

## JENNY

I wish. Oh how I wish! But there, it's no earthly use making wishes like that; no good trying to claw back the past in order to bite the cherry a second time. You can't go back. Not ever. The tape of life winds only one way, and having wound to the end, stops. If it breaks in the process, it stops sooner than expected, but that is the only variation permitted.

I was offered the moon once, but like a spoilt child - was I spoilt? - probably, would satisfy with nothing less than the stars. And now? Now I had the tiny patch of earth underneath my feet, a patch that changed constantly with my footsteps, and all of it second hand. Still, the beach gave a spurious sense of ownership, washed constantly as it was to a smooth uniformness that gave the impression of being new and unused. My feet sank into the soft, wet sand as I stared at the bottle drifting in with the tide. Retreating every now and then against the encroaching waters, I waited with what patience I could muster until the bottle was within reach, then stooped and picked it up, feeling slightly self conscious about the act. To be sure, there was nobody close enough to see, nobody even in sight at all, yet the feeling persisted just the same. Years ago I wouldn't have felt the same self consciousness, but then years ago I wouldn't have wandered along a deserted beach for company. Years ago I was a foreigner and did things differently.

I looked at the bottle with an artificial feeling of interest. It was green, a dark, deep colour that could only be described as bottle green. It was almost, but not quite opaque, though it was impossible to see what, if anything, might be inside. Without a label, there was only one way to find out. I removed the cork, half expecting a genie to swirl out and grant me my heart's desire, but of course no such thing happened. I would even have settled for one wish, and anyone else could have had the other two. The contents of the bottle, whatever they had been in the past, had long since gone, only a faint musty smell remaining, a smell that aroused a vague memory in the pathways of my mind. It wasn't apple, but that's the memory that came.

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I was just eighteen when I accompanied my mother on her retreat to the countryside. Not that I had any objection, as I had always liked rural life, so different from the busy, noisy, and above all, impersonal city we lived in. I never liked cities, but I

cannot go back to the countryside now. There are too many memories of things that never happened for it to be comfortable. I live by the sea instead, close by the shore, on the boundary, which is where my mind is situated.

But in those days, it was interesting to stay for several weeks that summer surrounded by farmland and sheep, moorland and forest. Boundaries of a different sort. We had taken a cottage for the whole summer, just my mother and I. There were only the two of us then. I had no brothers or sisters, and my father - well, my father was the reason we were there. With the resilience of youth, I had come to terms with his loss, but mother had taken it hard. There never really was anyone else except him. Even I was a sort of adjunct, an addition to their happiness together. Not that I was unwanted, or unloved. Far from it, but the truth of the matter was that my parents had been so wrapped up in each other that I was free to go my own way even as a small child. For the same reason, though my father was no longer with us, I was not missed when I took to exploring the district we had chosen to live in for those few weeks. I think my mother was only too glad to see that I was not fretting.

There was an intense pleasure in walking along the roadside and getting a mental map of the area, and in deciding where my next walk should be. The ditches were full of waist high grasses and other plants, some with white umbrellas on top, others showing off clusters of tiny yellow flowers. Reds and pinks and blues mixed with the greenery and dusted with scintillating diamonds of early morning dew made each walk a new adventure every time. Daisies abounded. Those I knew, as well as buttercups and dandelions. What the small, scarlet painted flowers that were dotted about here and there could have been I never knew, nor did it seem to be important to find out. They were just things to look at and to wonder about, just as the rapid movement of small creatures was something to ponder over without feeling the need to know more.

Insects for the most part, some sort of lizard perhaps, maybe mice. It didn't seem important to go past the perhaps. It was enough that they were there. To have given them names wouldn't have increased my understanding. I just knew what I liked.

It was on the third day that I found the neighbour. I say *the* neighbour, as he was the only one I ever really got to know. The house was set at the end of a narrow, overgrown lane, immediately after a sharp bend. Tall trees that I later learned were chestnuts grew in a somewhat straggly fashion, shadowing the entrance to the house, so that I came across it suddenly, and with a sense of surprise. There was a man in the garden, or what passed for a garden, since it wasn't cultivated in any way, merely

the taller weeds cut back roughly with a scythe in order to give light and air to an otherwise small and cramped area. I knew it was a scythe that had done the work, because the man was using it as I turned round the bend and came into view. I gave some sort of stammered apology.

‘I... I’m sorry. I didn’t know anyone lived here.’

He met my red cheeks with an amused smile, and stopped working, leaning on the tool with practised ease.

‘Not many people do,’ he said. ‘It’s a bit isolated, even for this area.’

He studied me with a sharp and penetrating eye.

‘You must be the new people. Or one of them, anyway. I heard someone had taken Rose Cottage. Two of you. Is that right?’

‘Yes. Just my mother and myself.’

‘That’s right,’ he said. ‘That’s what I heard. You can’t keep secrets round here very easily. Staying long?’

I shook my head. ‘A few weeks. Just for the summer really. Just until September.’

‘Then back to school I suppose?’

There was a question mark in his voice, but it wasn’t really a question at all.

‘Good heavens, no. I left school ages ago,’ I said with all the airy maturity I could muster. Three weeks ago to be precise, but it didn’t seem necessary to admit it. Such things take on an over inflated importance when you are just eighteen. There was a time when eight and a half, or even eight and three quarters had a much greater importance, but as an adult, I had long since put that sort of thing behind me.

Besides, what could be made of eighteen and almost a week?

His smile didn’t exactly express disbelief, but I had the uncomfortable feeling that my ploy had been seen through.

‘It must be dull for you in the countryside,’ he said. ‘Especially here. There’s not a lot of entertainment for a young girl.’

I stared at him frostily, in the hope that he might recognise his error. Girl indeed!

‘As it happens, I like it. I’m not a child to be entertained. When one has resources of one’s own - mental resources, you understand, then boredom isn’t a remote possibility.’

Looking back, I recognise the pomposity, but I thought my statement very mature at the time, a thought that crumbled slightly at the edges when the smile opposite simply broadened.

He shrugged. 'Well, you'll need all the resources you've got to live here for any length of time. Perhaps you'll manage for the summer. What brought you here anyway, if I may be curious?'

'That's a question that might be considered rude,' I said.

'So it might. Then I'll rephrase it. What brought you here anyway, if I may be rude? You don't need to tell me, of course. It's only idle interest on my part.'

'Oh, it's no great secret,' I said. 'Just about the whole world knows, I shouldn't wonder. My father died some time ago, fairly recently, in fact, and my mother wanted to get away for a while. I'm keeping her company.'

'I'm sorry,' he said, and he sounded as though he meant it. That was the first time he showed sensitivity.

'If I may be curious in turn, what brought you here?' I asked, preferring to change the subject. 'You don't need to tell, of course.'

'I won't, but I'll allow you to guess.'

'I'm not sure I like guessing games,' I said.

'Don't you? Oh, I love them. Anyway, you won't get to satisfy your nosiness without.'

There came a long silence as we stared at each other, while I considered whether my sense of curiosity was greater than my sophistication.

'I'm not nosy,' I said weakly, knowing I had lost the battle with myself already.

'All right, natural interest in a fellow being, if you prefer,' he said with a grin. 'While you are making your mind up, would you like a drink?'

'Sorry, I don't drink,' I replied a little more stiffly than I had intended.

'Nonsense. Everybody drinks.' He hesitated. 'I didn't mean alcohol, if that's what you're thinking. You're probably a bit young for that, even if you have left school. Apple juice is what I had in mind. Apple juice with a bit of ice floating on the top. Nothing more.'

'Oh, all right. Thank you. It is rather hot.'

It was hot, as it had been ever since arriving, a heat spell that showed no signs of disappearing. I sat on one of the two garden chairs underneath the spreading branches of a sweet smelling tree that buzzed with the sound of what I was sure were hundreds of busy bees in the branches. It felt a bit uncomfortable at first, but I soon realised that the insects were after more attractive things than myself. Not that I was considered unattractive, but a bee might well have another viewpoint, a viewpoint just

as valid as any human idea of beauty. To a bee at least.

My host came back with a tray on which were several containers.

‘When I used the words nothing more, I was referring to the alcohol content of the drinks,’ he said. ‘There are strawberries as well. Cream here. Sugar there. Help yourself. And when you’ve done that, you can start guessing.’

‘I’ve done so already,’ I said. ‘You’re an artist.’

‘Artist? Ah, you’ve seen the easel. Wrong, I’m afraid. I dabble a little in water colours, but not even my best friends would call me an artist. No. Try again.’

I helped myself to a bowlful of strawberries and ate them all before answering.

‘Holiday maker?’ I hazarded.

‘Not bad, but still wrong. I’m not on holiday. I rarely take a holiday. The last one was over five years ago.’

‘Oh, then I don’t know. It’s too hot to guess. Tell me.’

‘Certainly not. You must find out for yourself.’

‘Oh, if you insist. But not right now. I can’t think in this temperature,’ I said. I looked at my watch. ‘Anyway, I should really be getting back. My mother will have some food ready soon, and she doesn’t like to see it spoiled.’

‘Then you must certainly go. Mothers and meals must never be kept waiting. Come back another day if you like. I’m always at home. Any time you’re passing.’

As I walked the short distance back to our own cottage, I realised that I had never found the neighbour’s name. Still, I thought, he doesn’t know mine either.

