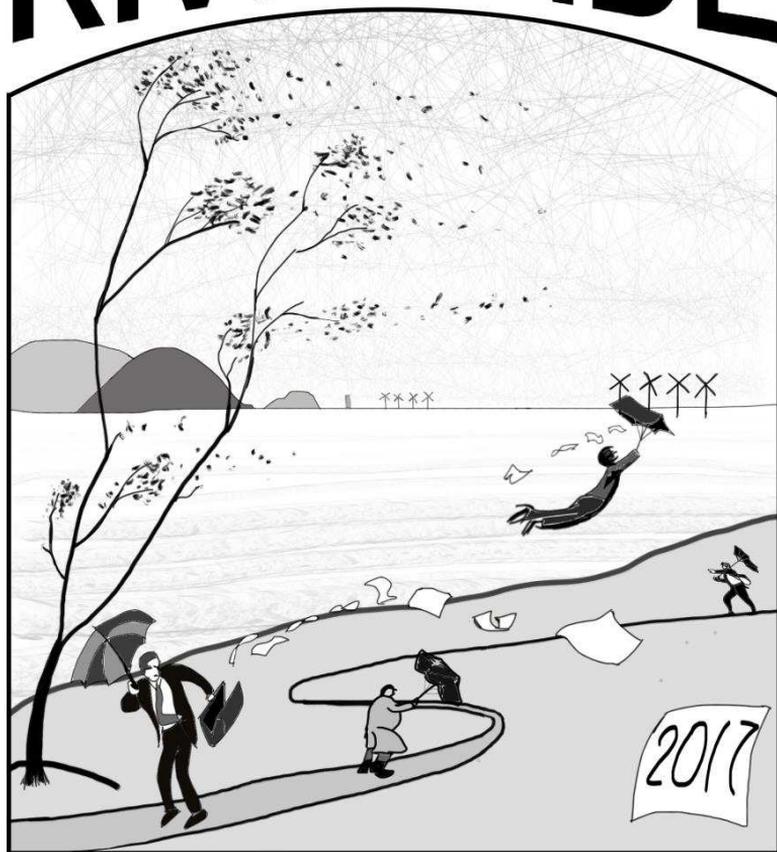


RIVERSIDE



WRITERS

RIVERSIDE WRITERS COLLECTION 2017

Front cover artwork by Brian Thompstone

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FORTY YEARS ON

Tim Hulme

She watched the clouds sweep in from the north-east, slanting across the shoreline, dark grey and white and, occasionally, when thin enough for the morning sun to filter through, burnt orange. The turbulent sea reflected the colours and she felt the salt, whipped from the waves by the vicious March wind, burning her cheeks.

She loved this place. Its very bleakness raised her spirits. She could sit here for hours, on the verandah of her beach house, just soaking in the beauty and splendour of the land and sea. In the distance the beach curved to a promontory, where the tiny white houses of the village huddled together against the wrath of the winds. Here was isolation.

At this time of year there were no other people. In summer an occasional walker or bird-watcher would pass by, perhaps in search of seals on the lonely estuary. Now she was utterly alone save the seabirds crying in anguish as they battled against the prevailing wind.

Her friends thought she was odd. “Don’t you freeze in that shabby old hut?” they would ask. She would laugh and tell them that she wrapped herself in layers of thermal clothing so she did not need to be inside the hut even when squalls blotted out the view.

“Why do you keep the hut then?” they would say and she would reply: “I like to keep it. It’s part of me.”

Part of her – and part of him. She had a few ageing black and white photos; but only here, in this place, in this fading wooden building could she hold on to a part of him.

Suddenly the rain came and she retreated to the inside of the hut. It was a single room, the wooden walls unpainted. Two well-cushioned wooden chairs and a plain settee were the only furnishings. A calor gas light was the only illumination apart from the tiny window. A similar gas stove and a water carrier stood on a bench. Today she had no need of these: she had brought a thermos and sandwiches.

On the wall was one of her paintings – the special one, framed under glass. She often painted here just as she had that day long ago. Easter

was very early that year as well. She refused the usual holiday weekend with her parents. Instead she came here, complete with paints, easel and sleeping bag. There was nobody in occupation. There never was. She had wondered if indeed it belonged to anybody.

Unlike today, late March then was warm from an early spring. The sea was gentle and the blue sky full of white tufts. Her painting was full of bright colour, the white of the village houses brilliant. She was trying to decide whether it was finished when footsteps on the rough path roused her.

“Excuse me. I was told I could see seals somewhere on this coast. Am I in the right place, do you know?” The young man was smiling politely at her. He was bare headed, his dark hair combed back from his round kindly face. His shirt front was open and she could see beads of perspiration on his chest.

“Yes,” she replied, a little nervously. “They are often up by the estuary. I haven’t seen them at this time of year though and it’s quite a long walk.”

“Oh, I don’t mind that,” he said. “It’s such a beautiful area.” Then, nervously in his turn: “It must be wonderful to be able to paint it. Do you mind if I look?”

“No, not at all.” She laughed. “I don’t get many admirers along here.”

“Then I shall be your admirer,” and he ran across to her on the verandah.

“Now that is amazing. I don’t know how you get that effect of the light.”

She tried to explain, but her words seemed rather lame as she pointed to different parts of the paint. She felt his hand on her shoulder and flinched. Looking up, she saw he was not looking at the painting but at her.

“Sorry,” he said, withdrawing his hand. “It’s just that ... you are very ... Sorry. I must let you finish it.”

“I think it is finished. It’s very difficult to tell sometimes. What do you think?”

“I think it’s wonderful. Will you paint one for me? I’d pay you. Not a lot though – I’m still a poverty-stricken ex-student.”

“Don’t be silly. I don’t paint for money.”

“Well you ought to. You’d make a fortune.”

A sudden desire overwhelmed her. “You can have this one, if you like,” and when he protested: “I’ve lots of them.”

“I tell you what,” he said, as if he were making some sort of business deal. “I shall walk to the estuary and back, and if, when I return, you have painted yourself into the picture, I shall let you know if I still like it - and you can paint me in as well if you want.”

In the end, he did not go anywhere. They sat and chatted and exchanged complaints about parents and students and work. They swapped likes and dislikes about pop-music and food and film stars.

After an hour, she interrupted him: “Now it’s finished. Look.”

He stood behind her, holding both her shoulders. This time she did not flinch. “You put both of us in it – and the hut! Wow! I thought changing it would have spoiled it.”

“You can paint over with oil paints,” she explained. “There you are. That’s for you.”

His eyes shone. “Thanks. You are wonderful,” and he kissed her on the cheek. “But I couldn’t. You should keep it.”

They argued until he said in his serious voice: “Are you here again tomorrow? I’m staying with my parents in the hotel in the village over there. I’ll think about it overnight and tell you my decision tomorrow. Oh – that’s if you’re here tomorrow?”

She nodded and then in a panic she asked: “What’s your name? You didn’t tell me.”

When he had gone, she turned the painting over and wrote on it: “To David, from Louise.” After a moment’s hesitation, she added: “With love.”

The next day was Easter Sunday. She waited hopefully all morning, but it was afternoon by the time he appeared. He was wearing jacket and tie and explained he had had to go to church with his parents. She took him inside the hut and showed him the painting again and – a little sheepishly, the inscription on the back. He grabbed her by the waist and kissed her.

“You are wonderful!” he cried in delight. “I shall take it with me on one condition: you must paint another identical one for you – with you and me on it just the same.”

Suddenly he became serious and slumped onto the settee. “How long are you staying? We have to go home tomorrow – and ... and I don’t want to go.”

“I go back tomorrow as well, but not until the afternoon.”

His hang-dog look remained. “Dad says we are starting early because of the Bank Holiday traffic.”

They chatted and walked along the beach, but somehow their moods were melancholy compared to the day before. Eventually David said he had to go – evening service and meal. They swapped addresses and telephone numbers and kissed goodbye, rather formally.

As he turned to leave, he asked: “You don’t stay here in the hut at night do you?”

She laughed. “Of course. I can’t afford fancy hotels like you.” He laughed, kissed her again and was gone.

As she remembered that goodbye, so long ago, Louise felt her eyes become damp. That evening, by the light of the gas lamp, she had painted the picture again with her and David in the foreground. She worked with a new fervour as emotions she had never felt before urged her on. This time she knew for certain when it was finished and she had no doubt that it was the best painting she had ever done. She wrote the same dedication on the back and wished that she could swap this one for the one she had given to David. She wondered if his last question meant he might come back that night. She knew that was what she overwhelmingly wanted.

But he did not come.

They exchanged letters and phone-calls and photographs. He had promised to try to visit her when she was at the beach hut, but their homes were so far apart it proved too difficult. Then her parents decided to move. She did not go with them. She rented a flat and met George. She decided to try to forget David. She wrote a letter to him saying that she was about to marry George and would have moved by the time he received the letter.

To her dismay, her letter was returned “Gone Away” and when she phoned his number, a strange woman knew nothing of David. She continued to write to him but, with no address, the letters remained in a drawer unposted. She sometimes thought George had read them - but it was not in his nature. He never queried her trips to the beach house.

Now she was here, another early Easter, exactly forty years on. As the rain beat down on the roof of the hut she had bought and renovated many years before, she wondered if David were still alive and if so ... would he remember the anniversary, or even care?

By the Sunday afternoon, the rain had become so heavy and prolonged she decided to go home. As she hurriedly packed the car, she

wondered how David looked now – an elderly man, as elderly as she. The dark hair would be grey betraying a lifetime of experiences of which she knew nothing.

She reversed the car onto the narrow lane which led to other isolated dwellings along the beach and set off for the main road. Unusually she saw a car coming towards her. She paused and edged hers into a gateway. As the other vehicle slowed to pass her, the driver waved a thanks to her. She saw his grey hair and bright smile and for one delirious moment she wanted to open her driver's window and shout ...

The car carried on. She watched in her rear mirror. It did not stop. She saw her reflection and thought of her painting of the young boy and girl sitting side by side on a verandah. As she pressed the accelerator she knew there was no going back. That boy and girl had died long, long ago.

OBNOXIOUS

Peter Caton

Teddy was sitting, as usual, in the corner. That was his chair, in the corner. It had been his chair for a long time, now. Almost four years. And in that time, it had started to take the shape of his bottom. But he was comfortable there. It had become a familiar and safe part of his small world.

Teddy would spend many hours in his chair. Sometimes staring out of the window at the passing traffic. Sometimes sleeping. But his main chair-activity was reading.

“So,” you may ask. “What’s unusual about an old man in a residential home reading?” Nothing, I suppose. Except Teddy’s reading was different. His book was entitled COLLINS ENGLISH DICTIONARY: the thick edition; all two and a half thousand pages of it. Yes, he read regularly from this most informative of books. And he had meticulously calculated that if he started at A on his seventy-fifth birthday (when he had got it as a present) and read through two pages a day, then he would finish it on his seventy-eighth birthday. What an achievement!

“But doing it,” he muttered with an upward glance, “is a different matter.”

Vera and Simone were always close at hand. They were just two of the staff here who worked tirelessly and happily looking after Teddy and his friends. These two would often be found standing just out of sight, listening intently to Teddy’s ramblings. Oh, yes, he read out loud. And, oh yes, it was often entertaining. After each word he would give a short talk. And everyone within earshot had to put up with it. He called it ‘Educating for You’. They called it ‘Rambling’.

But, oooh, Teddy was in his element.

Today’s word was Obnoxious.

