

Hariramasden IV returned home and promptly executed the Agentuscommissunus and took back his eight gold talents. Summoning the Head of the tribe he demanded that they help him again and again they did but it was still no good and so he killed the next Agentuscommissunus.

No one else would help him and then a clever member of the tribe approached mighty (and dangerous) Hariramasden IV with an idea.

'Mighty Pharaoh,' he said. 'I will find you a new land with a magnificent palace and it will not cost one gold talent.....if you do not like it.'

Several months and many false alarms later the man returned with a wonderful idea.

'Divine Presence,' he droned, 'there is a vast empire many leagues hence and the King is in the middle of building a vast palace. Why don't you invade now and then you can finish the Palace as you would wish it?'

'How many bathrooms does it have currently?' asked Hariramasden IV.

'Eighty seven,' replied the Headman.

Hariramasden IV thought for a moment about his fifteen wives and forty children and knew he would never get near a bathroom.

'Invade,' commanded Hariramasden IV.

They marched for many months and then they surrounded the empire of Plottusthreeus. Beating off all other pretenders Hariramasden IV camped his army, servants and family in a caravanus temporarus for a few weeks so that the building could be finished.

The next day Hariramasden IV went to the half finished building to discuss his new plans with the builders not only to be met by inactivity but no workers to actually be active. Finding a lone soul he enquired where everyone was?

''Tis the holiday, sor,' the man said in a strange tongue.

'Which holiday is that?'

'The one we take when we need a holiday, sor. This one is the annual camel races and lasts for one week.'

The mighty Pharaoh told the builders to assemble before him at dawn in seven days' time, which they did. Of the twenty seven thousand expected, twenty thousand were still in bed (a loose term), five thousand had been lost, one thousand had died of 'a strong potion', seven hundred and fifty were still betting on races that had finished, two hundred had decided to return to their ancient land across the sea and the remaining fifty stood before him.

The next day the leader of the builders was summoned before the omnipotent Pharaoh who explained what was wanted and it had to be completed in six months at a price of 18,000 silver talents. The man shook his head gently.

'That is my price,' reiterated Hariramasden IV, 'and it will be so.'

The men set to work and three months later a quarter of the work had been done. Hariramasden IV summoned the leader to him and demanded an explanation.

'It's the sqidgle in lokrup which is turning the fllarke down to ruble,' said the man.

'What,' said the Pharaoh to his assistant Righthandmanimus, 'is he talking about?' but he was also perplexed.

The man repeated the problem; the Pharaoh was no wiser and so asked how it could be put right.

'We could pling the dufrey with furt at a cost of about 3000 talents which should do the trick,' said the man gravely.

The Pharaoh gave up and agreed to the extra money. Anything to get out of the bloody caravanus temporarus!

Work went well and then one day all the builders vanished in the night only to return five weeks later as they had had to 'go to another job'.

Eight months into the project and the wives of Hariramasden IV were giving him continual grief about the living conditions in the caravanus temporarus and the mighty Pharaoh did indeed know they had a point. He was covered in dust, tired, irritable and wanted to kill all around him. But if he did, who would do the work?

He summoned the Head Builder.

'When,' demanded Hariramasden IV in his most pharaohotic voice, 'will it be finished?'

Seeming not to hear, the Head Builder said, 'We will have to pull down the west wall as it is not safe.'

'You have only just put it up,' spluttered the Pharaoh, 'how can it not be safe?'

'Bad footings, mighty Pharaoh, put in by the previous builders.'

'But you were the previous builders,' thundered Hariramasden IV.

'Technically, yes,' replied the man, 'but of course that was another contract, doing work for someone else, to another set of drawings, in a different season, using different sand.....'

The Pharaoh did not know whether to laugh or cry.

'What will that mean?' he asked in a rather pathetic, I give up sort of voice.

'Another seven weeks and 3000 talents.'

The Pharaoh did a quick calculation and realised that his original financial estimate was now just a dream but he said, in a subdued voice, 'Ok.'

The day the great palace (Dunromeicus) was finished occasioned great celebrations. True, it had taken eighteen months and not six and 45,000 talents and not 18,000 but what a marvellous Palace he had. It would be the talking point for the whole empire. Lords and Princes were invited from all points of the Empire and they assembled before the mighty, all-powerful Hariramasden IV. After the speeches and presents had been presented Hariramasden IV took them down to the new baths where all the guests could disrobe and frolic in the hot scented water. None went in and looked pensive as they stood at the baths' edge. Hariramasden IV went over to see what was happening to be met by empty baths and he could see more and more cracks appearing as the water seeped away. From another direction people were quickly emerging from the latest in plumbing technology holding their noses.