It was almost a week before I went back again. For some reason which I found difficult to define, I hadn’t told my mother about our neighbour. It’s all part of a growing maturity to have little secrets from a parent, but at the time I didn’t think in that way. Besides, she was rather distracted, and clearly welcomed the fact that I found my own entertainment. So soon after my father’s death, she was still withdrawn, more than usually.

It was late morning and the dew diamonds had long since evaporated from the grass. No matter. There would be others another day. The neighbour was sitting in the garden underneath the bee tree, apparently painting a picture of the cottage. He looked up at my arrival, and waved me to the other seat, from where I could watch what he was doing. It didn’t look bad, but I was no expert in art. At least it looked like the cottage. I mean, it wasn’t just a representative daub which many paintings seem to be.

‘All right, I’m finished,’ he said, putting his brush in a jar of discoloured water.

‘Drink? Non alcoholic again, I’m afraid.’

I know when I’m being teased, so simply inclined my head and murmured a conventional thanks, getting a grin in return.

‘Right. Stay there, I’ll bring them out.’

It was pleasant to sit and look at his painting, comparing it with the original. It was really quite good, or so I thought, but I could see that his claim not to be an artist was justified. It was a copy, but nothing more. A pretty memory, that’s all.

‘Well? Do you approve?’ His voice brought me back to the real world.

‘It’s not for me to disapprove,’ I said. ‘I like it, if that’s what you mean. I don’t suppose my approval alters anything you may feel about it.’

He shouted with laughter. ‘You’re a little miss old fashioned. Good for you. With a mind of your own. That’s even better.’

‘And you must be a criminal on the run,’ I said.

‘On the run?’ he said, stressing the final word.

‘All right, a criminal in hiding. What have you been doing? Robbing a bank? Stealing the Crown Jewels?’

‘Possibly luring young girls into danger and doing away with them,’ he said. ‘But I forgot, you’re not a young girl, so you must be safe. You’re safe anyway. I’m no criminal, unless you count failing to stop at a halt sign once. I was never caught for it, so perhaps you’re right, and I’m in hiding from the local constabulary. Try again.’

‘Let me see. I know. You’re suffering from an incurable disease which drives you to lick your wounds in solitude.’

‘Never had a day’s illness in my life,’ he said equably. ‘Excluding the odd cold which is incurable, but hardly life threatening.’

‘What about cutting yourself off from society because of an unhappy love affair?’ I said.

‘Ah, the romantic approach. It’s a distinct possibility, if you can believe a person of my age can have romantic feelings.’

‘Wrong again I see,’ I said, with a total lack of tact. It didn’t occur to me that he wasn’t so old at all. It just seemed that way. To an eighteen year old who has hardly started in life, anyone over the age of thirty is ancient. He must be, I counted, about the same age as my mother, and I couldn’t see her as a creature of passion. That I wouldn’t have existed to have such a thought if she hadn’t been passionate at some

time in her life was something else that didn't occur to me. It does now. Not then. 'As you say, wrong again. But enough of that for now. More apple juice? Cream cake? Do help yourself. It goes off quickly in this weather, and I can't really eat so much cream myself.'

'No thank you,' I said. 'One piece is quite enough.'

'As you please, of course, but I'm a little disappointed. Tell me, do you have to work at keeping the shape you've got, or are you naturally good looking?'

I remember giving him a sharp glance to see if he was joking, but received only an innocent stare in return. At least, I thought it was innocent. I didn't have a great deal of experience to go by.

'I'm probably not the right person to say,' I replied.

He nodded gravely, as though I had just verified something, but passed no further comment.

After that, I visited almost every day. We became friends, joking and talking together in the way that friends often do. We even learned each other's names. Jenny and Peter respectively, although I expect he thought of us as Peter and Jenny. One day was wet, with threatening black thunderclouds building up for most of the morning. We spent that time inside his cottage, listening to music, Mozart for the most part. Pleasant enough, though I really preferred something a bit more modern. I appreciate it rather better now than I did at the time. If I close my eyes I can recapture the scene clearly, the painted walls in a rather ugly shade of brown, except in the kitchen which was an even uglier green. There were pictures on the walls, some of them his own, others belonging to the cottage. The floors were of slate, cold to the feet, but refreshing in that hot, hot summer. There was a single bed, which I could see through a half open door that led to the bedroom. I never went in there, so cannot say anything more about it, but the living room had a large table and three not very comfortable old armchairs, along with a dresser of some sort, which was where he kept his crockery and table linen. Another door was kept closed, and I had no idea where that led to, unless it was a store room. And always there was apple juice available. And hot buttered toast all that morning.

The weather cleared in the afternoon, and we went for a walk to clear away the cobwebs that came from sitting in a close atmosphere for too long. We walked along a forest path, and around a lake that the trees encircled. Well, when I say forest, I suppose I mean a small wood, little more than a copse, and the lake was small enough

to throw a stone over it clear to the other side without any great effort. Still, it was pretty. As we came back almost to our starting point, a powerful smell assailed our nostrils, pungent and unpleasant.

‘It’s a badger hole,’ he said. ‘Look, there it is. Not exactly the stuff you’d pay several pounds a bottle for, is it? Of course, it may smell better to another badger.’ I looked to where he pointed, and there was a hole in the ground, close to the trees, with smooth trails all around where the badger had been going about its day to day business.

‘Would you like to come back this way another day? We might catch sight of mister brock if we are very quiet. Have you ever seen a badger before?’

I shook my head. ‘No, never. Not even in a zoo.’

‘But you’d like to, wouldn’t you?’

His enthusiasm was infectious. ‘All right. When?’

‘What about tomorrow? It would need to be early in the morning. Very early. Just before daybreak in fact. Can you get out that early?’

‘Of course I can,’ I sighed. ‘I’m an adult woman, and can make my own decisions. What time?’

‘Come to the cottage at half past four, and we’ll see. No point coming any earlier. It won’t be light enough to see anything if the badger is astir.’

There is no need to go into the badger expedition, as the truth of the matter is that it never appeared, even though we stood perfectly still in the undergrowth, deep in a natural hollow from where we got a good line of sight of the badger hole. It was a bit disappointing, but we could accept the non arrival with equanimity. My muscles were complaining because of standing still for so long, and Peter stretched out his hand to give me the help I needed to climb out of the hollow. It was the first time he had touched me, and he released my hand as soon as I was on level ground again. That was the second time he showed sensitivity. I pushed my hand through his arm and we walked like that back to his cottage.

I left then, promising to return later in the day. Turning to wave goodbye at the bend in the track I saw that he was looking after me with a strange, rather intent expression on his face, before breaking out into its customary smile. I gave it no thought, but wouldn’t have known what to make of it anyway.

Later in the day arrived at its usual time. I walked slowly, enjoying the heat from the sun, all the fresher for the thunderstorm of the day before. Everything had dried, and



my sandals threw up tiny clouds of dust as I walked. There was a tablecloth spread on the ground underneath the bee tree, set already with the inevitable apple juice and strawberries. Peter came out of the house as I entered the garden.

‘Hello again,’ he said. ‘I’ve put the things out on the ground today. The table has developed arthritis or something equally mortifying, and I can’t rely on it staying upright. Not until I find a hammer and nails and get physical with it. Is that all right with you?’

In answer, I sank gratefully to the ground and reached out for a glass. And then it all went wrong. After quenching my thirst, I stretched out on the grass, revelling in the warmth, and gazing into the tree where the bees were so busy still. He came to kneel alongside me, then leaned over and kissed me gently on my lips. It wasn’t the first time I had been kissed, but this sent a frisson of excitement charging through my body, and I responded in the best way I knew how, inexpert, but willing, my arms going around his neck and pulling him closer. His hand came to my breast, not moving, just resting there, and that was for the first time ever. I closed my eyes and drifted off into a dream world of my own, where thoughts and emotions chased each other around, battling for notice, and wishing that this moment could be frozen in time to last forever. He spoke to me, bringing me back to reality.

‘I love you, Jenny,’ he said. ‘Would you marry me?’

I sat upright with a start, fantasy fleeing as a snowflake on a hotplate.

‘Oh no, Peter. No, I’m sorry, I couldn’t do that.’

He looked hurt at my rapid answer, and I hastened to explain.

‘Marry you? I like you, Peter. You’re nice to be with, and to do things with, but... well... you’re so much older than I am. And we have different tastes in music. And we don’t know each other so well. And... well... I never realised you thought of me in that way. I didn’t know.’

With hindsight, I might have been more tactful.

‘Well, you know now,’ he said with a queer laugh.

‘I wasn’t trying to lead you on,’ I said, still fumbling for something to say.

‘I know you weren’t. It doesn’t matter. I asked. You turned me down. I was a fool to think it might ever be different, but I had to ask. Otherwise I would never have known.’

I left shortly afterwards, and spent three miserable days before coming to the conclusion that even if he was so much older, there was no reason why we couldn’t

continue to be friends. There wasn't, of course, but I know now what I hadn't realised on that day, that there was no going back. Life is not that sort of game where you can start again and do things in a different way in the hope that you get what you really want. I went back just the same, and found the cottage empty, devoid of all life, as though it had never been occupied, and I knew we would never meet again. That was the third time he showed sensitivity.

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As I have grown older, I have learned many things I was ignorant of when only just eighteen. I know that our bee tree was a lime. I know the names of a good many wild flowers, including the small scarlet variety I had once wondered about. I also know that age differences are not as important as a young girl might think. Above all, I know that once you set your feet on a certain path, there is no going back. Words said cannot be unsaid. They stick in the memory. I closed my eyes as I had closed them so long ago, and tried to see the future, any future, any possible future engraved on the eyelids reddened by the light from the fading sun. There was nothing to be seen, but I knew that already. I pushed the cork back into the bottle and set it down in the sea, watching until the ebbing tide drew it away out of sight, then walked slowly back to my lonely flat for tea.