Loudly, he read it out: “OB... NOK... SHIUS.” Then, with Vera and Simone listening from behind an open door in the staffroom, he started:

“OBNOXIOUS... extremely unpleasant.”

A moment’s silence. The whole house, you could say, was leaning forward in anticipation of his opening lines.

He continued: “These are a few of my un-favourite things...”

Suddenly, there was whispering.

“He’s going to sing, Vera, he’s going to sing!”

“Oh, yes!” she replied. “It’s that song from the *Sound of Music*. You know, the one with Julie Walters in it. This’ll be fun.”

He continued:

“Kids who think ‘old’ means you’re past it, you’re done,
Tea that’s gone cold through no fault of my own,
Birthday cards written you know without care,
People who walk with their nose in the air.”

Suddenly, “Dinner’s ready!”

The instruction was clear and the gong was so near.

Everyone jumped in the air.

“And that’s another of my unfavourite things: the gong,” muttered Teddy as he shuffled his way into the dining room.

“Sorry, Teddy,” said Simone, “but we’re getting a new bell installed next week. It’s modern and it plays a nice tune. How’s that?”

“So long as it’s not My Favourite Things,” he replied with a cheeky grin.

A short time later, as they were finishing their desserts and chatting among themselves, old Emily called over.

“I’ve got a word for you, Ted. D’you think you could find a rhyme for this one?”

He called back: “What’s the word, then, Em?”

“Phantasmagoria!”

Well, the whole place erupted. There were wrinkled old ladies, crying with laughter, doubled up in pain, strewn all over the furniture. The old men were holding on to each other like skydivers in formation, for fear of letting go. But it was the staff who were close to having heart attacks; worried that it might all be too much for such frail and elderly folk.

Yet well into the evening could be heard throughout the home the hum of elderly chatter. Across the lounge, in the corridors, behind closed doors. They were searching for rhymes. They were good for each other. And it continued well into the night.

Vera and Simone, meanwhile, were pacing the corridors, calling out: “Medication, ladies and gents, medication.”

And so was born the F E P Society. The Frail and Elderly Poets Society.

Yes, it started here, in Jolly Ranchers' Residential Home, on May 6th, 2012.

Your only qualification? Old age.

Above the hearth, with its imitation glowing wood-fire, hangs a large picture of the F E P's founder: Mr Edward Etherington. Teddy.

And underneath the picture, an inscription:

**TO THE MAN WHO MADE US LAUGH
A REAL TONIC**

GETTING COLD FEET ON MONT BLANC

Ben Stroude

In the Alps it is not normally possible to climb from the valleys to the summits in a single day, so a chain of intermediate shelters has been established, varying in size from small box to large hotel, and known variously as *cabane*, *rifugio*, *hôtellerie*, *hutte*, etc – all abbreviated by the English to the word “hut”. Most fall between the extremes, being comparable to what in Britain we would know as a youth hostel; basic dormitories, a common room and kitchen. The Franco Monzino hut, situated on the Italian side of Mont Blanc, a few thousand feet up from the floor of the beautiful Val Veni, is one of the better ones, almost a hotel, and it is where our story starts.

Outside the hut, a helicopter was struggling to land on its pad. A vicious, gusty wind was pulling the plane this way and that, and the pilot seemed only just in control. George and I, with the other occupants, were standing outside, watching with nervous fascination, when the chopper suddenly swooped towards us. The hardly bearable engine noise and the woof-woof-woof of the blades were almost as frightening as the thought of the crash. We all ducked; a woman screamed. But it missed, apparently by inches, and as we straightened up, rather shame-faced, we saw that the pilot had given up and was heading down the hill towards Courmayeur and safety.

It had been a memorable moment, the second that day. The drama had begun earlier in the evening, as we and the other visitors were relaxing after the long walk uphill and after a good meal. The door had suddenly burst open and a short, dishevelled and breathless Japanese climber had rushed in.

“My flend!” he shouted, “In clevasse!”

I am sorry to say that, perhaps because only George and I were English and had understood, the first reaction of everyone else was to burst into giggles. But it was no laughing matter. His friend was, indeed, down a crevasse, as we and the hut guardian soon ascertained. A phone call to Courmayeur shortly produced a helicopter and rescue team which stopped briefly at the hut to pick up the guardian and the Japanese climber.

But the weather was worsening by the minute, with the cloud base only just above the level of the hut, and the wind strength rising rapidly. So

that, a couple of hours later, with the casualty safely aboard, the helicopter was unable to return the guardian to his hut and – having given us all the fright of our lives – flew directly down to the valley.

Remembering this two days later, as George and I resumed our journey uphill, by then in perfect weather, we were particularly cautious, on the Brouillard Glacier, of the danger of crevasses hidden beneath the new snow. There was no need to hurry, however; we were not headed for the summit but to another hut, the Eccles bivouac (named after a Victorian pioneer) as a second staging post. Half way there we met, to our mutual pleasure, a French party descending. Their trail showed us the way up; and ours, their way down. Even with any route-finding problems sorted, however, the trudging was still hard work. In addition, I sensed my feet becoming steadily wetter. Evidently my old but comfortable boots had sprung leaks. It didn't seem important, just a minor discomfort.

The Eccles bivouac hut is a stark contrast to the luxury of the Monzino but, at 12,500ft, any shelter is welcome. It is a metal box with rounded roof, containing nine bunks in three tiers of three and a small table, surrounding a tiny rectangle of floor space; no place for the claustrophobic. When full of climbers, their rucksacks, ropes and axes, and when all their kit has been spread out in order to get at food and cooking gear, it is more than untidy, it is chaos. That's not such a big problem in the evening when some camaraderie develops and people are actually helpful to each other. After having got some food and drink down and having had a last pee over the ice cliff, you get to bed, out of the way.

In the morning it is different. Everyone is on edge and anxious to get away, for all the routes from this hut are committing. First you have to get boots on, brew up, get some food down if you can and re-pack your rucksack, while trying not to leave behind anything vital. It is simply impossible for everyone to move at the same time, and perhaps George and I were too polite, as we were among the last to leave.

But leave we eventually did, in good order, to find our route – the Innominata Ridge – to be a sheer delight. The weather was perfect, so everything white was frozen solid, with the recent snow having developed a hard crust, and the rock was the sort of rough granite a climber dreams about, with plenty of natural, bomb-proof belays. The standard was just right for maximum enjoyment; nothing desperate but sufficiently challenging at about Grade IV* to merit pitching it one at a time for safety, which is slow but non-exhausting. If there was a slight criticism of the great

architect in the sky, it was that the rock line was too often interrupted by sections of snow or ice, necessitating frequent fixing and removal of crampons. That, too, slowed us down. But, really, that was a mere detail. This was Alpine climbing in a superb position, on the highest mountain around, in glorious sunshine, at its wonderful, memorable best. It was what we had come for; no other entertainment could possibly come close. There were no other climbers to get in the way and spoil the solitude; this was bliss and we could relish it.

Perhaps we relished it too thoroughly. I don't remember any feeling of urgency, or concern about the difficulties of descent, as is common on most Alpine peaks. We had climbed to the top of the Blanc twice previously and knew that it was just like a bigger Ben Nevis. Once you were up the steep side, in fair weather, there should be no problem walking down the easier trade routes.

So it was that, as dusk fell and the lights of the Italian villages started to appear far below, we were still on the way up. We had finished with the rock and had reached the steep snow slopes leading up to the preliminary summit of Mont Blanc de Courmayeur. A sharp boulder, sticking out of the snow, offered a tempting belay if we hacked out a level shelf below it; and we did just that, constructing a comfortable, if cool, bivouac site.

And then, just as on any other bivouac, it was a case of all spare clothing on, get the stove going, melt some snow, pour in the soup powder and wait for it to boil, hands as near the flame as possible. One of the secrets of successful bivvies is to make the night as short as possible, and a good start to that is – weather permitting – to extend the evening entertainment by enjoying a banquet. Thus:

le potage – packet soup and stale bread

le poisson – tin of sardines and stale bread

l'entrée – stale bread and cheese

les desserts – frozen Mars bar (if you can get your teeth into it) or chocolate

le café

les petit fours – more of the boiled sweets you have been sucking on and off all day

George finished with a cigar while I relished the aroma. Plenty of Michelin-starred meals have been less satisfying, I have no doubt.

And so to bed. You are there already, of course, with lower limbs tucked cosily into your rucksack and its extension. All that remains is to cinch up the duvet hood to allow the smallest possible airway and thrust bemitted hands between the legs. Then you doze. It is, of course, pretty darned cold at about 15,000ft and the sky clear, so you don't doze for long. You wake, shiver, rub whatever can be rubbed, admire the stars and the lights below, and doze again. And wake again. And so on. If you had wet feet on arrival you should have been a bit concerned that they didn't feel at all cold. But their owner didn't give that a thought.

Eventually, as soon as the first hint of the coming day appeared – no light but rather darkness visible, as the poet** neatly put it in an altogether warmer context – we lit the stove; and as soon as the decadent tea in bed had been supped we could see enough to shake off the frost, get ourselves organised, and go.

We moved together, slowly and stiffly up the slope to Mont Blanc de Courmayeur and then, as the angle eased, more briskly to the summit of the Blanc itself. The ant-like processions crawling up from the French side were still far below and we had the top to ourselves. Everyone else in the whole of Western Europe – kings, queens, presidents, prime ministers, the lot – would have to look up to us for a few minutes at least, as we modestly noted. But it was too cold to linger. A handshake, a quick photo for the record, and then it was downhill all the way.

And what a way! Down the Bosses Ridge, past the Vallot hut, drop down to the right at the Col du Dome, onto the Grand Plateau, then the Petit Plateau, all the while passing puffing and panting sufferers as they plodded upwards and thinking (though I may be maligning George here) what fine fellows we were to have climbed the mountain by so much more sporting a route. However, such pride traditionally merits a comeuppance and ours duly arrived. We didn't fall but, in perfect visibility and knowing exactly where we were, we still managed to take a wrong turn. Shameful! I blush at such incompetence. The plan had been to bear right below the Grands Mulets hut and cross the dry glacier to the nearby télérephique station, from where we could ride in stately comfort down to Chamonix. Sometimes a line of flags marks the way across the maze of crevasses, but if they were there, we couldn't find them. We kept on being pushed left and downhill, so that

eventually the only way to go was onto the top of the rocky spur bounding the Bossons Glacier, known as the Montagne de la Côte.

By then we were, frankly, pretty knackered. Although we had climbed only a short distance that morning, we had subsequently walked downhill for over 7,000 feet and there were a further 5,000 knee-wrecking feet still to go. Despite its status as the world's capital of mountaineering and a major ski resort, the town of Chamonix is remarkably low-lying; a circumstance, we then felt, much to be regretted. But eventually, after a reviving brew, we stirred ourselves to trudge downhill again, aided by a good footpath and buoyed by the thought of the biggest *steak-frites* and the most capacious *pichets* which the town could offer, in the company of our friends later that evening.

And all those good things came to pass. It had been a terrific adventure, full of happy memories, with the pleasures far outweighing any slight pain and – at the risk of sounding sappy – with a wonderful companion.