'Get me the builders!' screamed the most powerful Pharaoh ever to have lived. But for some reason they did not answer their mobilusfonicus.

The Neighbour

He watched as their solitary cottage almost became a veritable semi. Their dream, their idyll, going - being swept away by the monstrosity before them. They had bought the little derelict cottage several years earlier. It had been a dream of his wife's rather than his - indeed at times he felt it was his nightmare on those occasions when she nagged, which was frequently. However they had rebuilt it to its present state, and that, with its incredible views of the huge lake, had made it seem like paradise (if you excluded the wife).

But then it had happened, HE had arrived. One day a Rolls Royce had arrived, with a limo just behind. HE and his common woman, dripping gold and fur, had got out, surveyed the area and left. Just like that. The next thing they knew men arrived with those hard yellow hats and started measuring and putting stakes in the ground.

'What are you doing?' he had asked them in dismay.

The new house. It was going to be a new house! In his line of sight to the lake! No fucking way!

'Whose new house?'

It was going to be Mr Gianelli's new house. His stomach was fractionally ahead of his logic and he felt a little queasy.

'Well....?' she said as he went back to the house, 'well....?'

It was not so much a question as an introduction to an interrogation.

He explained.

'Right,' she said, 'you know what to do.'

He nodded, not actually having a clue what she meant. It was always better to nod, never to question.

'You can go to the local council offices tomorrow and get it stopped!'

Now he knew what to do.

'I'm sorry, sir,' said the official, 'but there's nothing we can do, unless of course you ask for it to be referred to the Minister of the Environment, but I'm afraid it would be unlikely to succeed and cost several thousand pounds in solicitors' fees....'

He went home and explained.

After several 'humphs' she said:

'Right, you know what you have to do....'

The next time Mr Gianelli arrived to view his, now nearing completion, eight up and eight down five bathroom one pool two courts and jacuzzi cottage he was intercepted.

'Er, excuse me....' and he jumped back, startled.

His quiet entry had not been noticed and he was immediately grabbed by assistant number one who slammed him against a wall whilst grabbing a stiletto blade from a sheath inside his sock.

'It's ok, Gino,' HE said, 'it's only my neighbour, Mr.....?'

Gino put him down and smoothed his hair for him.

'Er... Crumb, er, Cecil Crumb, pronounced Cee-cil,' he stammered.

'How can I help you, Cee-cil?' asked Mr Gianelli amiably.

'I realise it's a little late,' he said, 'but could you possibly put your house.....' he turned and pointed over his shoulder, 'more over there?'

Gianelli smiled.

'Why not?' he said. 'It will cost no more than another...' he looked at Alberto, 'one and a half, maybe two hundred grand.....?'

Alberto nodded.

'You got that kind of money, Cee-cil?'

He looked aghast.

'Meee...?' he croaked.

Gianelli grinned again.

'You want I should pay?' he said quietly.

Cecil nodded several times appreciatively. Gianelli nodded once and Gino ejected Cecil in a heap outside.

He explained, she thought for a moment, she said:

'You know what you have to do!'

He went back again to the house.

'Look, Mr Gianelli,' he said, almost with authority, 'if you don't take a more reasonable, and should I say less aggressive, attitude towards the problem I am afraid we shall have no alternative to resort to other means.....'

It suddenly occurred to him there was no 'we'.

'Problem? What problem?'

Gianelli nodded and Cecil landed outside.

He explained, she 'mmmmmmed', then said.....

The next day Cecil spent long hours shovelling unused sand from the itinerant's house to a point just inside their drive to be. It was, they believed, a noble and symbolic gesture.

Cecil dreaded the return of Mr Gianelli.

Several days later they returned but to Cecil's amazement no one paid him a visit. He waited. Nothing. Perhaps they had respected their stand. That night after his Horlicks and, as it was a weekday, the allotted peck on the cheek, he drifted into a beautiful deep sleep only to be awoken by an enormous noise outside their bedroom window. He rushed to the windows and pulled back the curtains but could see nothing. He peered but could make out nothing but the bare earth for miles. Bare earth? For miles? He opened the window and the excavated topsoil rained in. He had no need to explain.