## THE EGG

Global warming. Climate changes. Kyoto agreement. Environmental disasters. They're words on everybody's lips nowadays, aren't they? I even use them myself, though I don't really understand what it all means. Sandra does. Sandra knows everything. At least, she tells me she does, and I suppose she should know. It's all a bit worrying. Global warming, that is, not the fact that Sandra knows a lot. It's a bit hard for a man to know what to do. Luckily I've got Sandra. She knows. Well, her idea was to keep a few hens, so that we would always have fresh eggs, and when the hens get old enough, we can have chicken soup. Very nourishing, says Sandra. Good for you. And if we keep enough hens, we can sell off the surplus eggs for other foodstuffs. How it all affects our place during global warming I can't say,

but Sandra seems to think it would help.

I must admit I wasn't so sure. I mean, it sounded like a lot of hard work to me, but she persuaded me to see things her way. She has a gift in that direction, has Sandra. Mind, I wouldn't have said no to sharing a cigarette afterwards, but she said not on your nelly. Ciggies are bad for your health, to say nothing about the burnt holes in the sheets. Still, it's always nice to have a before not to be able to have a quiet smoke afterwards.

So we set to work. Ten hens and a cockerel to start with. Or rather to finish with, as even I could see we would need to start with a cage of some sort. So, chicken wire, lots of it. Wooden posts, about twenty of those. A hammer, a crowbar, a saw, nails, and a fair bit of bandage until we saw the sense in wearing work gloves. Then there were the nesting boxes. Very important were nesting boxes, said Sandra. She'd been reading all about it in a book she got from the library. It's another gift she has, and hardly moves her lips at all when she's doing it. More wood, a screwdriver or two, plenty of screws.

It all looked a bit lopsided to me when we finished the job, but Sandra said she was happy with it, and that hens are not too particular. I thought that maybe it was meant to look that way. Still, it did seem solid enough, and so we introduced the hens. And the cockerel. I did wonder about that, but Sandra said one cockerel could look after ten hens all on his own, and I could wipe that look off my face, since there's only one Sandra thank you very much and that's going to be her. She seemed quite definite about it.

Then we waited. And waited. And waited. Not a lot happened. I mean, there wasn't a great deal in the egg production line. In fact, there wasn't anything. Oh, the hens settled down very well, and the cockerel appeared to be happy. Well, he would, wouldn't he. A bit tired, but happy. It was a real treat to watch the birds scratching about in the soil, looking for worms. It started out as grass, but it didn't take a week before there was only dusty soil wherever the hens had been. And hen muck. Lots of that. Rather more than they ate, I thought. Apart from worms and insects, we fed them on food scraps from the kitchen, which Sandra said was quite all right. They always seemed to be hungry though, so we bought some ready made food from the local corn merchants, specially designed to keep hens healthy and happy.

Whatever we fed them with, the result was the same. No eggs. The days rolled by, turning into weeks, then months. Still no eggs. They were supposed to give well over

two hundred eggs in the year, according to the book, but maybe these hens were illiterate. Or maybe it was a misprint. For all I knew, that number should have been two eggs in the year. Who would know? In the meantime, we bought our morning eggs from the supermarket.

They need time to settle down, said Sandra. They're too young yet, she said. It's the wrong sort of food, she claimed. She said quite a lot, really, but the day came when even she ran out of excuses for them, and we simply stared at our purchases and wondered how to bring a bit of cooperation into their little lives. Sandra started looking reflectively at axes in the hardware store, and I could see she was getting a bit broody.

But all things come to an end, and at last the famine broke. After thirteen months and one and a half weeks - we didn't count the hours - we woke up one morning to a really horrible noise, almost as though World War Three had broken out. The hens were squawking, the cockerel was crowing and there were feathers flying everywhere. Sandra burst out of bed and ran across the garden without bothering to put anything over her nightie, really short with a fair bit of lace around the hem. Very nice too, except that I was a bit slow and never got more than a quick flash of her legs, which didn't matter as she was normally very generous in that area.

I caught up with her by the henhouse, and saw by the look on her face that she was happier than usual. You've guessed it, we had an egg. Only the one, mind, but an egg just the same. Our first, and as precious to us as though it had been our own baby.

Sandra put it in the fridge and said she would make us an omelette each when we got a few more. Well, there were no more that day, and there were no more the day after. In fact, there were no more at all. We only ever got the one egg, and considering what it cost us in the way of materials, tools, the birds themselves and the food we gave them, the one egg we got certainly reached a price of well over two hundred pounds. We couldn't bring ourselves to eat it at first, and when we did, it turned out to be rotten and stunk the house out for days.

Oh yes, a fox got in amongst the hens shortly afterwards and took the lot. Still, as I said to Sandra, there's one consolation. We'll not die of cholesterol poisoning. Considering how careful she is about our health, I thought she might have taken the comment with a bit better grace.

## WENDY

Her name was Wendy. Bendy Wendy, a cruel nickname, since she was physically incapable of angling her body more than three or four degrees from the vertical, and even that slight movement was hidden under the rolls of excess adiposity which were her pride and joy. She was a big girl. Not portly, pudgy, overweight or obese. Just big. Big bones, as she was wont to explain. Glands. Puppy fat. Pleasantly rounded. Teenage problems, though it had been many years since she had said farewell to the years between irresponsible childhood and irresponsible adulthood. Such explanations fooled no-one, and Bendy Wendy she remained. She had a lovely complexion though, a smooth textured skin she would have exchanged for the spottiest of faces, preferably with testosterone as the cause.

Spinster Wendy. Too much for any one man. Too much for three or even four.

'Let me have men around me who are fat.'

Julius Caesar, Wendy considered, was a real man. Hamlet, on the other hand, was a wimp.

'O, that this too too solid flesh would melt.'

She didn't want her flesh to melt. She liked food. She liked bacon and eggs with sausages liberally doused in tomato ketchup. She liked a tablespoonful or two of jam on her cereal. She liked cream cakes, and butter, and chips in mayonnaise, ice cream, fizzy drinks and five generous helpings of sugar in her coffee. Then, after breakfast, a mid morning snack was always welcome, to stave off the powerful surges of near starvation until lunch time.

Men, thought Wendy to herself. They didn't know good stuff when they saw it. Thank goodness there was a bigger selection nowadays, when large numbers of workmen were flooding in to the area as a result of the latest oil strike. Workmen. Highly paid workmen. Scores of construction gangs swarming all over mysterious looking buildings that rose higher and higher with the passing of each day. The same men walking the streets at night, spending their money as fast as they received it. 'That has to change,' said Wendy. 'If I have anything to do with it, they can spend it even faster than that.'

‘Well, time to go on the prowl,’ she murmured, as she levered her rotundity out of the specially strengthened chair she called her own, and stripping off totally, leaving what looked to be the unfolded tents of a Victorian Lancer regiment strewn across the floor. Going to the wardrobe, she selected a skirt with care, then a blouse, rejecting the idea of putting anything underneath either of them on the grounds that it was A too warm, B she was a perfectly satisfactory shape without any unnecessary support, and C any other reason that came to mind, sprayed a generous amount of perfume in all the usual places, as well as a few that were not, then set out on a short walk.

Her sandals skittered lightly over the pavement, making no sound that could be heard within arm’s reach, even arms as pudgy as her own. Not a leaf would have rustled, had there been leaves to brush aside. Not even Wendy’s skirt rustled, being the sort of fabric that gave no warning of her approach, a fact she well knew.

She passed the open door of one of the many well patronised pubs along the street, and glancing inside, caught sight of a human figure just on the way out.

‘Trousers. Moustache. He’ll do,’ she muttered, and with a powerful sweep of her right arm, caught the unsuspecting character by the waist and dragged him swiftly away to a patch of waste ground at the back of the licensed premises. He stumbled and fell full length on his back, looking up in horror as the stars were blotted out and a suffocating weight came across his body. A pounding in his ears grew louder and louder, a pounding that was overlaid in his heightened state of tension by a sound that resembled that of a scythe being sharpened. Perfume caught his nostrils, and his flailing hands encountered flesh of a smoothness that seemed somehow familiar, but of dimensions that were not.

‘Not fair,’ he spluttered as strange hands wandered in places that memory told him should have been pleasurable but somehow failed to be so. Strange lips pressed against his own with a wet sucking sound, and the light from his eyes faded and dulled. ‘Not fair. At least let me get a smile on my face.’

We seem to have a thing about eggs, me and Sandra. Apart from the ones we tried to get from our hens, and never even attempted with the goose, there are always shop bought ones, which is the way we get them as a rule. Sometimes we buy them from a small farm or smallholding out in the country, but mainly from the local supermarket.

Anyway, I'd bought some on my way home from work so that Sandra could do us a gigantic omelette. She's good at omelettes, is Sandra, and always puts plenty of filling in them, like ham or cheese, or mushrooms, or even ham *and* cheese *and* mushrooms, not to mention odds and ends we happen to have left over in the fridge, which wouldn't be left over, says Sandra, if it wasn't for the beer cans the rest of the food likes to hide behind when it's feeling a bit shy.