It was worth the unpleasant surprise, while peeling off sweaty clothing when back at our home-from-home bunkhouse, of the sight of the unhealthy grey-purple colour of my frost-bitten toes. It was even worth the anxiety of the following ten days in Chamonix hospital. There, in a ward with a view of the mountains, I learnt a little more of the French language and customs. Soon, I could call for a bottle with fluency, and now I know where the French place their thermometers (not in the mouth) – though these topics are, admittedly, rather difficult to slip into the conversation in the *Bar Tabac*. Meanwhile, expert and friendly care somehow persuaded the blood to return to those extremities from where it had shrunk, so ensuring that the next pair of boots would have to be just as big as those now consigned - very belatedly - to the bin.

*Climbers' jargon for a standard of rock or ice climbing about halfway up the scale

**John Milton, describing Hell in *Paradise Lost*

HOME FRONT

Andy Siddle

I heard the heavy footsteps on the path. The doorbell rang. It was 9.30, too late for visitors. I remember suddenly feeling very cold.

The shiny boots gave him away before I dare raise my eyes to see the uniform. He was nervous, couldn't look me in the eye. He asked, 'Are you married to Sergeant Sam Yates, First Regiment, Royal Horse Artillery?'

I couldn't speak I just stared at the ground. My legs started shaking.

He took a deep breath and said it all in one go. I found out later they are trained to do it like that – say it quick so you don't raise your hopes, thinking they might be injured.

He just stood there watching me to see what I would do. It was drizzling and the rain was dripping off his cap. He asked if he could come in.

He hung up his cap and heavy army greatcoat by the door, came in and sat down. I asked if he wanted a cup of tea, I needed to keep moving see, do something, to keep ahead of the truth that was trying to catch up with me. He said yes but he offered to help and followed me into the kitchen. Something else I found out later, they did this in case I did something stupid.

I found a packet of chocolate biscuits and put some on a plate for him. I remember my hands were sweating so much the chocolate started to melt the second I touched them. As I handed the plate to him, I realised it was one of the chipped ones but it didn't seem to matter somehow. I couldn't eat anything. He didn't touch them either but he did drink the tea.

He told me what had happened. He said it happened in theatre, which was what talking to him felt like. I was speaking my lines, watching myself on stage and wondering why I sounded so calm when inside my feelings were on fire. I had to keep standing up and walking round, as if keeping those feelings down kept me on the move. At least it was past Susie's bedtime so she was upstairs asleep and couldn't see me like this.

They were travelling in a convoy in Lashkar Gah when their

Landrover was hit by a roadside bomb. Two other soldiers from her Regiment were killed straight off, my Sam was dead on arrival at Camp Bastion.

Finally, I stopped pacing the floor and sank back in the chair, no more life in me than the cushion I was resting on. I didn't want to look at the photo on the mantelpiece over his shoulder but I couldn't help myself. The uniform and her proud smile were too much to bear and I could feel tears pricking the back of my eyes. My wonderful wife, half of me, gone.

I had to leg it to the toilet. Kneeling there in the dark, I kept throwing up until there was nothing left and I was retching on nothing. But it wasn't like when I'd been out on the ale. I didn't feel better afterwards, the poison was still there, churning inside me.

I cleaned myself up and went back. He had a metal hipflask with him and offered me some brandy, said it would help. He stayed for an hour but it felt like a lot longer.

The doorbell rang and he heaved a sigh and said his relief had arrived. I couldn't help thinking it really was a relief for him.

I wanted to get up but I couldn't move. I felt like a ragdoll. There was nothing, no strength, no energy. There was nothing in my legs, it was like I'd run a marathon.

'It's ok,' he said I'll let him in and then I'll be off.'

The other man was older, in smart civilian clothes and said he was from the Ministry. He talked about money, funeral arrangements. But I was only half taking it in. He asked if anyone could come and stay as I shouldn't be on my own. I rang my Dad and he said he'd come round straight away, I could hear his voice shaking on the end of the line.

Once the man from the Ministry had gone, I went in the kitchen and saw that the first man had poured out the rest of the brandy for me into a half-pint glass. I finished it with Dad through those dark hours, staring at the fake flames as they twisted and curled on the electric fire. Neither of us slept a wink.

Sam's letter arrived two days later. When I saw the blue envelope on the mat for a second my heart jumped, out of habit, as it always did but then the pain hit me. It was as if she was still alive when I knew she wasn't. She said she was thirsty all the time, and asked me to send her lime cordial and some boiled sweets. She also asked me to send the usual, crisps, the local newspapers, marmite and tinned fruit. She said someone from the

government had visited them and had shaken their hand, told them what a good job they were doing.

She never moaned, she always said she was just doing her job, just like she'd been trained. But I could tell between the lines she was telling me in her own way that she was scared, wanted to come home to me. The way she asked after Susie, I knew how much she would have been missing her daughter.

The anger welled up in me as I read her note. It was down to me, my fault, a recipe for disaster from the start. I was the one who had let Sam go to fight thousands of miles away. And for what? To be killed in the dust and the dirt in a war no one could tell me we were winning or losing.

Holding the letter tight in my hand as if I was trying to bring her back, hearing her voice through the words on the page, I felt the tears coming.

Susie must have heard me because she came back in from the garden where she'd been playing with her granddad. She had a single daffodil stem in her hand. She held it out for me as if it was a weapon against the bad things that were making me cry.

Maybe if I didn't have Susie to think about I'd have been in the boozier by now, sinking pints and looking for fights to punch the pain out. But Sam wouldn't want that. That day I put the daffodil stem in a half-pint glass full of water to remind me of Susie's gift. It's still there now, even though it's dried up and only a faint yellow colour, next to Sam's photo.

Do I still feel angry? No. There's no room for that any more. It's hard enough fighting all the thoughts in my head, getting through birthdays, Xmas, anniversaries and the like.

There's a silence at the middle of everything where her voice used to be, bossing us round. Sometimes I feel like I weigh less and life weighs more.

But I have my own battle to fight now, for Susie and for me. It's a fight that will go on for as long as it takes and it's one we have to win.

THE MARKET

John Brown

“No mum, I’m not making light of it, only hernia ops are pretty standard these days. Ted will only be in two nights... I’m getting the car serviced today so as I can pick him up tomorrow... Yes, he should be ok to come home tomorrow afternoon... anyway I’ll have to dash now, I’m meeting Hazel at the market so we can do the shopping while the guy does the car... Yes mum, I’ll call you as soon as I get the news on Ted’s op... I’ll ring the hospital in a couple of hours. Bye for now, hon.”

Angie decided that her make-up would do for shopping with her sister at the town market, so she pulled on her second best coat, locked-up the house and then started the Astra, pulling a face at the annoying knocking sound from the engine.

“I bet that garage guy will make a meal of fixing this... he wouldn’t say boo to Teddy, but I’m just a dumb blonde so I’ll get the sharp-intake-of-breath treatment... hmm, sounds a bit rough, love... still I’ll see what I can do. Bloody mechanics,” muttered Angie as she headed for town.

“Do you have everything Mohammed? We must be at the market car park in fifteen minutes with all the stuff.”

“Yes, yes, don’t fuss Ahmed, I packed it myself, there won’t be any problems, it’s all placed ready for action, so let’s get started.”

The two Pakistanis started their vehicle and drove carefully to their assigned destination on the other side of town.

Kevin Trent was also heading for town, driving his JCB digger at twenty-five miles per hour along the main road and smirking to himself at all the impatient sods risking their necks with the on-coming traffic as they tried to overtake. Kevin had always been a bit of a loner, preferring to mind his own business. Working in the big noisy digger suited him nicely as he could spend all day listening to his iPod without having to join in the banter between his workmates on the building sites. The job he’d be working on today was in the west corner of the town centre market, digging-out the footings for the opening phase of a new shopping mall. The market stall holders had glumly resigned themselves to an uncertain future once the fancy mall opened for business, but Kevin wasn’t concerned with their

problems as he set-up the JCB for breaking up the tarmac and concrete to start the foundation work.

Mohammed and Ahmed carefully parked their vehicle so that they could watch both town centre approach roads, their radio tuned to the local emergency service channel, Ahmed was a worrier by nature; everything had to be just right. Even his English was now excellent, despite the relatively short time that he had lived here. His young colleague Mohammed had been born in England but preferred to use the language of his father and uncles. Both men were devout Moslems, with a profound sense of observance and duty towards their faith and the teachings of the Imam at their Mosque.

Hazel hugged her sister and launched into her usual stream of chatter. Angie smiled, remembering how their late father had always pulled her leg about her being a “world class gabber.”

”Yes, sister dear, and thank you for asking me about my poor husband’s operation this morning,”

“Oh God, sorry Angie, I quite forgot, what with the cat’s sore foot and Billy’s costume for the school play. Is Teddy alright and how is the car doing?”

“Both doing well, and the mechanic was really nice. I was expecting a greasy, sexist bully but he found the problem straight-off and it will only be twenty quid to fix. I’m going to ring mum when we’ve had a coffee, she’s having her usual panic about medical things. She always expects big dramas like *Casualty* on the telly.”

The sisters settled down in the market café, preferring to sit near the back because of the din from that digging machine on the new construction site nearby. Hazel hated having to compete with the racket while she rattled on about vets’ bills, rabbit costumes, her new partner’s motor-bike and their mother’s medical phobias.

Ahmed fussed and fretted about the placing of Mohammed’s haversack and whether they were parked in the best position to be most effective. Young Mohammed smiled; he respected his older colleague, so he never let the older man’s fussy nature get him annoyed. He just quietly reassured him that there would be no problems with this job.

After half an hour of one-sided conversation, Angie remembered that she hadn't rung her mum yet, so she told Hazel that she would go outside to make the call as the phone signal was poor inside the café. And she would get them another couple of coffees when she came back in.

She had hardly got to the door when the bomb exploded. Outside, the market was swept with a savage eruption of fire and shrapnel. People, stalls and produce were heaped together in a terrible confusion of destruction and pain. The huge blast wrecked the café, trapping the living and dead together under mounds of bricks and shattered timber. Then, as their senses began to return, the silence of total shock was slowly replaced by the groans and cries of the traumatised survivors. The crackling of flames and the myriad sounds of the damaged buildings settling and crumbling were terrifying to the trapped shoppers, unable to see how much danger they were facing.

Angie rubbed some of the dirt from her eyes and tried to get up. Her shocked system was unable to grasp the awful reality. She wondered why she couldn't move and why she hurt all over; and then slowly began to realise what had happened. But these things only happened on the telly, somewhere else in the world. Why was she in the middle of this mess? Then: "Oh my God, Hazel! Hazel, are you OK?" Angie burst into tears, certain that her poor sister must be dead or injured and she couldn't get to her with all this stuff trapping her legs.

"Quickly, this lady is conscious, help me lift this timber." The ambulance paramedics gently eased Angie from the rubble. "You will be fine, rather a nasty bump on your head and some minor injuries, but nothing too bad. Can you tell me how many fingers I'm holding up, madam?"

Angie coughed and gasped for breath, her mouth and nose full of dust and soot. "My sister," she croaked, "Hazel is inside near the back. Go and help her, I'm all right, let me go back to her."

"We will find your sister, now let us put you in the ambulance and we will contact you at the hospital when we have more news. Please try not to worry." But Angie had passed out again and only regained her senses in a hospital bed two hours later.

A tall, rather good-looking man was sitting beside her bed. Angie blinked and rubbed her sore head, still a little bit dazed. "Hello Mrs Connor, how do you feel?" he said kindly.

Reality rushed back. “My sister, is she all right?” whispered Angie, terrified that the news would be bad.

“Yes, she survived the explosion, but she has a rather painful neck injury and two broken legs. The poor girl won’t be able to talk for a couple of days.”