She had a Council of War. When it was finished she called him out of the garden.

'You know what to do....'

He didn't know, but he did know that whatever it was it looked like war, and he was in the front line!

The next day, as it was a veritable gale, he was dispatched to break all their windows. Several days later, by coincidence, a Tornado fighter flew about fifty feet above their house and shattered all theirs. She said it was coincidence, the Ministry of Defence said they had not been anywhere near, he thought Mr Gianelli had powerful friends.

When the Gianellis' swimming pool was finished and filled for a trial test, he was sent to drill a hole in the bottom. Two days later they had no water and for a further two weeks they had to ferry water from the lake in their car.

He realised all battles had their setbacks but.....

The Gianellis' electricity was switched on. He threw a metal rod over the power lines and blew all their fuses. Two days later they found their own electricity off and their pylon down. For three weeks the Electricity Board denied all knowledge of having a pylon anywhere near them.

It called, she realised, for drastic measures.

'Rats?' he said. 'Where am I going to get rats?'

She hadn't actually thought of where, only that he should. She reverted to plan B.

'Locusts?' he said. 'Where am I going to get locusts?'

Plan C came immediately to mind.

'Rivers of blood?' He started to worry for her sanity. She had always been a pain but this.....

She was half way through 'Kill the first born...' when he had an idea.

When the Gianellis next arrived he went to see Mr Gianelli.....

Cecil had never been so happy. His new wife was lovely in a caring, giving way and their neighbours were kind and considerate. The phone rang and he picked it up.

'Hello? How are you....good, good. Pardon?...love to, love to.....thank you,' and he hung up.

He shouted over his shoulder.

'The neighbours are having a barbeque around the pool, love, and would like us to join them. I said we'd be right down. OK?'

'Lovely,' came the reply, 'I'll just get the swimming things.'

This was the life, he thought, much, much better.

Sorry? What's that? How? How did I.....? Oh, I see.

'Firstly I went to see Mr Gianelli and told him if he didn't knock his house down I would arrange for something dreadful to happen to his wife. They found mine floating in the lake about a week later. Terrible tragedy, terrible,' his eyes smiled.

'Secondly, I moved.....'

A Difficult Par Three

He was standing on the first tee watching four figures move farther away from him down the fairway. Irritation swept through him, playing golf on his own he knew that he would have to wait ages on each hole because of the four in front. They would feel his irritation and also realise it would be better to let him through, but as all golfers know that a single golfer has no standing on a course they would never let him through. It was silly really but as golfers are basically hypocrites it was understandable.

'Another one of those bloody days,' he thought and reached down into the pocket of his golf bag for a tee and ball.

He teed the ball and after taking one or two practice swings he stood behind the ball, selected a point about a yard in front of it and then moving back addressed the ball, focussing his mind and body on the task. He mentally made his body one unit and then scanned it for any obvious areas of tension; this completed he 'saw' the trajectory of the ball in his mind and started to take the club away in the backswing.

A shout permeated his brain.

'Excuse me.'

He looked behind him and saw about forty yards away a shambling figure with arm raised.

'Are you on your own, may I join you?'

He sighed, stood back from the ball and waited for the other to arrive.

'Please do,' he said, 'I'm behind a four-ball anyway and would enjoy the company.'

Repeating the sentence in his head to check whether the words sounded as false as when he had said them, he changed his driver from his right hand to his left and moved forward to greet his new partner.

'Pleased to meet you,' he said. 'Ray Thomson.'

'My pleasure,' the other replied. 'Desmond Maine.'

Ray watched as Des rummaged in what appeared to be a hired set of clubs for one to his liking, then addressed an imaginary ball on the ground. Addressing, Ray felt, was perhaps a polite way of describing what was in essence an almost physical impossibility. Des fixed his eyes to the ground and placed his club near the spot, his whole body stiffening, then raising the club to the sky he did a pirouette on the spot as the club circled him as it came down.

'Not played for a while,' he said in a manner that suggested that the swing was only fractionally less than perfect.

Ray looked down the fairway and realised the others were long gone.

'Shall I go first?' he asked and, hearing no dissent, went back to his ball, repeated the set-up procedure and hit the ball down the fairway. Des, to the amazement of Ray, repeated his practice swing exactly and also went down the fairway.