Brown eggs, they were. These are the ones I just bought. I thought I'd better mention that just in case you'd forgotten. I got brown, because they are supposed to be healthier than the usual white, only Sandra says that's a load of old cobblers, they're all the same, it's just an excuse to con idiots like myself into paying a bit over the odds. Well, to be honest, she didn't exactly say "load of old cobblers", the reason being that she's been properly brought up, but I know how her mind works by now, and I could tell that that's what she really meant.

The colour of the shell, she told me, depends on the type of bird. After all, if you go out in the wild nature, which I hardly ever do unless it's within easy reach of some pub or other, you can see birds nests with all sorts of eggs in them, including blue ones, green ones, and even mucky brown speckly ones, though not all in the same nest, of course. I must say I was a bit surprised at the the thought of green eggs, and privately I think they must have gone off, but it doesn't do to argue with Sandra in case she's in one of her moods. I wasn't too taken with the idea of speckly ones either, especially the mucky brown variety. I mean, it's almost as though the bird couldn't make its mind up, isn't it?

Anyway, Sandra said she wasn't going to do an omelette, as she had already cooked the dinner, which proved to something tasty without a single egg in sight. And what we had for afters was even tastier, but since we took that with the curtains closed and the doors firmly locked, I won't bother going into details.

I wondered what she intended using the eggs for, since I generally get a bit peckish after exercise, but the only answer I got was to be pulled into the kitchen, set before the stove and told to watch the eggs boiling for ten minutes, then take them off the

heat. Because, said Sandra, and this is a good bit, because tomorrow is Easter Sunday, and we are going out for a picnic, don't forget to dress yourself up a bit and I'll even put in a can or two of beer, she said.

Picnic. What a good idea. I haven't been on a picnic since I was a nipper in school, and we all got taken out for the day by the teachers. We went for a bus ride that was probably quite short, but which seemed long enough at the time. Our teacher ordered us to play delalo or something like that, which I couldn't do as I'd never heard of it, but that didn't matter as it turned out he was the only one who had. Probably invented the name on the spot so he could skive off for a quiet smoke or something. What we did then I can't remember, except that Herbie Jones fell down a well and got soaked to the skin, and nobody would sit next to him on the bus home as he had found some gungy stuff where there should have been water.

Our picnic promised to be a lot more interesting than that. It always is when Sandra's around. Well, we took the picnic basket together with our sandwiches and pies and drinks and stuff, not forgetting the eggs either. I was rather proud of the eggs as I'd stayed up half the night painting them with bonny patterns with my old water paints I'd had since I was still at school. Sandra said they were something da Vinci would have been proud of, but I couldn't understand why an ice cream seller should be so interested. Still, she gave me a nice cuddle which shows she liked them. I did point out that I'd painted quite a lot of them in the hope of getting more cuddles, but she said we'd better be going and she'd see about a bit more praise later on, which is Sandra's way of making a firm promise. It looked like being a good day.

It was a good day, at least to start with. I wanted to eat a few sandwiches first, followed by a couple of pies, but Sandra said no, if we're out on an Easter picnic, we might as well do it properly, so we rolled our eggs down a steep hill which fell away from where we had parked ourselves. As the eggs rolled away, I said to Sandra I had invented a little poem just for her. She went all sappy and asked me to recite it, so I did.

It's Easter Day,

The eggs are brown.

Skirts go up and... you're giving me a funny look, aren't you, Sandra?

Still, it wasn't one of those funny looks, if you know what I mean. No, this time I think she really liked the poem, even if she had to work out the last line for herself.

That's not a hard thing for her to do because she's really quite clever, and I don't



always have to tell her something even once for her to understand. She just gave me a push and I went rolling down the hill after the eggs, which was great fun such as I haven't had for years and years. Not that sort of fun at least.

Sandra followed me, rolling round and round, and I could see that my poem had a bit of truth in it. Well, she landed right against me, laughing and giggling, and I grabbed her to stop her going any further, which is when she started giving me a bit more praise for my eggs. It was at that point that things got a bit out of hand, but that's more or less normal for me and Sandra. The only thing was, that just as things were getting interesting, or more interesting than usual, we got a bit of a nasty shock.

We got wet. Very wet. In fact, we got wetter than Herbie Jones after he fell down the well, only there wasn't any well anywhere near us. What it was, was some country bumpkin or other, who stood there with an empty bucket in his hand, though it wasn't hard to guess that it had been full only seconds before, and mouthing off at us in terms which weren't fit for my ears, let alone Sandra's.

I stood up, of course, ready to give him what for, until I noticed he was accompanied by a set of teeth that all too clearly had a large dog attached to them, and even the tail end looked distinctly unfriendly.

That wasn't the end of the picnic though, as we just gathered everything together, drove off to a quiet spot - not a pub for miles - and ate our sandwiches in the car, while Sandra hung her dress outside the window to dry in the sun, which meant that the day ended pretty well after all.

## LOVE OF LITERATURE

Little Miss Entwhistle of the Central Library, though no longer in the first flush of

youth, was yet not so old, nor so lacking in good looks that she failed to attract appreciative glances. Unfortunately, appreciative glances was practically as much as she ever got. Not that she really missed a family life, but nevertheless, it has to be admitted that the strain of living in that sort of solitude which arises when even your only pet, a budgerigar, refuses to talk to you, was beginning to take its toll, until she found a new passion in her existence.

How she overcame this unenviable position is easily related. Through efforts which never reached the ears of the local Watch Committee, Miss Entwhistle had so increased the rate of book borrowing that considerably more than the usual amount of annual funds was allocated to the library service, and as a result she was offered promotion, an office of her own, and a degree of secure privacy she had never before enjoyed. To her employer's surprise, she turned them all down, and asked for a position of sole assistant in one of the town's outlying and underused branches, a branch that had come under threat of closure several times. She assured the Libraries Committee that she felt able to keep it open and properly employed.

Being given the opportunity she had asked for, she surrendered her once unblemished chastity several times each day to anyone and everyone of the appropriate gender who returned their books before the due date.

As she explained, 'I fine you if you are overdue, so it seems only fair to offer a reward for being on time. No dear, it's not the European Union rules, this is purely an idea of my own.'

## FLEA MARKET

We had a day out last Saturday. Well, when I say a day out, I mean we spent a lot of time going from one flea market to another. There are plenty of them in this town, let me tell you. Don't get me wrong, I like flea markets, but then I don't mind where I am just as long as it's with Sandra. Not that she asked me to come along, just took it for granted really, but it doesn't matter since she always thinks I shouldn't be let out on my own.

Anyway, there we were in what is probably the biggest flea market in the area, and

wandering slowly around the four hundred or so little stalls, looking to see what was on offer. There's some really interesting stuff there, if you take your time to search properly, and time was what we had plenty of, Sandra having a few days off work on account of her not taking all her holiday last year, and she has to take it now or lose it, if you understand what I mean. As for myself, I'm sort of self employed on the building sites, and get good money, so I can afford to have a little holiday whenever I feel like it, which happens every few weeks or so.

Here, said Sandra, what do you think of this, Dumdum? She always calls me Dumdum, at least when she doesn't call me by another word, but which has the same meaning. If anybody else said that to me, they'd be crawling around the gutter looking for enough teeth to make up a full set, but Sandra says I should learn to control my temper and act like a gentleman, which is what I try to do. At least I always hold the car door for her when she gets in, though Sandra reckons that's only because I'm hoping for a flash of her leg, which happens to be true, especially when she makes a point of wearing short skirts and getting in the car very slowly. I don't suppose I need to paint you a picture. Anyway, I don't mind when Sandra calls me names that I don't take from anybody except her. Sandra's special, and it's a sort of compliment when she says it.

Well, naturally I looked at what she was holding. This is still in the flea market, in case you got lost. She was showing me a piece of white plastic that was shaped like a human foot, only not quite the right shape. Distorted, Sandra calls it, but then she's clever and has had an education. There were a couple of holes where the heel would be, so you could screw it into the wall or somewhere like that, and the toes - six of them, which looked a bit odd, but who am I to judge, since I don't go around checking how many toes everybody has - were spread out in a way which brought tears to my eyes just looking at them.

What is it, I asked Sandra? It's a tea towel holder, she explained. Look, you put loops on your tea towels and fasten them over the toes. Well, we stood looking at it for a bit, wondering if it would make a good back scratcher, though we have other ways of doing that than using a bit of white plastic in the shape of a foot. Sandra wondered what sort of a person could even think that that was something the world really, really needed.

Of course, you see a lot of that sort of thing in a flea market. Like angels with stupid grins on their faces, probably embarrassed at having to wear their nighties in public.

Then there are home made clay things that are supposed to be something, but which never really are, and are usually painted as though the artist was some three year old with no taste at all and not a great deal in the eyesight department. Not that I can do any better, colouring in a picture without going too much over the lines being my limit, but then I have enough sense not to offer it for sale in a public place. Should I mention the cigarette stubbers? All right, I will. There was this little metal thing on one stall, round and just big enough to fit in the palm of your hand. It had four small tubes on the surface, each about as deep as the thickness as Sandra's little finger, which really makes them small. You were meant to stub out your ciggie in one of these little tubes, but I could see at a glance that your average ciggie is bigger than the tube it was meant to fit, so there didn't seem to be much sense in it at all. Besides, what idiot is going to carry one of those around, when nobody's allowed to smoke indoors nowadays anyway?

Honestly, there's all sorts of rubbish like that, and most of it damaged in some way. Broken books, broken locks, broken toys, broken mugs and plates. Broken dreams, more like.