Angie burst out laughing as relief overwhelmed her. “I’m sorry, I can’t help it, I must sound so heartless. I know people must have been killed, only my kid sister not being able to talk is so funny. Oh, are you a doctor? Do you know what happened? Was it some sort of bomb?”

“No I’m not a doctor, Mrs Connor, I’m Peter Thomas from the anti-terrorist unit. It’s our job to investigate tragedies like this and interview witnesses. However, we won’t be arresting anybody for this mess. It was a really big World War Two German bomb. The poor chap in the digger must have hit it and set it off. It was fortunate that two paramedics were on standby near that accident black spot on the two main roads. They were the real heroes. They arrived on the scene within minutes and had plenty of trauma gear to treat the casualties. They saved quite a few lives, including your sister’s. One of them, Ahmed I think, asked me to tell you that they found Hazel before she choked under the wreckage. She was right where you said she’d be. Those two lads deserve medals.”

THE PHONE CALL

Christine Holland

Hello. Am I actually speaking to a human being at last?

Oh good, it's me, Mrs Fisher.

I been waiting on this phone for over twenty minutes, I had to feed Bertie while I've been waiting.

No, No, he's not me husband!! He's me budgie, and if he doesnt'a get his food on time, he chirps that loud I canna hear meself think.

He were that hungry, he flew straight out of his cage onto me head. Gave me such a scare, I knocked me glasses off me head, and now I canna find 'em.

Sorry..... What was that, can you use me Christian name....?

Er well yes but why would a young man like you want to be called Annie?

Oh I see Greg... You mean talk to each other on first name terms... Aye, aye, course you can call me Annie.

Well what you can help me with is me bill. I want a proper un that comes through letterbox, and tells me how much I owe each month. So I know what I've got left for me bingo.

It's the big jackpot on Saturday, I want to get six books and a taxi there and back.

Me balance you say... Well I only use one stick.

Oh a smart meter is it? Well there's too much nowadays called smart if thee ask me. Me son's got one of them smart phones, he does all sorts on it but talk!!

I'll tell thee what's smart Greg...

My husband, Joe, he were smart, he wore clean underwear every day. And a collar'n tie, whether he were going out or not.

Pardon.... What? You want me date of birth. Ee what ever for?

Look, gas board have never sent me a birthday card. I don't reckon they gunna start now at my age.

What were that? Ask me some security questions? Well I lock 'n bolt me front 'n back door every night, and I've stopped putting me spare key on a string through letter box, since that crime prevention officer let hisself in with it.

Nice young man, I made him a cuppa tea, while he fitted me one of them chains on me front door, so I can peep round and see who it is.

What do you mean am I paperless? It's a struggle on pension Greg, but I can still afford toilet rolls Ee, and I buy a Sun newspaper every day.

Oh, sorry Greg I reckon not wearin me glasses makes me a bit deaf.

Aye yes, that's exactly what I'm sayin, I don't get paper bills, since tha changed me to one of them there new meters.

Would I what? Like a new tariff ... Oh I'm not too sure. One that would suit me better ...
I'd have to ask me doctor about that, Greg.

What you saying... It's a direct debit payment method?
How did I used to pay? ... Well I used give me son me money and he go direct to Crown 'n Anchor and debit over bar.

I only found out when them red reminders come.

He's a good lad really, he always paid out of his next pay packet.

Yes, yes, I would like a different payment method please. I'd like one of them meters like I used to have when I first got married. Where you put your money straight in meter... Then a man used come round every now 'n again, to empty it. I'd always put a few bob extra in without Joe knowin, then I had a bit extra for me bingo.

I won last week. I waited nine numbers for lucky seven. It wasn't that lucky cos beggar me, a bloke shouted House as well.

We had to share, but I'm not complaining, every little helps,
I reckon I'm on one of me winning streaks.

Eh, that's nice Greg your gran goes to bingo a lot too?

What were that, dual fuel... You say? Nay I'm not interested.
Oh well, you get discount with it do you?

Well last time I had dual fuel were when I used to order a bag of coal 'n a bag of nutty slack... And I got me discount cos on delivery days...
I'd wear me John Wayne bra... I called it that cos it headed em up and rolled em out.

When I saw coal lorry pull up, I'd nip me apron off, and bend over low...
When I unlocked coal house for him, he couldn't resist a bit of cleavage.

Oh, Greg, just a minute , somebody's at door, I hope I can see who it is without me glasses ...

Hello, hello, Greg are you still there? Ee... It's a man, he's says he's from EON to look at me smart meter .

He's a big fat fella looks like he should be drawing his pension...
I wish I could find me glasses I canna see his card proper.

I tell you what, I know what EON stands for now, elderly 'n over nourished.
I can hear you chuckling, Greg.

Aye it's been lovely talking to you too.
I'll ring again next week and let you know if postman brings me a bill.

What Greg love, feedback? I'll tell you what, I'll ask that bloke at the door.
Looking at size of him, he looks like he knows a lot about that ... in fact if I let him in, I'd definitely have a full house.

You take care too, Greg love.

Taraa for now.

BILLY RAY

Robin Hynes

Billy Ray Landon carefully screwed the ends of his homemade pipe bomb tight. He didn't want it to go off in his face. It was intended for his enemies. Billy Ray had lots of enemies. He smiled as he checked the fuse, then he proceeded to load his beloved Colt 1911 pistol. The pipe bomb, a cigarette lighter, the pistol and a couple of spare magazines were bundled into a knapsack. As he left his bedroom for the last time, he propped up the letter that would explain everything to his mother.

Dear Mom. Someone has to stand up to the Blacks, Muslims and Mexicans flooding in here and trying to take our jobs and our women. (Billy Ray was careful how he chose his words. Mom didn't like the "N" word bandied about the house. Dad had always been careful about swear words in front of the ladies.) Those Jews, gays and retards (the letter went on) are gonna pay as well. They won't know what hit 'em. I'm gonna take 'em down the moment they step off the bus. I guess it's just what I have to do Mom. This diseased Zog government of ours has let things ride too long. This corrupt world of ours is about to be changed forever and it's up to me to do it.

Your loving son, Billy Ray.

He turned for a fleeting look at the bedroom that had been his world for 20 years, and left – for the bus station.

Billy Ray was just five years old when he first hated someone. Dad was firmly convinced their new black neighbours would drag the whole street down. Billy Ray thought his Dad was some kind of genius. The second he laid eyes on new people he would know whether to love or hate them. He didn't need to get acquainted. Somehow he just knew. Dad hated the new family. Young Billy Ray decided to show his support for his dear old Dad. Billy Ray hated blacks now. He always would.

Mom and Dad Landon always kept their angelic blond blue-eyed boy on the path of righteousness. They were good church people. Every Sunday the preacher told the congregation that Jesus was their friend and Satan was their foe. With unquestioning faith, the followers of Jesus would always come down on the right side. With absolute devotion, a man could die young and live forever. Billy ray believed this. He always would.

When Billy Ray was a little older he heard Dad shouting abuse at a politician who was trying to introduce gun control. The latest high school massacre, he protested, was not a good reason to take their guns. “The Second Amendment says we can protect ourselves from the commies and the perverts!” he blazed. “It’s in the Constitution, Congressman. Guns are as American as apple pie!” Dad was sure that this traitor was a gay, Jew-loving, interfering liberal. Billy Ray hated gays, Jews and interfering liberals now. He always would.

It was shortly after this that Dad got drunk one night and crashed his truck. The people in the emergency room did their best but now Billy Ray would have to grow up without a dad. Mom compensated for the loss by spoiling and indulging her precious boy whenever she could. The big meals and candy bars added to Billy Ray’s waistline. Otherwise he might have hated fat people too.

Billy Ray’s inward, downward, hateful spiral took a new turn one day when he returned home from school in the worst rage his mother had ever seen. One of the kids at school had been given more time than the rest of the class to complete a test. “That damn retard should be put down,” he wailed, “never mind being given more time. His wheelchair ran over my foot, Mom. Everybody laughed at me!” When Mother Landon finally calmed her son down, another problem came to light. The handicapped kid scraped through the test with a pass. Billy Ray just failed. The darkness descended over the boy, with catastrophic results. Mrs Landon, in complete denial, saw only a quiet, forgiving Christian boy. She did *not* see the growing hatred within. On Sundays he would always sit by her side, reciting the Lord’s Prayer with sincerity. But now there was another side to this heart, mind and soul that had no forgiveness for those who trespassed against him.

From then on, everything about disabled people gave him real problems. Every time a new wheelchair ramp was fitted to a public building, every time a disabled child went to the front of the line at a theme park, every time he saw anyone who was deformed, stunted, slow,

struggling or needed crutches, he snarled with venom and vitriol. His uniquely twisted world took him to church on Sundays, and to a spiralling hatred the rest of the week. In the privacy of his mind these two opposing worlds had an odd co-existence.

School failed to teach Billy Ray anything much about Math, English, Geography, History, Physics or Chemistry. Biology was the one exception. The theory of evolution became his particular fascination. He cared little about William Shakespeare, George Washington or Isaac Newton. It was Charles Darwin who fired Billy Ray's limited imagination. America belonged to strong white folks. None of the rest had a right to survive.

Within the diverging worlds of Billy Ray's mind, he was just as sure of evolution as he was that the world was made in seven days. He could die for a holy cause and rise to fight again like an X-Box soldier. The World hated inferiority as much as Jesus forgave his sins. Billy Ray made up his mind. He made up *both* his minds.

The purity and supremacy of able-bodied, white, heterosexual Christians was, in his dark extraordinary world, beyond question. When the other kids at school debated whether it was right to deport illegal Mexican immigrants he dismissed the discussion: "Don't send 'em back, just exterminate 'em all!"

When a local radio station interviewed Billy Ray about his views on Muslims in the USA he ranted and raged with such energy they couldn't broadcast any of it. How anyone could bring together Jesus Christ, Charles Darwin, nuclear weapons, Coca Cola and Disneyland was beyond the radio presenter's comprehension. He erased the interview and looked for somebody else to interview. *Anybody else* would have been ok. That "strange Landon kid" had a reputation now. Most people avoided him.

Although he was generally a loner, Billy Ray's social life was not completely stunted. He managed to make a *few* friends. He fitted in really well at the local gun club. The Neo-Nazis also warmly welcomed him. After all, even the most determined liberal can't argue with a Colt 45 in his face. And as for that Holocaust thing – it never happened. Billy Ray believed that. He always would.

Deputy Sheriff Rex Needam tried his best to walk with a spring in his step. He managed a weak smile for the lines of travellers as he walked slowly through the bus station. Here and there he acknowledged an old

friend with a touch of his Stetson hat. Today was Monday. On Friday he would hand back his uniform and begin a well-earned retirement. But he was not looking forward to it. The nightmares had dogged him since Vietnam and were not likely to let him go now just because he was old. He was terrified of inactivity. That was when the flashbacks were at their worst - the faces of the dead and dying, the enemies *and* the friends. He had just about managed to persuade the department to keep him on a bit longer, but now it was time to go. He was a strong believer but this time Jesus let him down. The long sleepless nights ahead promised to be difficult. "Just tell me what to do Lord and I'll do it." He prayed quietly, "I've served my country. I've served the people of this town. I've served you as best I can. Now you're sending me to Hell. What's the deal?"