They put their clubs in their bags and moved forward as one, pulling their trolleys after them.

As they reached Des's ball first, Ray had an opportunity to clearly take in his opponent. He felt a little embarrassed as he noted the brown golfing shoes that were actually ordinary shoes, the blue trousers with rumpled creases and the holed red baggy sweater and he wondered whether the rules actually allowed such garb.

Des, as if trying to prove that his first shot had indeed been a miracle, almost missed the ball with his club and it flew thirty yards right. Ray hit a good second and finished just short of the green.

In due course, after both holing out at the par four, Ray had taken five due to a poor chip and Des taken eight due to a poor most things.

They walked to the next tee.

'You a member here?' asked Ray to make conversation.

'Yes.'

'Long?'

'Quite a while. You?'

'About two years.'

Ray, who really didn't care, but felt that if you were going to have company you really should talk, carried on:

'Live locally?'

'Over that way,' he said, raising his arm in the direction of a large tree in the distance, which Ray assumed was only an indicator and not actually his habitat.

The second hole, a short par five, they played relatively uneventfully, Ray making par and Des, who had tacked down the fairway again, making eight.

'What do you do for a living?' enquired Ray, feeling as though he was being dragged into the maw of a conversational black-hole from which no information escaped.

Des mumbled something then got out his driver and started to swish.

'What did you say you did?'

Des looked uneasy.

'I'm a psychiatrist.'

'Oh?' said Ray, noticeably perking up at the possibility of an interesting conversation.

'And you?'

'Sales rep, computers. Need one, home, business, whatever?'

'Er.. no, thank you. We do have them for the patients but it's not my department.'

He paused.

'You'll have to excuse me,' said Des, 'but it can be difficult when you say you're a psychiatrist, people want instant therapy on the course and tell you all manner of personal details. It's amazing,' he looked perplexed, '..... to tell such things to an absolute stranger.'

'Where do you, er, whatever the work is, at?'

Des smiled.

'The word may be practice but I do little of that now. I'm mainly involved with psychiatric hospitals on a consultancy basis.'

Ray carried on in a rush as though this was the key to keeping Des talking.

'Like that one about fourteen or fifteen miles away? What do you actually have to do?'

'It's difficult to explain,' said Des, looking uneasy again, 'even to people with a knowledge of mental illness, so if you'll forgive me I won't bore you with the details and I can also concentrate on the golf. I don't want to be beaten by too many.'

He let a small smile crinkle his face as though to show he should be forgiven.

They continued for several holes with Ray having the odd par and Des having one exceptional hole which he only bogied. Conversation however had still been intermittent with Ray running a gamut of subjects from the weather to football with little success. He therefore returned to the only thought provoking subject he could think of.

'Isn't it dangerous working at those hospitals?' he said in a dismissive way that tried to suggest that the topic was obviously of no import.

'Pardon?'

'The hospitals where you consult - aren't they dangerous?'

Des paused as though considering how to evade the question, resignation then invading his face.

'You have to understand that dangerous is a relative word. For instance some of the people there may occasionally break furniture, but a golfer occasionally breaks a club over his knee in temper or throws it

in the lake. To both people it is natural at that point in time so to do. To an observer the furniture breaker is dangerous and should be sedated, the golfer expressing frustration. Take another example; two patients are squabbling over a possession and it develops into a small fight, conversely two boxers have a large fight to decide on the eventual ownership of a large purse. In the first instance both will be punished, in the second both will be feted. Can you see the contradiction? Violence is measured not by the participants but by the onlookers, or put another way, by society.'

They had reached the thirteenth tee and sat down on a bench which looked out across a large pond, their next obstacle. A par three, one hundred and ninety yards the first ninety of which was water.

'But,' persisted Ray, 'I read of people escaping who are dangerous. It says they are dangerous, mad axe-man and all that.'

Anger flared in Des's eyes. He made a large effort to relax his tightening muscles. His voice came out controlled but softer and slower as though explaining to a naughty child.

'It is very rare,' he said, 'for someone to go around killing just for fun. Usually if they have killed it was for a very good reason but unfortunately society deemed that in their eyes the reason was not good enough and they were judged insane and dangerous. It's obvious that if someone goes home and finds their wife in bed with another man, their wife,' he said, emphasising the point, 'the only thing they ever really loved in their whole lives, that they should say "sorry to interrupt but perhaps all three of us could discuss this over a pot of tea?"'