Sandra gave me one of her funny looks when I said that, and commented that either it was the most stupid thing it was possible to say, or else it was so wise it would take a whole generation of philosophers to work out what I really meant. I didn't understand what she was talking about, but she looked pleased, and held my arm round several aisles after that, which is a thing I always like, even if Sandra does claim she's only trying to keep my wandering hands under control, although I happen to know she would be the first to complain if they were.

It was then we caught sight of something a bit unusual even for a flea market. At least, I caught sight of it, and I'm pretty sure Sandra did as well, but she is a lady and often pretends she doesn't see, or hear, certain things, and pole dancing kits certainly come into that category. The writing on the side of the box said "Mit Erotisches Garter", which is another thing I didn't understand, not having been taught French at school. I asked Sandra about it, because she is bright, and knows all sorts of things, but she just went pink and said she hadn't been taught French either. I copied it down on the back of a fag packet in case I ever found anyone who might know, although it wasn't so difficult to guess when looking at the picture on the front of the box. I'm good at reading pictures, so that was all right.

Anyway, Sandra said she'd give me pole dancing when we got home again, so that is

something to look forward to.

### MILLIHELENS

I can't go out this weekend. Again. It's the black eye, you see. And the rather deep scratches along both cheeks, plus a few other bits of damage in places not normally open to public view.

It's my own fault of course. It always is. I suffer from a disease which I like to call inadvertent logorrhoea, but which really means nothing more than every time I open my mouth I put my foot in it.

Women, of course. It always is. The problem is that I like women. Well, nothing wrong with that. Women usually like me as well, and that's also pretty normal. At least from my viewpoint. And that, I think, is where the trouble rises. My viewpoint. I've never been very good at considering anyone else's viewpoint. And I like straight talking. It's thought to be a virtue where I come from, but doesn't always go down too well here. Believe me. I know.

You see, if I think a woman is luscious, I tell her. Straight talking. They like it. They may not want to go any further, but I've never found a woman yet who objected to being told things like that. The trouble is, if I think she is ugly, I tell her that as well. That is, not at the same time as I tell her she's luscious. Should be obvious if you know what I mean. Not that she has to be ugly as such. Any little defect will do, and I can't help commenting on the fact that she fails to measure up to an ideal of perfect beauty. Hence the scratches. Not these. Others. Some of them are ancient, almost like the black crunchy bits at the bottom of the frying pan that you swear down you'll clean out sometime tomorrow, a swear you've been using for months.

Anyway, it's getting a bit expensive on pain killers and antiseptic, not to mention the price of raw steak. It's disgusting what the butcher charges for that nowadays.

Something, I thought, had to be done. Or even better Had To Be Done. When a situation demands capital letters, it had better be something radical as well.

The answer came to me during one of my earlier periods of cutting myself off from mankind. I was reading a book. Well, you have to do something while waiting for Time, the great healer. The story was all about this bird called Helen of Troy. Great read. Lots of action. Plenty of fights and massive amounts of blood. Plus treachery

and cunning. Liked it. Liked it a lot. Especially the bit about Helen. Mind, I did wonder about the length of time it took to rescue her. She must have been pretty well middle aged by then, and probably past it in the beauty stakes, but no matter. The interesting part, the part that really got me thinking was about how she had a face that could put the shipwrights on voluntary overtime, and I thought, "That's it." That was exactly what I was looking for.

Maybe you know the story. The point is, that if she was reckoned to be the last word in beauty, then all other women could be rated accordingly. What I'm trying to explain is that if Helen of Troy had a face that could launch a thousand ships, then her beauty rating was obviously one thousand millihelens. Precisely that. Nothing more, and certainly nothing less. That means, if you follow the argument, that a woman only half as lovely as the Maid of Troy, though it's hard to see how she could get away with that claim after a ten year siege, would have a rating of five hundred millihelens. Able to launch five hundred ships, see?

Twenty five millihelens? Worth a small fishing fleet perhaps. One millihelen? Well, I've seen Thor Heyerdahl's balsa wood raft, and with all due respect, pretty it is not. I tried the system out last week, and it worked a treat. Until I saw this female in the bookshop coffee bar. Well, I was looking to see if I could pick up any more ideas. She was dressed in something that hurt the eyes, had long frizzy hair that definitely wasn't styled, and wore Sensible Shoes. With thick stockings. Might have had half way decent legs, except it wasn't possible to see under all that fabric. Horrible. A man shouldn't have to face things like that straight after bacon and eggs and a couple of slices of fried bread.

I muttered something about having to extend the millihelen scale in a downward direction, and she threw a blooey. Well, it seems that apart from having superb hearing, she was studying classical literature at university and was more at home in Ancient Troy than I was, which admittedly isn't such a hard thing to be, and understood perfectly the direction my mind was taking. It's all the fault of allowing women to get an education, I say. It wasn't meant to happen like this. Anyway, as I said at the beginning, I can't go out this weekend.

We are quite fond of gardening, me and Sandra. That is to say, Sandra likes the actual gardening, while I do all the rough work such as digging and humping stuff in the wheelbarrow, which suits me very well since I'm a bit of a rough character, but nice with it, as Sandra always says.

I'm a bit clumsy for anything more than digging and stuff, and tend to pull out the plants we want to keep along with the weeds, although I can tell the difference. I'm not that stupid. Even so, it gives a feeling of pleasure to see a newly dug patch of soil, all raked and levelled, ready for the seeds to go in. There's always something to do in the garden, mainly to do with plants, but that isn't enough for Sandra, as she's really keen. This year, she said, we should have a greenhouse, then we can grow some grape vines.

That's right, grape vines, the reason being that Sandra thinks I drink too much beer, and I wouldn't say she's wrong about that either. Not that I'm hooked on the stuff, you understand. I can give it up any time I like. Why, sometimes I go almost a week without even thinking about the pub, let alone entering one. If you must drink, said Sandra, at least get sophisticated with it. We'll grow our own grapes, make wine, and you can slosh that down you. I have to admit, the beer does tend to turn a man a bit pear shaped, and I wouldn't mind losing a bit round the middle. So, wine it is. For wine we need grapes, and for grapes we need a greenhouse.

No problem. I work on the building sites, and can turn my hand to almost anything in that line. As it happened, we found a load of old windows, which we decided to use. All I had to do was build up the framework to take them. As I said, no problem. The foundation went in, crushed brick covered with a foot of coarse gravel. That's thirty centimetres, says Sandra, which I expect is right as she's the one with an education, and makes me look a bit dim in comparison, though admittedly that's not difficult. After that, I laid down a few wooden railway sleepers and started building the greenhouse framework on top, putting the windows in last of all. The roof was light enough, being simple plastic corrugated sheets, only I didn't fasten those in place, as I'm a bit on the heavy side, so Sandra climbed up to do that part of the job. I did suggest she wore trousers instead of a skirt, but she said it didn't matter, as there was nobody to see what she had for breakfast, only me, and I was going to look anyway, which is true enough to make it, well, true.

I also built a big box to take the grape vine, and Sandra set about filling that with one of her special mixtures of soil and compost, with a few secret ingredients thrown in

for good measure. I don't know what they are, but she can usually grow things big enough to win prizes in the local agricultural show, only we never bother entering the competition. Too busy growing the stuff, if you see what I mean.

While she was filling the box, she sent me to the garden centre for a grape vine, and it was duly put in place, well watered and left to its own devices. Well, apart from the digging, I'm no gardener. I mean, I know nothing about plants, so perhaps it wasn't too surprising that what I had bought wasn't actually a grape vine at all. Never mind, said Sandra, as the truth became apparent. Tomatoes are good to eat. Healthy. Cheap. Full of vitamins, I shouldn't wonder.

That's one of the things I like about Sandra. She might sigh heavily at times, but she does have a very forgiving nature. In fact, she went so far as to tell me something about tomatoes, something I never suspected, and which had me watching them in the shops in a very different light I can tell you. It made me wonder at all those old grannies buying them as though there wasn't going to be a tomorrow. She said that they were a well known aphrodisiac, if I've got that spelling right, and the word comes from Aphrodite, one of the Ancient Greek goddesses. She said that the French call it pomme d'amour, only she must have been teasing, because she is well aware that the only bit of French I happen to know is Mit Erotisches Garter, which we saw printed on the side of a pole dancing kit once in a flea market, and I never really found out exactly what it meant anyway, so she explained further in terms which dispelled any doubt about the matter at all.

We had a little feast a few weeks later. Sandra bought a bottle of wine, since we obviously weren't going to be able to make our own through someone's pig ignorance, and we had a cosy little evening drinking that and eating our newly ripe tomatoes.

I know what aphrodisiac means now, and while I wouldn't trust the French too much, there's one thing I can tell you - those Ancient Greeks knew a thing or two about tomatoes.

### MIRROR, MIRROR ON THE WALL

It seems to me that every time I look in the mirror I see a fat person looking out. It's



myself, of course. There's nobody looking over my shoulder. The mirror is mine. All my life it's been mine, and all my life I've been looking into it. The same fat person has always been staring back at me.

Nowadays, the image really is fat, and I can't fool myself that it could be anything else, not when size XL clothing leaves me feeling constrained and short of breath. The reason isn't hard to find. I like my food. I like bacon and eggs with sausages liberally doused in tomato ketchup. I like a tablespoonful or two of jam on my cereal. I like cream cakes, and butter, and chips in mayonnaise, ice cream, fizzy drinks and five generous helpings of sugar in my coffee. A snack, to me, is a box of chocolates. In short, I'm a compulsive eater. You get the idea.