Bobby Jo McKenzie waited patiently in line to board the local bus. She was going to visit Grandpa at the nursing home. Nothing put Bobby Jo off seeing Grandpa. She had always been adventurous, never afraid of being out on her own. She loved being in a crowd. The bus drivers were always friendly and there were always helpers when she got on the bus. Nobody could resist her round cheerful face, with the rosy cheeks framed in wild red hair. It was great to be alive with so many good people in the world.

Craig Jefferson stood in line for five minutes before he realised it was the wrong line. The Dallas bus wasn't listed on the timetable. He had been so sure it was right just before. Now he wasn't sure of anything. He began trembling. He was worried everyone was watching him. His big red facial spots hurt him now. He almost dropped his bag as he stumbled over to the next line. "Does.... does anyone know which is the D-Dallas stand?" The kindly old woman turned, but it was the loud young woman who spoke first. "Just over there!" shouted Bobby Jo, "You got plenty of time. It doesn't go for another ten minutes. Are you going to Dallas for the rock concert?" At first Craig didn't see her. He scanned down to see a girl with a wide, confident grin, a girl about his age. She was the sort of person who normally gave him a kick for his lack of confidence. But this girl couldn't kick anyone. Craig saw the wheelchair and felt guilty. He so often felt guilty but didn't know why. "Er... thanks" he mumbled. "I'm not a big rock fan. I'm going for a job interview." "Good luck!" she shouted." The moment Craig stepped away from the line and started towards the Dallas bus he regretted it. He should have stayed and talked to the kind wheelchair girl. Another minute wouldn't have cost him anything and she seemed so

keen to talk to him. How often did *that* happen. He looked back and smiled briefly. For a moment he took in the sad wasted paralysed legs, and that happy winning smile. He cursed himself. He'd never had a girlfriend. He'd never really had friends. The Dallas job application had taken all his courage. He desperately wanted to live life to the full but didn't know how. A thought crossed his troubled mind. Just my luck if I never see her again.

Rabbi Mordecai Bernstein stepped off the Austin bus. He marched with purpose towards the exit. Everything about him seemed to shout "Tradition!" He felt acutely the need to honour his ancestors with every stride. If anyone dared to doubt the suffering of the Jewish people he was ready to stand and argue with his last breath. He regarded the shabby brown skinned man, with the garbage sack for his few belongings, shuffling from the Houston bus. For a second the old Rabbi was certain the scary youth would pull a gun and open fire on the crowd. Perhaps this enemy of the United States, this hater of Judaism, was working with a highly organized Islamist terror cell. Bernstein checked out the young man's emaciated waistline for a bomb belt.

Ranjit Ghafoor was indeed a Muslim, but Rabbi Bernstein was wrong about everything else. Ranjit simply wanted to begin a new peaceful life in America. He saw the old man staring hard at him as he walked past. Ranjit stared back, uncertain what the problem was. Mordecai stared back harder. The staring competition escalated with increasing paranoia on both sides.

Billy Ray arrived at the bus station shaking with fear and excitement. He calmed himself, certain that God wanted this. The strong and the righteous would emerge victorious. America would be great again. He scanned the crowd of midday travellers shuffling this way and that. He felt a rush of adrenalin as he took in the juicy targets demanding righteous damnation: the old Jew, the young Muslim, an entire black family, and a whole busload of Mexican or Hispanic types.

Jerome and Virgil initially escaped Billy Ray's attention. They were tall, strong, handsome white American men striding boldly and without shame through the crowd. Then, without realizing the deadly danger, they set aside the tiff they had earlier and grabbed each other's hand. They giggled like children and kissed briefly, unaware of the hateful hissing just a few feet away. "You queers are on the list". Billy Ray's murderous intent was barely audible, but real enough.

There was a moment of horror as Billy Ray realised there were too many God-fearing white-folks in the way. Thoughts of friendly fire raced through his sick mind. "Come on people," he whispered. "Get out of the way. Stop walking in front of my targets. I'm fighting the enemies of Jesus here. Help me out." He almost lost his nerve. It was right at the moment he turned to leave that he saw it - the wheelchair. That did it. The red-mist rose and there was no going back. "You're gonna die first. No special arrangements for you. No retards in my world".

The plan that formed in his head was pure and clear. The Jew, the Muslim, the blacks and the gays were all moving from left and right, towards a convenient free-fire zone in a vacant bay between the waiting buses. He would walk forward and kill them all at close range. The righteous white Americans would know he meant business and keep clear. The wheelchair girl with the smile on her face was in the line for the local bus. She was neatly in the centre of Billy Ray's free-fire zone. Strangely, Bobby Jo was the first to see the danger. She felt confusion as the fat, fair-haired, blue-eyed boy approached, staring. He was staring at *her*. She felt concern as he put down his knapsack and reached inside. Not once did he take his eyes off Bobby Jo. Confusion and concern gave way to blind terror as the gun emerged into the light of day.

Billy Ray enjoyed a brief happy flashback to the first time he'd held a gun as a kid. The man in the gun shop had put the pistol in his hand. "Get a feel for the good ol' 1911 boy, an honest-a-goodness American gun. Seven rounds in the magazine and one in the chamber. Watch out for the recoil now. She kicks like a mule."

Billy Ray knelt on one knee to take the shot. He had always preferred this position. He seemed to get better results. He raised the gun. He lined up the three red dots on the gun sight with the target. He felt more powerful than he had ever felt before. He saw her fear. He gave himself a second to enjoy it. Then he squeezed the trigger.

Nothing happened.

At this point the crowd of travellers came out of their self-interested trance and paid attention to the bizarre scene. Billy Ray's surprise and confusion at his trusted Colt's apparent malfunction coincided perfectly with the onlookers' surprise and confusion at the sight of this assassin in their midst. Everyone took a sharp intake of breath. Everyone.

Another flashback to that first gun lesson put Billy Ray straight. The old gun-shop guy had told him: "There's somethin' real important you

gotta know about the Colt 1911 son. Remember to pull down the safety lever, otherwise it won't shoot, see. You can squeeze the trigger all day and get nowhere." With a playful smile he finished the sermon. "If you're a good soldier you'll remember this and never get in any trouble".

With the safety lever firmly down Billy Ray took aim again. The element of surprise was gone. It was Rabbi Bernstein who shouted first. "No!"

Startled, the deranged fascist pointed at the source of the protest. In a heartbeat he squeezed the trigger and the .45 round left the barrel with a deafening noise at nearly 1000 feet per second. Mordecai was on the move when the round passed through his arm. The round shattered the ticket office window, and passed through the ticket office back door. The bullet, now as twisted as its owner, rattled harmlessly into the parking lot.

In the bus station chaos reigned. Scores of startled people ran in all directions. A big woman, screaming for her life, ran into Bobby Jo's wheelchair. Mordecai Bernstein fell back clutching his arm. The sudden pain drew a shout of alarm. The scarlet spatters on the concrete floor fuelled more terror. Wide-eyed, Billy Ray panicked as white Christian folks ran through his field of fire, falling over each other, venting their fright in the highest pitch they could manage. Looking frantically back and forth for some idea what to do next, Billy Ray remembered the busload of aliens. The confined space was perfect. They couldn't run. With trembling hands Billy Ray shuffled through his knapsack and pulled out the pipe bomb. Then he grabbed the lighter.

Craig Jefferson heard the gunshot and the screams. As the flock of humanity ran for their lives, Craig had one thought. Wheelchair girl. Oh God, please be ok. So often Craig had run *from* anything the slightest bit dangerous. Running *towards* danger was new, and yet here he was. Dodging the terrified travellers with their flailing arms, he was running back to the local bus. How different this was, he thought, from *World Of Warcraft* or *Call Of Duty*. Terror is real. Injury is horrible. Death is forever. I might die now, he thought. The fear was powerful, but the feeling he had for the smiling red head was stronger, a lot stronger. He looked. There was a young fat guy crouching, lighting something. Then Craig saw her. Wheelchair girl was face down on the concrete floor like a child's rag doll. Craig gasped as saw the blood. Not her blood. The old guy was hurt. There was a shabby brown-skinned guy kneeling by him. Running past the armed fair-haired terrorist as if he wasn't there, Craig went

to Bobby Jo, cursing the cowardice of the other travellers. You don't just - just leave a defenceless girl on the ground and just - just run away, do you?

Deputy Sheriff Needam was jerked out of his thoughts by the sudden crack. He spun round and tried to take it all in. "Ok, time to go to work." He whispered to himself, "One last time." He began running towards the sound. There was no time to help the people tripping over each other. While the inner demons burned his troubled soul, the training kicked in.

"Shot fired. Bus station. Request backup!"

"Received ten four".

The voice on the radio was reassuring. There would be help soon. Law and order would take control again. But right now Rex Needam *was* the law.

"I hope that is not too tight." said Ranjit, fearful the makeshift bandage was not tight enough. The young Afghan refugee returned the old Rabbi's wry smile. "I came to the United States to avoid getting shot." Despite the sharp pain the Rabbi almost laughed, but offered counseling instead. Shaking a bony finger at the young Muslim he rasped "You will need that sense of humour if you are going to live in Texas, my boy."

As Rex Needam approached he assessed the scene as quickly as he could. The two tall young men running away weren't actually hurt. They were just crying with the shock and holding each other. There were two people on the ground by the buses – an old man and a young woman. An empty wheelchair lay on its side. The young fat guy had to be the shooter. There was a pistol on the ground by his feet. The priority was simple. Arrest the suspect, then deal with the victims. Needam drew a big breath. The command would be loud. There was no room for error.

"County Sheriff! Hands in the air! Step away from the gun!"

The speed of the fat boy's response was scary, the look in his intense blue eyes even scarier. In a second there he was, bolt upright, gun in hand. Needam was staring straight down the barrel of a 1911 just a few feet away. Do me a favour, boy. Shoot straight. Thoughts of a quick, painless euthanasia seemed to drag on and on.

Rex Needam's thoughts went back to the basic training in the Sheriff's Department, and further back again to his army training. They can teach you everything except how to prepare for death. The army instructor had been full of every *other* type of wisdom. Things like: "*Remember to pull down the safety lever on the Colt 1911, otherwise it won't shoot, see. You*

can squeeze the trigger all day and get nowhere. A good soldier will remember this and stay out of trouble.” Didn’t he buy a gun shop after the war? Not sure. Needam closed his eyes as the younger man prepared to fire.

Bang!

It wasn’t so much the sound of the gun as the recoil. Army training forms habits for life. Needam had drawn his own weapon (one of the few remaining 1911’s still in service with Texas law enforcement), *pulled down the safety lever*, and fired in self-defence – all without thinking. Training.

Oh Jesus I’ve shot someone. Needam stepped forward to assess the damage. *All these years without drawing my gun and now I’ve gone and shot someone.* He kicked away the gun on the ground while replacing his own in his holster. Is he dead? There was a shuffle a few feet away. Craig Jefferson picked up Bobby Jo McKenzie and began running. He almost dropped her but she held on with surprising strength. At the same moment Ranjit Ghafoor threw Mordecai Bernstein onto his shoulder with practised ease and started his run in the opposite direction. Rex Needam looked back at Billy Ray Landon. Billy Ray took in a sudden breath. He twitched his arms. His blue eyes were transfixed on the blue Texas sky. “God Help me” he whispered. At once the picture was clear. Needam’s .45 round had passed through the fat boy’s abdomen and buried itself in the mass of the Greyhound Bus behind. The boy was bleeding. What internal injury was there?

“Ambulance required!”

“Received ten four.”