He stopped for a moment and looked down at the floor.

'Do you understand what I'm saying?' he said, raising his voice. 'His own wife!'

He stared at Ray with cold eyes. His hands were clenched and his knuckles white.

'You can call them many things,' he said, 'dangerous, monsters, axe-men, whatever you like but you would be doing so out of ignorance. Some have been put away for doing what other people have received medals for. Society says they are mad, insane, mental but society doesn't understand, it doesn't understand!'

His face had lost its colour and he knew he was about to lose his temper. He should know better. He of all people knew the consequences of loss of control.....

The body had been found in the pond late that day and immediately identified.

'It's a tragedy,' said the hospital director, 'a bloody tragedy. On a golf course, for Christ's sake, a bloody golf course!'

He walked up and down the room.

'Can you believe it,' he said, 'it's so bloody bizarre.. A multiple killer on his way to us, escapes from the police, steals clothes and a bag of golf clubs and plays golf with perhaps the only person in this country who is good enough and cares enough to help him.'

He sat at his desk.

'Christ, Des Maine cared so much, I've known him get furious if someone even treated the subject lightly!'

Togetherness

Tonight was the night. Pussy night. It was called pussy night, he thought, because on a Saturday night it was always late when you got in and therefore you always saw the 'cat's eyes' on the roads. He'd got the phrase 'pussy night' from the Mike Hammer private detective novels that he consumed over and over again and he imagined the American roads covered with cat's eyes and lit up like Blackpool when a car brushed them with its lights.

He was twenty-seven and lived with his mom in a two up two down terraced house. His dad had been there until five years ago when he had then run off with - as his wife put it - the tart from behind the bar at the local pub.

He looked in his mirror and liked what he saw. The wide shoulders and slim hips enhanced his nine stone three body, whilst his six feet one height, he was sure, gave him an enigmatic appeal.

He was going to the local dance, as he did every Saturday night, to strut his stuff and pick up a woman. Every Saturday for the last seven years he had been, barring illness and holidays, and had always, without fail, gone home alone. This usually occurred because of his dancing, which he did by himself as no one would dance with him. He would gyrate frantically and then, dizzy, he would careen into the nearest person and take them down with him. As it was usually only the women that danced he was lucky, although once he was smacked in the mouth

by a local toughie who found Clint lying on him grinning inanely.

He looked at his watch that could tell the time at forty fathoms. It showed 19:45. He quickly subtracted twelve from the nineteen and nodded. He pressed the button again. It showed 20:10:91. After pressing a few more times he was sure that everything was functioning correctly and felt reassured that in San Francisco they were behind by several hours. It meant that if anything incredible happened he would be able to ring Mickey Spillane who would have time to think about it before it happened in America.

He dressed, choosing the off pink shirt with the wide round lapels, brown flared jeans and black platform shoes with white socks. Just before he went downstairs he remembered something and went into the bathroom and quickly washed his face and neck then shook some talc inside his shirt and into his armpits. Fantasising somewhat he then stuck some down his trousers.

In the dance hall he found a few of his mates from the stores where he worked. One, who was the assistant to the Deputy Storekeeper, was Clint's hero and role model. Cedric was where it was at, knew the scene, grooved.

'How's it goin', Clit?' he asked.

The others giggled.

'Great, Cedric, great,' replied Clint.

'Your turn...' he said, holding out his glass, 'and the others want....' his voice tailed off as they all chorused in with their current liquid needs. Clint always seemed to buy more than his share of the drinks but at least he was part of 'the crowd'.

Cedric surveyed the girls dancing in pairs on the dance floor.

'A motley friggin' selection,' he announced to the assembled throng. 'Don't fancy any of yours.....'

They grinned. It was an old joke but they all believed it held true. The latest number one dance tune came from the disc jockey and the

gang slid off to find a woman. Clint and another fellow went towards two women dancing together.

'Want to.....?' said Clint's comrade to the better looking of the two.

She looked at him as though he had just been assembled and she was checking for faults and then looked at her mate, who shrugged.

'OK...'

Clint looked at the other one expectantly.

'Get fucked,' she said as she turned and flounced away.