It was a little different once, about two or three years ago. Then I was thin. Slender. Attenuated. Anorexic. Really anorexic. Almost skeletal. I used my mirror then just as much as I do now, which is to say several times a day, gazing at an image which always looked overweight. I was desperate to slim down even further, convinced that just looking at food was enough to pile on the pounds. Breakfast was a cup of hot water, lunch a leaf or two of lettuce, and for dinner I used to go into hiding so as to avoid my mother's cries of anguish.

Nothing anyone said to me made any difference. I felt as though I was overweight and that was a thought that I couldn't get rid of. Didn't want to get rid of. My frequent dizzy spells were put down to starvation, but I knew better, didn't I? Of course, the dizziness came from eating too much.

So why did I change? Well, it happened when I was travelling by rail on my way to a job interview. The train was full; at least the carriage I was in was packed. Amongst the passengers were two rather dishy looking young men who cast frequent glances at me. A girl always knows when she is being admired, and in any case, I could hear what they were saying.

'Have you seen that girl there? The one in the corner seat.'

'You mean the skinny rabbit?'

'That's the one. Isn't she thin?'

I felt a warm glow pass through me. At last, someone who recognised my principal virtue. If a total stranger could see it, then perhaps, just perhaps, I wasn't as gross as I thought.

'Thin? Thin isn't the word. Skinny more like.'

Better and better.

‘Skinny? I’m not sure that skinny is quite the right word either. It doesn’t seem quite thin enough to describe what I can see.’

I love this man, whoever he is. I love them both.

‘You’re right. We have to go down a few sizes to get the proper description here.

Stringy? Skeletal?’

‘Cadaverous.’

Clearly the second speaker was a man of some education. Perhaps I loved him more. Then came a long list of words that demonstrated just how educated they both were, and I curled up in my seat with a feeling of sensual happiness that bordered on the obscene.

The train stopped, and I became aware of the two men gathering their belongings together before getting off, but I still caught their last comments just before they moved out of earshot.

‘All I know is, if she ever gives birth, she’ll have to have a caesarean to deliver.’

‘What I think, she’s going to need a caesarean to get pregnant in the first place.’

Since then, Julius Caesar has always been my favourite Shakespearean character.

Perhaps you know the quotation I mean.

’Let me have men around me who are fat.’

I must say, it sounds awfully sexist.

## EQUALITY

We’re all equal nowadays, aren’t we? Political correctness demands it, or to be more precise, the Ministry of Political Correctness demands it. In principle I’m all in favour. Equal pay for equal work, fair stab at a job, irrespective of gender, colour, or any one of an increasing number of proclivities, you know the sort of thing. But what I want to know is why, in the interests of strict equality, I, as a stunningly beautiful ballerina weighing in at 40 kilograms, am obliged to wear a bag over my head, lead slippers and a 40 kilogram body belt whenever performing in public?

## SANDRA'S CHRISTMAS

We love Christmas, Sandra and me. We love all its traditions, like mince pies, and

getting presents, and stuff like that. The best bit as far as I'm concerned is the swilling down the booze so I can't remember what happened the morning after, but Sandra says that's not very healthy and I have to ease up a bit this year.

What she likes best is the eating. She's a good cook, is Sandra, and she always makes plenty of grub at Christmas so I can hardly stand afterwards, and have to go for a lie down, and miss the Queen's speech, but that's all right since Sandra always has a lie down with me, just for company like. It's a great way of getting rid of the excess calories.

This year, she thought we might have a bit of a change. Everybody has turkey, she said, except in some places where they have ham, but that hardly counts. A bit odd, I thought, thinking of the ham we sometimes get from the supermarket. A couple of slices of that hardly seems like a Christmas dinner, know what I mean? It's probably a different sort of ham, said Sandra, and anyway, those places are probably a bit backward, up north somewhere, Santa Claus land, that sort of place. She didn't suppose they knew how to grow turkeys there.

Anyway, we weren't going to have turkey, she said. This year, we are going to have a bit of goose. Well, when I heard that, I pinched her bum, which is always a nice thing to do, and something she looks forward to a lot. In fact, it quite put her mind off Christmas dinner for at least a couple of hours, by which time I was starving, and ready for the main course, if you see what I mean. Fish fingers it turned out to be, which isn't exactly one of my favourites, but quick and easy anyway. Just like Sandra, really.

After our experiences with the hens, I thought she might have gone a bit cool on poultry, but she said no, a goose is quite different. We'll not be looking for eggs, for one thing, and there'll only be one bird, which we can fatten up between now and Christmas. Easy. All we need to do is feed it, and that's no work at all, then kill it, I don't know how, but Sandra will think of something, stuff it and eat it. Lovely.

Except, what a surprise, it didn't quite work out like that. Oh, the feeding went all right. Believe me, a goose knows how to eat. The greedy little pig, excuse my French, never stops filling its face, and comes running to us every time we leave the house just in case we have a little something for it. The trouble started on the day we came into the garden holding an axe. I said Sandra would think of something, didn't I? Now I don't think birds are very bright, but this goose seemed to have a dim understanding that an axe isn't exactly nourishing. To put it plainly, it refused to

stand there and do an impression of Marie Antoinette. Not that I've ever heard of Marie Antoinette, but Sandra said she was famous for losing her head when all about her were keeping theirs. Something to do with Kipling, she said, but I've never kiplled, so I didn't really understand.

Anyway, this ungrateful bird, that's the goose, not Sandra, after all we had done for it, not only refused to do the decent thing, it actually attacked us, and I can tell you, when you've been attacked by a goose, you stay attacked. That beak isn't just for eating. Talk about sharp, it should be against the Geneva Convention. I used to know a Geneva, and she was a bit sharp too, but I have my doubts as to whether she deserved that goose. Sandra just gave me one of her looks and I kind of guessed we were talking about two different things, so it was probably some other Geneva since I can't remember the last name of the one I knew.

Not only the beak. Those wings can do a fair bit of damage as well. In fact, it proved to be a bit awkward eating my Christmas dinner left handed, but Sandra cut up my slices of ham for me, and even put a sprig of holly on the top. She's very thoughtful like that, is Sandra. She said it was like a Swedish Christmas dinner, but I thought no wonder they're a bit serious if that's all they get. Somehow, it just wasn't the same staying awake during the Queen's speech. I really missed my little lie down.

### LUST IN SPACE

Space exploration had developed considerably since Gagarin felt his first release from Earth's gravity, thought Rodney. Not that he himself would know too much about that. Earth's gravity, that is. He was one of the newer pioneers of space, born on the moon, brought up and educated there, and had felt a pull no greater than one sixth of the Earth's in his whole life. Nor was he likely to do so. A space worker's existence was hazardous enough without wanting to add to the risks of hard falls and broken bones because of an inability to cope with accustomed weight. Indeed, although the hazards were real enough, there seemed to be more danger simply crossing the road almost anywhere on Earth than crossing a few million kilometres of more or less empty space. Not that Rodney would know that either, nor had he any particular desire to find out at first hand.

Now it has to be understood that one of the drawbacks of working in space is muscle

wasting, and this applies whether born on the moon or anywhere else. For all the advances in space technology, man was still confined to the genetic inheritance passed down by his earliest ancestors. The body had no real weight in space, so the muscles never got a chance to develop properly, leaving the average spaceman totally unsuited to anything even remotely resembling heavy physical labour. There's not a Mr. Universe amongst them, even though they worked in a considerable proportion of it. The problem was well enough understood, though, and they got regular rest and recreation periods in compensation.

Was that word "rest"? Every six months or so, depending on how the orbits matched, every space worker was sent to one of the so called Holiday Farms. That wasn't the official title, naturally, but only humourless administration ever remembered the official name. Some farm, with not even animal pictures, thought Rodney. Some holiday, when the real purpose of being there was to induce an artificial gravity and put the victims through a punishing schedule of exercises in order to keep them fit and healthy. Can't have an expensively trained man getting flabby. That would represent a poor return on investment. Well, it was a break of some sort, anyway, and it usually gave a welcome opportunity to talk about something other than the job. In that way, spacemen were no different from the ground moles after all. Not that anyone cared so much for the keep fit aspects of the Holiday Farm, but it was written into the contract, and had to be accepted with whatever grudging grace could be mustered. That was another way, too, in which spacemen were no different from the ground moles.

Rodney's last session at a holiday Farm had been a couple of weeks earlier, on one of the older bases overlooking Saturn's rings. It may have lacked some of the ambience traditionally associated with holiday spots, but it seemed exotic enough in spite of the shortage of dimly lit bars and scantily dressed nubile young females. He had been working in the main asteroid belt at the time, identifying and categorising asteroids, checking their orbits in the event that any one of them felt like paying a brief and glorious visit to Earth. Believe it, until that job has been tackled, nobody knows what boredom is. For once, he was really looking forward to his session at the Farm. It even felt as though he was going on holiday.

He was there for a week, on his own for a change. That didn't matter, as no-one can work in space unless he can live by and with himself. In some ways there can be rather more human contact than average, space stations tending to be small and cramped, but there can be plenty of solitude as well. It's all part of the job, and those

who can't take it, don't do it. Not for very long, at any rate.