Something else caught the deputy sheriff’s eye. He wasted two valuable seconds staring at the small innocent looking cylinder in the gutter, clinking against the curb. The fizzing fuse mesmerised him. He looked around, concerned for the general public. He calmed down a little as the last few passengers escaped through the emergency exit of the bus and ran. The curious onlookers were some distance away. In the distance flashing blue lights and wailing sirens called out to him. Hold on Rex, we’re coming.

“I’ll read you your rights in hospital, young fella. That bomb of yours is the problem now.” There was no way the old deputy sheriff could lift the overweight suspect and run to safety. He was still wheezing from the effort of getting to the crime scene. The crowd looked on with macabre fascination. Each good citizen wanted to bring his own wisdom to the spectacle.

“Isn’t that Rex Needam? I thought he retired,” said one.

“It looks like a robbery gone wrong,” said another.

“Oh my God!” shouted a third, unsure what to think.

They watched their law enforcer pull the discarded wheelchair upright. With one adrenalin-fuelled lunge, the young criminal was hauled up and thrown onto the wheelchair. In a moment Needam was on the move, pushing the wheelchair as fast as he could away from the pipe bomb as it consumed its last half-inch of fuse.

The bomb turned out to be like everything else in Billy Ray’s life – an abysmal failure. The damp homemade explosive smouldered, smoked and died. Needam didn’t know this. He kept running.

The curious crowd kept watching. Another voice expressed conjecture and opinion.

“Isn’t that the Landon kid? I told you he was strange”.

Craig set Bobby Jo down on a bench along the street from the bus station. The two young people laughed, cried and held each other. They wanted tickets for that rock concert. They wanted each other. Craig loved Bobby Jo. He always would.

Ranjit carefully lowered Mordecai onto a grass bank round the corner from the bus station. The Rabbi realized the young Moslem was used to courageous deeds under fire. A new reality entered the old man’s world. *A Moslem saved me. He could easily have run away but he saved me.* Mordecai respected and admired Ranjit. He always would.

Rex Needam was strangely at peace now. All those years ago, back in the Mekong Delta he was trying to kill the enemy. Now he was trying to *save* his enemy. As he ran along, gasping for breath, pushing the wheelchair, he smiled broadly. In his heart he offered a silent prayer. *Thank you Jesus. I see it clearly now. Amen.* Rex Needam felt a warm growing sense of well-being. He always would.

Billy Ray bobbed around in the wheelchair as he raced along. He wasn’t thinking about those he hated. He was preoccupied with his own “shock and awe”. He had great pain in his upper body, and more disturbing than that, *no* pain in his lower body.

Billy Ray needed the wheelchair now...

He always would.

PARALLEL WORLDS

Peter Caton

A. THE STUDENT

His face was youthful, attractive.

He was altogether a handsome young man and, by all appearances, had everything going for him. A pretty girl walked closely beside him, her arm around his waist, and their eyes said it all.

Today they were making for the station.

College lectures had finished just half an hour ago and their plans were to escape the city, return to his place and, after a quick evening snack, spend the evening making love. Well, that's what their eyes were saying!

However, some of his closest friends knew of another secret. He was carrying the weight of at least two thousand years of bloody world history in his heart, and that, too, sometimes showed in his eyes. He was a history student, with all the advantages of youth on his side. But in his mind, the weight of conflict was depressing him, day by day, stage by stage, into an explosive human package from which there seemed no escape. Some in his family were saying: "He's taking it too much to heart." Indeed, he was a confirmed depressive, with bipolar tendencies.

How sad. How unfair and disagreeable, that two conflicting worlds should co-exist in such an attractive setting.

B. THE LADY

She was a shining example. She had lived in the community for thirty years and had gained the respect of all who knew her. Some are known for their skill, some for their knowledge, some for their position. But she was known for her love. Not that soft, comfortable feeling of being loved; but that tough love which makes a difference to people's lives.

She had found time to listen empathetically to people's problems.

She had given food and shelter to those who were destitute.

She had given money to those who were genuinely poor.

And in time, she was recognised for her efforts. She was made a Dame. That, of course, increased her fame and she began to accept invitations to give lectures, to speak at dinner functions and other such occasions.

Yet she expertly covered up her own grief.

No one knew of the abuse she constantly suffered at the hands of her violent husband. Privately, secretly, she was worn out.

Here again, parallel worlds cross. And here again, the question is asked: “How can they co-exist?”

C. THE PRISONER

He had been found out. Now he was paying the price for rape and murder. He was paying with at least twenty years of his future. He had served fifteen of them. And in those fifteen years he had changed. Understandably.

But there was an added surprise.

It happened just after he had completed five years. In his cell one night he had a strange spiritual encounter. It was witnessed by only one other prisoner. The result was awesome. He told the prison Chaplain. He showed true remorse for his crime. He started attending the Chapel. He even wrote to the girl’s family. Commendable.

But in the days following there was yet another surprise.

He woke one morning to find he had the power to heal people: to influence all kinds of sickness. Together, inmates and prison staff began visiting his cell for help. They came with depression, with regret, with anger and bitterness. They came with personal family matters and with sexual problems. Others had physical problems: broken bones, defective sight. Rarely was his cell empty.

So his fame spread uncontrollably. Nothing like this had ever happened before in the prison, nor has it happened since. A remarkable story.

But is this a fairy tale? How could two parallel worlds exist in this man’s life: one for evil, one for good?

Perhaps it is better for us to leave the questions unanswered, to go out and observe real people, and then to arrive at our own conclusions.

MY FATHER'S WATCH

Christine Holland

It wasn't gold, or even gold plated; it had a soft leather strap, which was burgundy. The face was so unusual, he said that the lady in the shop had helped him choose it as his retirement gift.

His boss had said, "Choose your own, then it will be just what you want. A timepiece is a personal item." It was rather good-looking, just like the man himself. Though I think the lady in the shop must have influenced him as it certainly wasn't one that I would have chosen.

Punctuality was of great importance to my father.

But he never got to wear it. On the first morning of his retirement, Mum took him his morning cuppa, saying, as she was climbing the stairs, "At last I've got you all to myself. Let's get ticking that bucket list. Barbados here we come!"

He was sitting in bed with the watch in his hand, and the accompanying card had fallen on the floor. The words on it simply said

Long service achievement to a man who had time for everyone.

He was still warm and his eyes were wide open.

I had booked the day off work after his retirement party, to take my parents to the airport. But her piercing scream had woken me and I heard the cup of tea crash to the floor.

The funeral was a small affair. My brother helped us go through all his papers and make all the funeral arrangements. I helped as much as I could but my priority was Mum. For 55 years of marriage she had been devoted to him. Bless her.

My brother called me one evening to ask if I thought it possible that Dad had had a mistress?

"Don't be so absolutely ridiculous," I said, "Where on earth did you get that idiotic notion from?"

"I found a letter in his papers, and a jewellery receipt for a ring that Mum never received."

“Oh Peter, our Dad! No, never. There must be some explanation. What did the letter say? Who was it from?”

“I’ll let you see it. She says how much it means to have him in her life, and how the time they spend together is so precious, and stuff like that.”

I went to his house the next day, unable to believe my father could have been unfaithful. The letter said how lucky she had been to find him, how her life was now complete, how she knew one day they would be reunited, how it made her feel when he looked into her eyes and held her close in his arms. She had signed it

We will always be part of each other. I will always love you. June.

“Bloody hell, Pete! Mum must never know any of this. It would kill her!”

The receipt was for an eternity ring that had the engraving inside saying *Love you, Sweetheart.*

Sweetheart! That’s what Dad always called me! How could he? The blood rushed to my head. My mind spun. This man, the centre of our lives! Bastard, bloody bastard!

Pete came and comforted me. “Perhaps it was just sex, perhaps him and Mum went through a bad patch when we were young. Try to think positive, even if this woman was part of his life. He never left us and Mum did he?”

“No!” I screamed. “He lived a bloody double life!”

One night, when Mum and I sat sharing our memories, drinking wine, laughing and crying together, she caught me unawares.

“What is it, love? Is there something about your Dad that’s bothering you? I’m your Mum, I sense these things.”

“Oh Mum, how well you know me.” Instantly, I broke down and the words spilled out so easily as I sobbed in my mother’s arms.

She listened and then, as my tears subsided, she held her hand under my chin, lifted my head and wiped my tears away. Looking lovingly into my eyes, she spoke gently.

“June is your stepsister. She and your Dad were reconciled about twenty years ago. She was the product of his first love at school. They were only sixteen and they had her adopted. She came to find her parents about ten years ago. Forgive him, love. I have. They were so young. And she looks a lot like you. Her Mum works in the jewellers. She is the pretty lady who helped him choose his retirement watch!”

SALLY SALAMANDER

Andy Siddle

Sally Salamander speaks with great candour,
She tells it just as it is.
You won't hear her politely pander
To those who mistake Mrs for Ms.

A husband would hold her back, you see,
He'd only get in her way.
If you're an ambitious amphibian
You can't waste a single day.

Sally's a successful socialite
Since she moved across the pond.
She's left no stepping stone unturned,
From fringe of fern to flapping frond.

With en-suite petals and four spacious blooms,
She's earned her new pad by the shore.
It's overhung with lily flowers
And the water's bright, clear and pure.

There's no easy way to say this
But Sally's a bit of a snob.
She doesn't fraternise with frogs
And with toads she'll never hobnob.

Sally Salamander thinks she's special,
She thinks she's really cute
And perish the amphibian
Who dares to call her a newt.

'They're plain and dull,' she says,
'Got no colour, got no spots.'
The black and white patches on Sally's skin
Make her a pondlife polkadot.

Sally says newts are inferior
No depths to which they won't sink
And, she points out, they are notoriously bad
When it comes to handling their drink.

THE SWEETNESS BOMB

John Brown

David Porter parked his white Vauxhall Astra car between two scruffy Hondas and strolled into the “Blue Bear”. In the bar, he waited a moment while a customer was served, then caught the attention of the busy landlord.

“Excuse me mate, “he said cheerfully to mine host, “Is this where the Immortal Classics Car Society have their meetings?”

The burly publican gave a wry smile, pointed dismissively to the back room and told David that that was where the old banger nutters hung out. Porter rather tentatively entered the large room and acknowledged the curious glances of the society members with a nod and a faint grin.

“Hallo old chap, you look a bit bewildered, can we be of assistance?” The cheery greeting came from a rather portly, florid gentleman wearing sharply creased grey-flannels, a freshly ironed white shirt, a regimental tie and a black blazer with gold buttons and a fancy crest. He was happily clutching a pint of beer and beamed at David with obvious good humour.

“Er, yes, I hope so, I’m Dave Porter, and I’ve been told that you guys are the best people to ask about old sports cars.”

“Guilty as charged, David. What we don’t know about classic sports machines is not worth the froth on a pint. I’m Ted Watson, sort of chairman around here and these ‘speed-demons’ are all poised to mull and ponder over your motoring dilemma.”

Dave glanced around the room and noticed that the ten speed-demons ranged from middle-aged to ancient, and all seemed to favour the baggy trousers and leather-patched sports jacket look. They animatedly waved pints of ale and talked loudly in a bewildering mixture of heavy-handed banter and totally obscure technical jargon. A perfect collection of British male stereotypes, thought Dave.

“Oh, it’s not my car. My brother-in-law, Max, has been trying to fix-up an old banger that he acquired, but he seems to have screwed things up a bit. Anyhow, his neighbour had heard of your club, so Max asked me to get your advice as I live nearby.”