Clint smiled to hide the rebuff and shrugged as though it made no difference. It did on two counts. One, it happened every week and it hurt. Two, if only, if only, someone would help him 'get fucked'. It was all right saying 'get fucked' but it was bloody nigh impossible to actually do it. Whatever it was.....

The night wore on and Clint spent most of it twirling, gyrating and generally looking as though one of his feet had been nailed to the floor when the time arrived for a ladies' excuse me. Clint stopped momentarily to listen to the announcement and then carried on whirling like a dervish. It didn't apply to him.

A few moments later, deep in his whirling brain, he heard:

'Excuse me....'

Clint ignored his fantasy and carried on, moving all in his path.

'Excuse me!.....' said the voice again.

He stopped. Standing by him was a woman of about his age.

'Excuse me....' she said again.

'Yes....?'

'Excuse me...'

'Er....' he moved to one side, 'er, sorry,' he said.

'No, not excuse me. Excuse me. It's an excuse me....'

Clint looked around him to see who she was talking to. Other than the invisible man it wasn't obvious. He pointed to himself.

'Me.....?'

He pointed to her.

'You....?'

He waved his finger around a few times.

'Dance....?'

'I like intellectuals,' she said, taking him by the arm and leading him to a point nearer the disco and farther away from the bar and the slobbering masses.

They danced for several minutes and then he asked her if she would like a drink.

'Yes, please,' she said, and so they moved to the edge of the room and occupied a vacant table.

He went to the bar and came back with two pints of bitter.

'Babycham and blackcurrant, please...' she said.

He looked at her enquiringly but received no help. He looked at the table but that failed to respond either. He looked at the two pints and a twenty-watt bulb glowed behind his eyes. He wandered off to the bar and ten minutes later returned with a gin and orange. She thanked him.

Clint was lost. To dance, sit by, and drink with a woman all in one night was all too much.

'Where do you work?' she asked.

His mouth tried very hard but his brain had given up.

'Shlik koo ya mat,' it said.

'Oh,' she said, 'in the stores at the depot.'

'Gingee...' he said, nodding.

'My dad works in the maintenance section a few buildings down from you. You may know him, Harry Briggs?'

'Am yam fee qot,' said Clint's mouth.

'Oh well, never mind. Maybe you'd know him if you saw him.'

They watched the dancing and finished their drinks and then she stood up and said:

'I'm going home now. Thank you for the drink....' and started to move away.

Clint was stunned. This woman, this apparition, this Angel was leaving him. He didn't know what to do. If he asked to see her again she'd say no. If he asked her to stay for another dance she'd say no. If he asked her if he could take her home she'd say no. His face crumpled in anguish. She turned towards him.

'See you the same time next week....?'

Clint tried so hard but again there was a mismatch between that part of the brain that produces speech and his psychomotor system.

'Shhoool....'

'Good,' she said, 'see you then.'

After a few minutes of staring vacantly at the door he wandered over to the bar and Cedric et al.

'You're in there,' said one.

'By the looks of her,' said Cedric, 'somebody is..'

And they all collapsed in a heap of dirty laughter. It had, however, passed Clint by as he was still thinking of the princess, who had, one way or another, left him with her slipper.

He went the next week, kitted out in a new suit and shoes. His heart pounded at the thought of meeting her again.

She wasn't there.....

He died inside. She'd said the same time. Perhaps he was early? He looked at his watch. No.

After an hour he went home, rejected and dejected.

As he was about to sleep the phone went. He dragged himself downstairs to answer it.

'Hello?'

'Is that you, Clint?' the voice asked. 'Is it you?'

'Yes.'

'It's me. Avril.'

His heart decided this was obviously the night for pounding and so it started up again.

'You weren't there,' he said accusingly, 'you weren't there....'

'I've been ill, didn't you get my letter? I gave it to Cynth to give you tonight.'

'Nobody gave me a letter.....'

'I bet the silly cow forgot,' she said. 'She'd forget her pants except she's rarely got any on. Anyhow, I'm sorry I wasn't there tonight but I am quite poorly with flu. But I will make sure I'm there next week. Good night, Clint.'

He went the next week, kitted out again in his new suit and shoes. His heart pounded at the thought of meeting her again.

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As he was about to sleep the phone went. He dragged himself downstairs to answer it.

'Hello?'

'Is that you, Clint?' the voice asked. 'Is it you?'

'Yes.'

'It's me. Avril.'