Rodney was put through the usual exercises, as well as a few that were new to him, by an extremely attractive young girl instructor dressed in a figure hugging sports outfit which sent his blood pressure soaring to unhealthy levels. Yes, he was still on his own, but no, he hadn't gone crazy, at least not in the medical sense. She was simply a computerised image, of course. It doesn't take much imagination to understand what sort of muscle tone would result from a situation where such an instructor was actually present in flesh and blood. Besides, although the real thing can be manufactured by unskilled labour, computer images work out cheaper in the long run, and they are capable of working twenty four hours every day, with only an occasional malfunction to make life interesting.

Electronic image or not, Rodney began to fantasise before the first meal break. By the time he went to sleep, he couldn't imagine life without her. Long before the week was up, he was pouring out his feelings of undying passion. He sweated and panted his way through the prescribed exercises, desperate to do the best he could - for her sake, rather than for his own. He felt like a teenager anxious to impress the first girl he ever really looked at. He begged to know her name, where she was from, where she lived. He implored her to keep in touch, to forget anyone else and give herself the chance to get to know him properly. All to no avail. She fended off his questions and outpourings with gentle ease, making him feel good in the process, but giving nothing away about herself. She's probably had lots of practice, he thought bitterly.

All too soon, he was back at his work station, counting interminable asteroids again, his mind not quite one hundred per cent on the job. He could feel his colleague's eyes upon him.

'You're a bit quiet,' he said. 'Fallen in love, have you?'

It wasn't really a question, and there was no hint of a joke in his voice.

'I have, Fred, and that's the truth of it.'

'Green eyes? Fair hair? Red ski suit? Husky contralto voice?'

Rodney gasped. 'You know her?'

'I know of her,' Fred replied. 'Don't waste your time, Rodney. She's only a computer image.'

'Well, I know that,' said Rodney somewhat indignantly. 'I am a computer man, after all. But the things she does with her electrons makes me shiver.'

'What I mean is, she's nothing more than an image. She's not real. She's only a set

of electronic impulses on disc. A recording. You've heard nothing that hundreds of others haven't heard.'

'Nonsense. I was talking to her. She was talking back. I can't pretend I got much joy out of it, but we were holding a genuine conversation. In real time, too. No time delay, at least none that I could detect. Wherever she is, she can't be too far away. On the new space station, maybe. I did hear they'd got some fresh workers there.'

Fred looked at him sympathetically, and shook his head.

'You're a computer man, Rodney, and you've never heard of positive feedback?'

'Of course I've heard of it. I helped to develop some of the current systems...'

He stopped suddenly and put a hand over his eyes.

'Oh, oh,' he said. 'Idiot. I should have known. Of course. The more excited I got, the more she responded, even if it wasn't quite in the way I would have liked. Just the same, the original is really something, and she must be around somewhere. If not on the space station, then somewhere else. All I have to do is to find out just where she is.'

'Drop it Rodney.'

'I'd do another spell of rest and recreation for her.'

'You'll be sorry, Rodney.'

'I'd go to Earth for her.'

'Rodney, you're not listening.'

'I'd suffer Jupiter's gravity for her.'

'Rodney, she's older than you think.'

That stopped him, just for a moment.

'That's all right. I prefer mature women anyway. Think of how much she must have improved, like vintage port, or ripe stilton, or, or... How much older?'

'Don't take this too hard, Rodney. You're not the first to be caught out.'

'How old?'

'It's a good piece of software. Been in use a long time.'

'How old?'

'Mature.'

'How old?'

Fred looked around carefully, as though finding a possible escape route before answering.

'To the best of my knowledge, a hundred and fifteen. If she's still alive, that is.'

## SOAMES AND THE GHOST

Of course, Aircraftman Second Class Soames Forsyth didn't really believe in ghosts. There was a time though, when his disbelief was badly strained, and that time was was horrifyingly, nerve shatteringly now.

'Why me?' he complained bitterly to himself. 'What did I do to deserve this? I never asked to come here. I didn't even want to join the Royal Air Force in the first place.' Well might Soames ask such questions. After all the excitement of being posted overseas had subsided to a more normal level, he found that the military mind had been subject to a severe aberration when choosing the place where he now served, somewhere in the back of beyond, if not a good deal further. There was a theory amongst airmen of the rank of corporal or below that officialdom searched the world until places were found where no-one could possibly live, and built airfields there. This was obviously one such spot. Soames scarcely knew just where it was, except that it was one of the desert areas of the world, hot, sticky and grossly uncomfortable. It was a two year tour of duty, long enough to get to know it quite well, rather better than he had any wish to do so. It was a place with problems of its own, not the least being the fact that the local inhabitants didn't really want a British military presence there, and were not slow to let their attitude be known. In fact, only a few weeks previously, the bullets had been flying in all directions, and while things were relatively peaceful at the moment, there was always a feeling of severe tension. During his normal working time Soames was a motor mechanic, mainly stripping down fire engines to the basic framework, then waiting months for spare parts, but that was not all that he did. Every two or three weeks he was given a rifle and fifty rounds of ammunition, or as common parlance had it, a pea shooter and fifty peas, and sent to the airfield to stand guard over the aircraft all night. Guard duties were gratifyingly boring for most of the time, especially when there was a man short and he was on his own, as tonight. It wasn't so bad when there was company. Depending on who he was with, it was often possible to curl up in the wheel bay of some large aircraft and snatch an hour or two of sleep. Some types were keen though, and wouldn't allow it. Of course, it meant a severe roasting if the guard was caught



unawares by the sergeant but with a bit of care, that almost never happened.

Quite why one of the guards had failed to turn up that night was unknown, but it was easy to guess why no replacement had been found. The police coming round to find a spare guard was knowledge that spread rapidly. No doubt everyone had climbed up to the top of the flat roofs of the three storey buildings which were home to the airmen and were hiding there, first having taken the precaution of pulling up the home made ladders that allowed access. The police were certainly aware of the situation, but doubtless felt that chasing after reluctant airmen high up on a flat roof with no guard rails was no part of their duty.

Soames fell to musing about his experiences with the military during the year since he had become a loyal member of Her Majesty's Royal Air Force. Although the stars were shining brightly overhead, like sparkling jewels on black velvet, he had never been one for any great communion with nature, and the sight of the heavenly orb left him cold, despite the heat of the night. He preferred to think of something rather more down to earth.

It was strange that in this particular branch of the armed services, he had hardly seen an aircraft until he came here. In fact, the only one he had ever seen close up was the one parked outside the guardroom of the Royal Air Force station where he had completed his basic training. It may, he thought, being reminded by a sharp sting on the back of his neck, have been a Mosquito. Or possibly a Spitfire. Or even a Lancaster bomber. All he could really be certain of was that it had wings and was clearly a flying machine of some sort. Being not only an Aircraftman Second Class, but a recruit as well, and hence the lowest of all possibly life forms, he was never permitted to stop and admire it, and in any case, as anyone who has served with the armed forces will testify, it is never too wise to linger outside the guardroom.

Military Police have an uncanny sense which seems to tell them when a haircut is millimetrically too long, or when boots have not been polished to eye dazzling brilliance. Nobody of his acquaintance seemed to want to know what the little plaque at the front of the aircraft said. At least not so badly that they were willing to risk being found extra work to do, especially in a recruit training camp where the motto seems to be "A static man is an idle man."

Strange, he thought again, that that was the only sight of an aircraft he got for many months. It may be reasonable to assume that the Air Force is littered with aircraft, and so it may be, but at that time at least, they did not seem to be evenly spread. It is

a matter of fact that when Soames was posted overseas, the mode of transport used was actually a troopship, and that was run, not by the Navy as might have been thought reasonable, but by the Army. The voyage took fifteen days, during which he saw plenty of mosquitoes of the bloodsucking kind, but never a one with an engine. The night was pitch black and moonless, the only illumination coming from the working lights of the far off hangers where mechanics toiled throughout the night to repair and maintain the station's aircraft. Although these lights were dim and distant, they were strong enough to destroy the little night sight Soames had, making it impossible to see anything clearly more than a couple of paces away.

Amid the faint machine noises in the background, his reflections on the meaning of life were disturbed by a very different sort of sound, one that didn't belong to the mechanical world, and which had no right to be there in the middle of the airfield. Though faint, it jarred, causing Soames to cease his musings and lift his head. He listened intently as the sound became gradually louder. It sounded exactly like someone walking through the sand wearing loose sandals, sandals of the type favoured by the civilian population and off duty airmen. Suddenly alert, and realising that airmen in that area would be firmly on duty, Soames called out, giving the time honoured challenge. It had always sounded a little silly before, but now the words were exactly what he wanted. No answer. He called again, and again there was no answer. Only the sound of footsteps coming closer and closer. Jumbled thoughts ran through his mind. Was it a thief? That wouldn't be unknown. Someone taking a short cut home? But the nearest inhabited building lay the other way. In this direction there was nothing except empty desert for several hundred miles. Someone with a knife or a gun perhaps?

World War Three's going to break out, Soames thought bitterly, and the only defence for freedom and democracy is me and fifty bullets. Charming. Why did it have to happen right now? Why not in an hour's time when my shift is over?