Ted shook his head and lowered his voice a little before answering. “Well, we never call vintage cars old bangers around here old son, but if it is advice you need, then we are the boys,” exclaimed Ted eagerly. “Now which example of prime automotive delight has your friend acquired?”

“Well, it sounds really weird, I don’t expect you’ve ever heard of it. It’s a right old bang - er, sorry, vintage car, but as far as we can tell it’s called a “Bomb” and we think the make is a “Sweetness.”

A pall of shocked silence descended over the room, just like in a western movie when the bad guy walks into the saloon. “Good God man, no, no, you must be mistaken,” gasped Ted hoarsely. “Not a Bomb, the holy grail of automotive excellence. It simply cannot be!”

“Well Ted, I don’t know about the “holy grail” bit. It’s a total old rusty heap, but it definitely says Sweetness on the engine badge and you can just make out “Bomb” on the tail fin thingy. Our Max emailed me a photo of it, he thought it might help,” said David, placing the picture on one of the tables.

The society guys clustered around and gazed in incredulous reverence at the decaying relic sagging quietly on the path outside Max’s garage.

“It just might be,” whispered old Don Fletcher, who treasured a pencil sketch of a “Bomb” cut from a 1929 copy of *Sports Car Legends* magazine.

Ted managed to find his voice. “We’d better call Benno, he’ll know,” he wheezed and sagged slowly into a chair to get his breath back.

“Has Mr Benno got a Bomb then?” asked Dave innocently.

Ted chortled. “A whole Bomb? Nay, laddie, Benno - er, Alan Bennett actually - has an almost intact radiator grill and three ironwood wheel bearings.”

“Oh. Max thought those things were door knobs of some sort. Wheel bearings, eh? Don’t they wear out quickly, being made of wood?”

“I don’t believe that anyone ever drove a Bomb far enough to find out, old son. Professor Sweetness was a true genius though.”

This observation prompted a host of reminiscences – indeed, possibly incantations - about Professor Algernon Sweetness and his many technical innovations from the dumbfounded speed-demons as they stood and gazed adoringly, beer forgotten, at the old rust-bucket on the photo. Don returned from ringing Mr Bennett and declared that he would arrive anon; the thought of seeing a Bomb would lend wings to his heels.

Sure enough, five minutes later, a stocky, balding, red-haired individual burst in and dashed to the photo in a fever of impatience, “Oh my Lord,” he sobbed, “It is! It bloody is!” Then he sat down limply at the table, his eyes never straying from the picture.

While Benno sat gazing in rapt oblivion at the Bomb, David looked out of the pub window at the car park, “I don’t see any sports cars out there,” he observed to Ted, “Just Fords and Vauxhalls like my Astra.”

“Oh no old lad, those things belong to our wives; all of our classics are laid-up at the moment. Prime thoroughbreds crave a lot of TLC, you know, endless tweaks and adjustments. It’s worth it, though. There’s nothing to beat the roar of a finely tuned motor, the wind in your hair, the rumble of tyres and the smell of hot oil. Ahhh!”

Ted’s eyes glazed over at the vision and Dave noticed the same spellbound expression drift dreamily over the faces of all the “boys”. He smiled, thinking privately that most of them didn’t have enough hair for the wind to get into. It transpired, though, that such golden driving moments were quite a rarity. The boys’ thoroughbreds were constantly plagued with strange technical problems that kept them in pieces in their garages. They didn’t seem to mind, however, as the various gremlins provided endless debate and negotiation for weird spare parts.

Benno eventually regained the power of speech and agitatedly grasped David’s arm. “How did your mate find her?” he rasped, in the tone a devoted father would use to thank the guy who had saved his child from a burning building.

“Our Max is a builder, and he found the car in an old shed that he was going to demolish. The owner’s widow didn’t want it and asked Max to dump it for her. Anyway, Max thought he’d have a go at getting it running and maybe do a bit of banger racing.”

“Running?” howled Benno, aghast, “You don’t just turn a key to start a Bomb! Banger racing! Is the man insane?” He slumped back limply into his chair. “Banger racing,” he continued despairingly, “The old prof would be turning in his grave if they’d ever found enough of him to bury.”

“He’s dead, then?”

A tear appeared in Benno’s eye. “Professor Sweetness perished in an explosion in 1934, while attempting to introduce nitro-glycerine into petrol as a fuel additive. He only ever produced five Bombs.”

Dave mentioned that most of the running gear was in a wooden box and Max had had a swine of a job fitting the engine; there weren’t any bolts

or fixing holes in the chassis. Benno listlessly explained that mechanical magicians like the professor didn't concern themselves with mundane things like nuts and bolts. Bomb owners were expected to fit engines, steering and suspension themselves. Professor Sweetness provided scrawled notes on bits of paper as a guide and sent his customers a basic chassis, body and engine, plus a fairly random selection of spare parts. People who wouldn't apply themselves and were too stupid to figure it out had no business buying such a miracle of engineering.

Dave pressed on, despite Benno's distress. "Yeah, well anyway, me and our Max pretty much got it put together, bunged a new battery on it and tried to start it up. There was this weird looking metal gizmo on top of the engine that pretty much melted and the engine just gave a weak fart and died. Is there any chance of us getting a new one, or shall we just slap a Ford on it?"

The chorus of outraged gasps and groans from the boys stopped any further blasphemy from Dave; apparently the speed-demons didn't entirely agree with him. Benno bought a pint, took a long swig of his beer and, with a huge effort, calmed himself; he was evidently dealing with a complete cretin.

"David lad, that weird gizmo was the patented Sweetness Injector Detector mechanism; it should have been immersed in liquid nitrogen for an hour before any attempted start-up. The engine worked on a sixteen volt battery, so obviously the pure tin filament in the auto transfer portal would have melted, the cam-shaft would have snapped at its frangible torque-link junction and the crankshaft would have disintegrated. Starting a Bomb required a full day's careful preparation."

He sighed. "That was the last complete engine. Some were destroyed in the professor's immolation, and his ham-fisted customers wrecked the rest. But if it had worked, Lord, the wonder of it, the culmination of utter engineering excellence,"

"So it's pretty much bugged, then," said Dave. "Well, it's worth a tenner to a scrap dealer, anyway."

"A tenner!" cried Ted. "But this is a holy relic!"

The boys organised an immediate whip-round and bought the Bomb on the spot. "This will be a society project," proclaimed Ted. "We have the technology and the expertise, so we can rebuild her. The Bomb must live again!"

The delighted boys raised their glasses in salutation and Benno arranged with Dave to collect the treasure on his trailer the following morning. The great project would need months, nay years of mulling and pondering and spare-part acquisition before a spanner would be lifted. Ted knew of a ninety year old Cornish Gypsy who was skilled in pure tin filament work, if he was still alive, and if they could work out the intricacies of the injector-detector from the professor's scribbled notes. Don had read somewhere that a guy in Rhyl had an almost intact crankshaft and Charley was sure that a retired window cleaner in Glasgow had been bragging in *Automotive Treasures* magazine that his brother had a Bomb cam-shaft in a glass case over his bed. Benno was certain that if they were very careful, the explosive fuel could be reproduced without the grim fate of Algernon Sweetness.

The Immortal Classics Car Society was content.

THE SCARF

Tim Hulme

The scarf lay on a mound of bracken, a bright blue distant patch in a glistening white world. He quickened his step, his walking shoes crunching the tough grasses petrified by the early frost. As he came nearer, a waft of mist, eddying in the thin warmth of the brilliant December sunshine, caught the scarf, whirling it up into the brisk air, away from him, and landing it tantalising yet further from him; and when he reached the tree, the scarf was gone.

They came up here on the moor every month while she was still able to. All their married lives, it had been their favourite place. In summer they would bring a picnic and sit in the lee of this wind-blasted tree, so bent by the winds that you could walk along its trunk. In winter, they would hike the moorland, pausing here to recover a second energy.

That last time, she had barely been able to reach the tree. Every step was a bolt of pain. He had tried to dissuade her, but she was determined. He had brought the car as close as he could, and then all but carried her to the tree, where she had slumped, grey and exhausted.

She took off her headscarf and shook her hair in the breeze.

“I don’t know why you still wear that old thing,” he said.

She ran the soft silk through her stiff fingers: the blue paisley pattern still brilliant after all those years. She smiled. “Because it was the first present you gave me.”

As she held it up for him to see, it rippled in the wind.

“You see where I darned it? Do you remember? That time, when I fell in amongst the brambles and you had to untangle me, and we ended up both covered in blood. And that’s white paint when I was painting the garden seat. I shouldn’t have worn it then. Oh dear, it’s very frayed now, isn’t it?”

At that moment, a stronger gust whipped it from her hand and it floated up into the air and away. She tried to rise to chase it but he held her firm.

“Perhaps,” he said, “it had come to its end,” and she had nodded.

Now, when he came to this place, the scarf was always there, ever beyond his grasp. But once he reached the tree, it disappeared into the bright air, and he would sit alone with the moor. One day, though, he would catch it, and he and she would run and laugh as they did all those years ago.

He picked up his stick and turned away. He would come again next month.

SUNDAY NIGHT SQUARE OF LIGHT

Andy Siddle

When the week ahead
Holds fear and dread
And Monday means only pain,
Reach inside for the child
You once were
 When Tom Sawyer and wonder still reigned.

Being alive means things can change
And you can breathe in the new.
Take strength from the square
Of Sunday night light
 On the bedroom wall of your youth.

The streetlight cast its friendly glow
Banishing shadowy fears,
While the clock on the wall
Weighed the future for you
 In dreams of hope and not tears.

For the morning will bring
A fresh start, a new page,
Sunlight will flood through your room.
You are strong and life shines
Outside your front door,
 Waiting to greet you, and soon.

THE CHEESE LEAPERS OF FOXCOMBE GREEN

Tim Hulme

“Thank you so much, Stanley. It’s a lovely birthday present,” said Doris, a bemused expression on her face as she eyed the object emerging from the small parcel.

Fred, back to the fire, leaned forward to inspect the item. He frowned, straightened up so he could look his daughter’s new boyfriend severely in the eye, and asked, “And what is that - er - thing?”

Mabel, attempting a motherly smile, suggested: “It looks like a cheese grater. A miniature one.”

“Absolutely right,” said Stanley proudly. “But it is a ceremonial one! You see I am one of the cheese leapers of Foxcombe Green.”

“That’s nice,” said Mabel.

“How wonderful!” said Doris. “Tell us about it.”

Fred’s eyes shifted heavenwards. Mabel, noticing Fred’s grimace, said: “Stanley won’t take long, will you dear? There’s plenty of time before church.”

“Well,” said Stanley enthusiastically. “Every Leap Year, most of the young men of Foxcombe Green, blacken their faces, don turbans decorated with goose feathers, black jersey, red and white kilts, and black shiny boots.”

Doris giggled. Mabel, wearing an expression somewhere between astonishment and suppressed laughter, queried: “And is that what you had to do, Stanley?”

“I haven’t actually done it yet, but I’m taking part this year. Last time we were only just moving into the village, so I didn’t qualify. Now we’ve been here five years, I’m entitled to take part.”

Fred looked puzzled. “What’s the matter, dear?” mused Mabel.

“I thought you said it happens every Leap Year, that’s every four years, not five.” Fred gave Stanley the look he gave most of Doris’s boyfriends: it meant “You’re an idiot as well a nerd!”