His heart was undecided about whether this was actually a good night for pounding or not. After a quick conference with brain it was decided that a small erratic pulse flutter was more appropriate.

'You weren't there,' he said accusingly, 'you weren't there....'

'I'm sorry, Clint,' she said, 'but my auntie's died and we had to get down to Leeds pretty quick and I didn't have time to call you from home. I did try from the station but there was no reply...'

She waited for him to respond but he said nothing. He knew what this was, had been there before, nothing changed. Life, he knew, was cruel, but at times it was too cruel.

'Thank you for calling,' he said softly, and put down the phone. He heard it ring again as he climbed into bed but he ignored it.

The next week he thought long and hard about going to the hop. What would he do if she were there? She had treated him so badly and yet the thought of her..... (Brain to heart - a quick belt please, don't overdo it). He decided to go. He would ignore her if she was there and life would carry on.

He was going through his routine, something between a dervish and a limbo dancer, when a voice said:

'Excuse me.'

Although he had vowed he wouldn't, he stopped instantly and looked at her.

'Will you dance with me?'

He paused for a moment and then nodded.

At the end of the track she took him to a table and then left him for several moments, returning with a pint of bitter and a Babycham and blackcurrant.

She sat by him.

'You're quiet,' she said.

He nodded.

'Have your drink,' she urged.

He shook his head slowly.

'If you don't mind, I don't want the drink,' he paused as though summoning the courage. 'Why did you treat me like that? I've never done you any harm, why do that to me? I checked and I know you weren't ill and I know you didn't go to Leeds. Why did you hurt me like that? It was very cruel.'

He stood up to leave and she saw moistness in his eyes. She held on to his sleeve.

'Because I love you,' she said simply.

'Why do you loathe me?' he asked angrily.

She raised her voice above the din.

'Not loathe, love. L..o..v..e, love.'

He looked at her dumbfounded. It was all a trick again! A con! He stared at her. Her eyes silently repeated what her mouth had just said, and he believed. Oh God, did he believe!

'But why did you keep saying you would meet me and then not arrive?' he asked.

'To see if it made a difference. To see whether.....' she took a deep breath, '.....you cared.'

'Why shouldn't I care? I said I'd meet you here twice, doesn't that mean I care?'

'Look at me,' she said, 'what do you see?'

'You.'

'Yes...' she said patiently, 'but what about me?'

He beamed and his face lit up.

'You're lovely.'

She blushed.

'Thank you, but what else do you see?'

He looked long and hard as though it were some kind of initiative test and then shrugged.

'What else is there?'

'Clint,' she said. 'I'm fat! I'm five foot one and eleven stone six. I'm fat.'

'If you say so,' said Clint. 'I hadn't noticed,' and he shyly put his hand on hers. 'Why don't we go and get some fish and chips?'

She nodded and they moved towards the door, passing Cedric's table as they did so.

'What's that,' asked Cedric, 'a tart or a tank?'

The gang guffawed.

'Pardon?' said Clint.

'The tart, bit on the heavy side, eh? Don't let her get on top...'

Cedric held his head in his hands, laughing hysterically, as the tears rolled from his eyes. The assemblage collapsed around him.

It only took a second. Clint let go of Avril and grabbed Cedric's hair very tight, pulling it back viciously. Cedric's scream rent through the hall. Then, whilst that hand forced his face forward with a 'crack' into the table, his other picked up a glass and broke it. He yanked Cedric's face up yet again and put the broken jagged glass near his already swelling eyes and the nose that spurted blood.

'Next time you ever say anything like that, to anyone, you're mine.....all mine. Do you understand?'

Cedric didn't move.

'Can't hear you,' said Clint and yanked his hair.

'Ok...' whispered Cedric.

Clint slammed his face into the table. Another 'crack'.

He yanked him back.

'Yes, yes,' screamed Cedric, 'yes, yes,' and he burst into tears.

Clint let him go, took Avril's hand and they walked out, watched by the gaping spectators.

Outside she said:

'Where did you learn that?'

'From Mike Hammer, "My gun is quick".'

'Pardon...?'

'Nothing..'

She looked at him adoringly.

'I do love you,' she said. 'Do you love me.....?'

He gazed into her eyes.

'Mas wee ruk mat ter...' his mouth said.

She kissed him.

On the way home he wondered whether he should ring Mickey Spillane.....?