“Oh gosh, Mr Saunders, I’m afraid you are getting confused.” As Fred’s face darkened into a scowl, Stanley continued: “It is rather confusing. You see Leap Year – that’s our Leap Year - Foxcombe Green’s Leap Year - is nothing to do with Leap Year – er ... February 29th and that. It’s supposed

to originate long ago, probably before Julius Caesar – he invented your Leap Year.”

“That’s nice,” said Mabel, obviously totally lost.

“Oh yes,” said Stanley, continuing to warm to his narrative. “There are those who believe that Adam and Eve were not cast out of the Garden of Eden, but leaped out into the wilderness when chased by a giant bullfrog.”

Doris was trying to recall her Bible classes. “I don’t remember a bullfrog in the Garden of . . .”

“Oh, for goodness sake, let the idiot . . .” Fred began, “er . . . Stanley tell us what all these fools in costume are supposed to do at this so-called festival.”

Stanley carried on, unabashed. “The festival starts in the Cheshire Cheese Inn where the wives, who are similarly dressed, all grate a huge Cheshire Cheese ready to add to the big cauldron cooking the famous Foxcombe Cauliflower Cheese. Meanwhile the men are allowed to drink as much as they can before the cheese is fully grated.”

“The women symbolically surrender their cheese graters to the men who dance down the street, leaping every few yards over one of the Leaping Cheeses. Actually they should be real cheeses carved in the shape of bullfrogs but whole cheeses are so expensive these days, they use specially constructed frogs. I made one myself.” Stanley beamed at Doris proudly. Doris beamed back.

“It’s carved out of old rubber tyres. There’s a little plaque on it, saying, ‘This Leaping Cheese presented by Mr Stanley Sidebotham.’ Actually it doesn’t look much like a cheese or a frog: but it makes a great leap!”

Fred leaned over Mabel and whispered, “Where did Doris find this one? He’s more looney than all the others put together.”

Mabel, without losing her bewildered smile, grunted between closed teeth: “I have no idea, dear, but Doris seems totally besotted. Think of something quickly.”

But Stanley was in full stride now: “Anyway, the men carry on dancing, waving garlands of cauliflower leaves and their cheese graters, all accompanied by the Foxcombe Green school band. Eventually they reach the Leaping Eve, the pub at the far end of the village. It’s named, of course, after the legend. The inn sign shows Eve, having gathered her fig leaf about her, leaping over a giant frog with a lascivious grin on its face. Then, after a period of further refreshment, the whole procedure is reversed, at least by

those who are still capable. By the time they have leaped their way back to the Cheshire Cheese, the Foxcombe Cauliflower Cheese will have been thoroughly cooked. The womenfolk then dish it out on the village green to deserving inhabitants and anyone else who can bear to eat it.”

Doris still looked puzzled. “How did it all come about?”

“It originated from some pirates who settled here in the 17th century. They blacked up and waved coconuts to ward off evil spirits. Of course they couldn’t get coconuts over here, so they used cauliflowers instead, and being Cheshire of course, it all got amalgamated into the cheese leapers festival.”

Stanley looked around, questioning: “You’ll all be coming next week, won’t you? You see, before the festival, any man taking part for the first time traditionally gives a ceremonial miniature cheese grater to their wife or betrothed. This entitles her male relatives to join in the leaping. You could join in, Mr Saunders.”

Fred went white. Not noticing, Stanley knelt in front of Doris: “So, here you are, Doris, my cheese grater just for you ... “

“Oh, Stanley, does this mean you are proposing ...?”

Mabel looked despairingly at Fred. Fred rose to the moment. “Mabel!” he cried very loudly. “I think it is time all of us got ready for church, don’t you?”

But Doris still clutched her cheese grater, dewy eyed.

THE PARK BENCH

Mac Whiteley

The grumpy old man sat still as rain created overlapping rings in the small lake. Ducks ignored the sudden downpour, squabbling amongst themselves as they foraged for bits of weed.

The Park Keeper looked out of his small wooden hut as he sipped from a steaming mug of sweet tea. Noticing the man, he shook his head in resignation and took a bite of his biscuit before settling down on a folding chair next to the mower to read the paper. He deserved a tea break, and now was a sensible time to enjoy it.

He was awakened from a snooze a little later, not to the sound of the rain on the shed roof, for that had stopped. Instead, it was the sound of children chanting. Looking out of the small window, he could see three of them, the pesky 'Park Rangers,' as their gang was called. They were running around the bench that still supported the old man, now gently steaming in the autumn sun.

The Park Keeper could just make out their words, "He's dead, Grumpy's dead, the silly old man's dead."

Well, that was always a possibility, but the old man sat there for hours each day and always seemed to manage to move himself for lunch. Or he always had so far. Maybe he actually was dead. Sighing to himself, the Park Keeper put his boots back on. Tea break was over. The man seemed harmless, though he was obviously not "all there". There had been a number of times lately that he had been caught playing on the swings or the roundabout. The grumpy old man had acted like he was five when the Park Manager chased him off the equipment. Definitely something missing there. He would go and check that the old man was okay, chase the horrible kids away, then see if the grass was likely to dry enough for a mow, before it went too dark.

As he opened the shed door, he heard a change in the chorus, along with the sound of a splash. Not the sort of splash that you get with a bird. This was a loud splash. Immediately alert and looking toward the lake, he saw that the old man was, indeed, alive but, having chased off the gang of annoying kids – now disappearing into the bushes – he had slipped and was now in the lake.

The Park keeper grabbed the nearest useful item, a gardening fork, then hurried across to where the old man had slipped in. He was still in the lake, now surrounded by distressed swans and ducks. The lake was only a couple of feet deep, though the bed was admittedly quite slippery with clay, weed and rotting leaves. However, the old man seemed oblivious to this and was splashing about as if he was drowning. The Park Keeper stooped and reached out towards him with the fork.

“Here! Grab the handle and I’ll pull you to the side!”

The old man looked at him, seemingly scared that he was going to be shouted at again. But after struggling for a few seconds more, he grabbed the fork and allowed himself to be pulled ashore. He was soaked from head to toe and covered in pondweed. He looked so comical that the Park Keeper struggled not to laugh.

“Come back to my hut and we’ll try to get you warm while I get some help.” The Park Keeper guided the soggy old man towards his hut, then put the kettle on for a hot drink.

“Just stay there and I’ll be back in a minute.”

A short walk and the Park Keeper was at the park gates, where he persuaded a passer-by to go and find a policeman. By the time he got back to the hut, though, the grumpy old man had gone. Some people just wouldn’t be helped.

About three weeks later, the local police were called to the park again. The Park Keeper had been found face down in the lake, the prongs of a gardening fork pinning his neck to the lake bed. An investigation produced no clues, although the incident was clearly not accidental.

The grumpy old man smiled as he sat quietly on his favourite bench, enjoying the autumn sunshine. He would enjoy ensuring that those horrible, bullying children came to harm in much less suspicious circumstances. Practice makes perfect, after all. Parks were such pleasant places to spend one’s time, so full of wonderfully poisonous plant life, weed killer and fungi.

IN LOVE WITH AN ISLAND

Ben Stroude

Setting off for this walk is not like starting from Ogwen or Pen y Pass or Honister, where your car has already lifted you comfortably for a thousand feet or so. Neither is there a rack railway or cable car. No, here you start from sea level and lump it; every foot of ascent has to be earned.

From the beach a rough, sandy track leads – painfully if you are wearing shorts – through overgrown and untamed blackberry bushes to the crucial junction where the path to the summit begins. This rises steeply, too much so for comfort, especially after rain or dew has lubricated the short grass. It is tempting to kick steps, but probably you are not wearing that kind of footwear and in any case, although you may not be an eco-freak, you still have a certain respect for the environment. Anyway, why shouldn't those coming behind suffer as well?

Eventually, to the delight and relief of the overfed, the angle eases and one enters the fern belt. Here the path zig-zags to and fro, offering tantalising glimpses of the summit whenever there is a view to the south. This stretch seems to take forever, so enticing is the topmost point, but when the ferns disappear all that remains are a few yards of scrambling through the heather before arrival at the welcome rough granite of the summit boulders. It has taken fully fifteen minutes from the beach but at last you have reached the highest point on the island, 140 feet above the sea, and – suddenly to become sincere – you can relish one of the most spectacular views in the whole of the British Isles.

For this is Samson Hill on Bryher, the most westerly of the Isles of Scilly. It isn't much of a hill – you can get much higher on the Wirral – but these things are relative to the surroundings; Bryher in old Cornish means “the place of hills”. With Shipman Head Down in the far north, a mile and a half from our viewpoint, Badplace Hill, where visitors don't linger, Gweal Hill, with its (imported) wild ponies, Watch Hill, where the wreckers used to look out hopefully on stormy nights, to Samson Hill overlooking the uninhabited island of that name, Bryher is a wonderland in miniature.

That is because of the extraordinary all-round backdrop. The five inhabited islands of the Scillies are surrounded by many smaller islets and countless jagged fangs of granite which wage ceaseless battle against the

Atlantic Ocean. Even on still days the swell rolls in, everywhere setting off spume showers of a brilliant white, which make more vibrant the other colours; the infinite variations between deep blue and light turquoise of the sea, the bright silvery-gold of the beaches and the greens and heathers of the land. On wild days, when a westerly gale drives the rollers, with three thousand miles of fetch behind them, onto the rocks – well, you understand why Bryher’s westerly inlet is called Hell Bay.

The Scillies are unique. All other offshore islands of Britain are, as you would expect, just like the adjacent mainland but broken off. (Well, admittedly the Cuillin Hills make Skye rather different but without escaping the West Highland ambience). The Scillies are nothing whatever like the dreary hinterland of mainland Cornwall. They sparkle, with crystal clear water, clean sand (no rivers, therefore no mud), pleasant, undemanding walks, spectacular views, famous birdlife and not too many people - development being restricted not so much by decree as by the availability of fresh water in the wells.

This is a good place to live. The islands may not be tropical but sunshine records are high and life is healthy, judging by the enthusiasm which the youngsters put into their local sport of gig racing. Tourism may dominate the local economy but visitors never overwhelm the place as they do in (say) North Wales or the Lake District. Neither is there the hideous juxtaposition of tax-free wealth and tourist tat, as in the Channel Islands. Here, the local residents are friendly in the extreme and the welcome is genuine.

Meanwhile, seen from the hilltop, the sun is sinking and, a few miles to the south, the double flash of Bishop Rock light, the final (or first) glimpse of Europe for many a voyager, is becoming more evident. The colours of the sea and the sky are growing yet more vivid and it is tempting to linger and wonder at the extraordinary beauty of the scene. But it is time to wander down the hill to the beach, scramble aboard our little boat and, while the soup is simmering, clink a glass in the cockpit with the mate. This is the thirtieth time we have sailed here, sharing those little adventures which strengthen the bond.

If it is possible to be in love, additionally, with a place – well, here we are.

INSTANT THERAPY

Peter Caton

To those who need reassurance:

Repeat after me, "I am Number One..."

I am Number One...

I am Number One..."

To those who have been wronged:

Life is perfectly designed to right all wrongs.

Didn't you know?

To you who is confused:

Go for the simplest option.

To you who will never be satisfied:

With a bit of luck you've got maybe eighty years to get it right.

To you who thinks you're good-looking:

How deep is it?

To you who thinks you're useless:

Step up and prove it.

To you who is successful:

So who do we thank for this?

To you who is always, always, thinking, "I can't."

There's always, always, a choice.

To you who is a perfectionist:

The world's greatest artists, innovators and heroes were perfectionists.

Didn't you know?

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