The footsteps came ever closer, but look as he might, he could see nothing. The shuffling footsteps were near enough to be able to touch whoever was making them, but still he could see nothing. They passed between him and the hangar lights, but nothing was silhouetted, and nothing could be seen, even though he lay flat on the ground and looked all around. Then, incredibly, the footsteps began to die away and *still* he had seen nothing. He jabbed with his rifle, even swung it round him in a complete circle. His wild efforts met with no resistance at all. The sweat that poured

off his face and neck and ran in rivulets down his body had little to do with the temperature, hot though it was. His stomach churned and the world seemed to blur with an odd, shimmering motion. The whole situation was impossible. If he hadn't seen, or rather not seen with his own eyes, he would never have believed it. How could there be a sound without something to produce it? How could footsteps have a disembodied life of their own?

By now badly frightened and trembling in every limb, but determined to discover the truth of the matter if only for the sake of his own sanity, Soames followed the sound of the slowly receding footsteps, and there, in a tiny pool of light reflected from the hangar lamps, he saw what it was that had terrified him so much. No bigger than a human hand, a little desert rat was hopping along as though he had all the time in the world, oblivious to the presence of the man, oblivious to the fact that it had come within a whisker of having fifty rounds of ammunition pumped into its tiny body. 'If this gun works,' muttered Soames. 'Which I doubt.'

Just the same, even in the dim light, it seemed to him for a moment that the desert rat was wearing a little grin on his face. But only for the briefest space of time, for the rat disappeared on his unknown errand into the desert.

Reaction set in and as Aircraftman Second Class Soames Forsyth slowly slumped to the ground in a dead faint, his last thought was "Sleeping on Duty". I'll be caught for sure. They'll never believe this in the guardroom.

## THE CRUISE

We really liked the holiday we took on the canal boat last summer, but it wouldn't be much of an option right now, as the weather has turned into something so nasty it gives a marvellous opportunity for everyone to talk to total strangers. I mean, we've had weeks of rain already, and now it's turned cold enough for outcasts from a brass foundry to be very careful when they step outside.

We're a bit fed up with it all. At least, Sandra is, and I can't say I'm too pleased

either. What I mean is, I work on the building sites, but it's nearly all outside work, and there's no fun in getting home every day soaking wet, even if there is always a hot bath waiting for me. Of course, I make good money, but that's not everything, is it? Easy to say when you have plenty, of course, which is something we do have. At least, I have, as Sandra does something in an office, which isn't a bad little job, but doesn't pay so well. I sometimes think that's why she stays with me, because I buy her lots of things for herself, and am generous when it comes to cash. Quite what else she sees in me I really don't know, but she signifies her appreciation in her own generous ways that are very satisfactory thank you very much, so I'm not asking questions in case I get answers I wouldn't care to hear. I mean, I'm one of the world's rough characters, but I do have sensitivities. Truth I can handle, but you have to draw a line somewhere.

Anyway, to get back to the weather. We were so sick of it, we decided to have a winter holiday, and because of our experiences on the canal boat, we opted for a cruise in the Caribbean. It meant flying to America, I think it was - somewhere foreign anyway, where you could hardly understand the language at all, don't know why they don't teach them proper English in the schools, then on to the cruise ship, and set sail for somewhere a good bit warmer. Now that, I thought was a funny way of putting it, as the ship we were on didn't have a sail at all, not even one, just engines, which was a good thing as far as I was concerned, because I didn't fancy being called out in the middle of the night to put the sails up, or take them down, or something else like that.

Sandra thought I was being a bit daft, but that's not a new thought where she's concerned, so I let it slide. I've seen the films, and I can't help worrying sometimes. As I said, I have a sensitive nature.

We had a lovely cabin, all to ourselves, with what looked to be only one single bed and a sofa in it, but which proved, in a less disappointing way, to open up into two double beds, which we didn't bother with, as we thought just the one would do very nicely, which it proved to be. There was a smashing shower in a separate room just off the cabin itself, and it was big enough for two, hem, hem, but I won't go too deeply into that. We also had a large picture window on one side, though why it's called a picture window I never understood, as all we could see through it was the sea. No pictures at all. Not that it mattered, as it gave plenty of light to see Sandra by, which is always a pleasant thing to do. Then there was a dressing table and a couple

of comfortable armchairs, plus a radio, and TV, neither of which we bothered much with as we believe in making our own entertainment, and you don't need a licence for it either. Not yet, at any rate, though I'm sure it's only a question of time.

As we sailed - engined? on, it got warmer and warmer, and as the temperature rose, the layers of clothing we were wearing reduced considerably, until Sandra was posing by the side of the swimming pool on the top deck in nothing more than her new bikini. This wasn't the bikini she had on the canals, but another one, as she likes to have new stuff all the time. I'd gone with her when she bought it, because she likes to have my opinion on things like that, although she usually makes decisions for both of us when it comes to anything important. Really, I thought it might have been sufficient to get us an invite to the Captain's table, but when I say sufficient, perhaps there simply wasn't enough of it to register. Certainly there wasn't a lot to see. Of the bikini, that is, as there was certainly a lot of Sandra visible. She's only small, but she does stand out a bit, especially in that bikini.

Anyway, there was Sandra by the pool, and there was me, and there was a load of other blokes all pretending they had weak eyes and needed sunglasses all the time. I knew they were only pretending, and were secretly casting glances at Sandra, but then they were also casting glances at me and weighing up their chances of mixing it with a bloke that measures six foot fourteen, and has shoulders any self respecting barn door would be delighted to own. Let them look, I thought. It's safe enough. It doesn't pay to argue with Sandra, as many a bloke has found to his cost. It's simply not worth the effort. So I just licked my ice cream and did a bit of pretending of my own. In any case, Sandra doesn't belong to me. It's probably more true to say that I belong to her. Anyway, none of them had a cabin they didn't have to share with a couple of other blokes, so their chances of getting anywhere with her have to be described as a bit limited. As I already said, she's a girl that sort of stands out wherever she goes, and it would be a bit noticeable if anyone tried to make a secret assignation with her. It wouldn't work, as in no time at all, she'd have a couple of dozen men hanging around with their tongues doing a polishing job on the ground. It sort of puts a cramp in a man's style, that sort of thing. That's why I paid for a private cabin. Only the seagulls can see what we get up to, and apart from the fact that there aren't too many of them this far out at sea, I can't say I care much about what a seagull may think.

So what else were we getting up to, when we weren't lounging around the swimming

pool, or giving the seagulls a treat? Eating, mainly. Honestly, the sort of food they offer on board a cruise ship makes me sick, but that doesn't mean what it may seem. What I mean is, that there was so much of it it wasn't possible to get through it all, though we tried, we certainly tried. I'm used to carrying a heavy hod up and down ladders on the building sites for eight hours every day, so have an appetite which Sandra says is hearty. Actually, what she said was something along the lines of me reminding her of a gannet, but it amounts to the same thing. She's not too far away from the cutlery drawer when it comes to meals either even if she does eat more rabbit food than is healthy. It's a funny thing is that. I've noticed that it's the women who go in for the vitamins as a rule, whereas your average man thinks a vegetarian diet starts with the contents of the ketchup bottle. There wasn't a lot of ketchup on board this ship. Too posh for that. Too expensive, anyway. The ship, not ketchup, which is very reasonably priced, or would be if I didn't eat so much of it.

What there was, was an enormous breakfast, even by my standards. You know how, in bed and breakfast places you are offered a choice of full English breakfast, or continental, which in England seems to mean a stale bun and coffee, unlike the proper continental breakfasts we've had on the continent. Well, in our dining room there were both, and not only that, there were a number of other choices, like smoked salmon, chicken wings, some other odd dishes that might as well have been in a foreign language for all I understood, but which were very nearly as tasty as Sandra on one of her better days. I say very nearly, since nothing could ever reach her standards in my opinion. There was fruit, and juices, coffee and tea, but no beer, which Sandra said was probably a Good Thing, as liquid diets were all very well in their own way, but a bit of solid food doesn't do any harm now and again. The point I'm making here is that you weren't given one or the other. Oh no, you could have the lot, and come back for more. And that's more or less what we did. Luckily, our cabin was quite close to the dining room, so we didn't have far to go for a bit of a lie down. We like our little lie downs after eating, me and Sandra. We always did. Then there was something they called lunch, but being only a rough working class man, I would have said was dinner, and even that was a choice of a good hot meal, or a buffet where you helped yourself to what were mainly cold foods, like smoked salmon, a dish that seemed to crop up constantly. No wonder there's a shortage of fish in the sea. I think Sandra and me caused most of it.

I know there were other meals, and snacks in between, plus ice cream and beer almost

anywhere on the upper decks if Sandra wasn't watching, but things got a bit hazy by mid afternoon, and it was difficult to concentrate.

### SANDRA'S SUMMER HOLIDAY

We've been together for quite a while now, me and Sandra. She sort of looks after me because I'm a bit limited in the brain department, if you get my meaning, and someone has to be responsible, which is only Sandra's way of saying she loves me. Sounds a bit soppy, but that's the way she feels about it. Maybe she could do better for herself, but I don't think I could get rid of her even if I wanted to, which I don't. I can get a bit soppy myself. I might be thick, but I've got feelings.

We plan on taking our summer holidays soon, which is something to look forward to, as Sandra goes in for cool, summery sort of clothing. That's just another way of saying she likes to get the sun on her skin, and that's just another way of saying I see a lot more of her than usual, and *that's* just a way of saying it takes a bit of doing, considering what she wears at home in front of a blazing good fire in the middle of winter.

Not that she doesn't look nice in the winter when she's dressed up to go outside. She has this sort of almost real sheepskin calf-length coat, dyed red, with a pure white furry collar that she pulls up to almost hide her face. I always reckon she looks like one of the gnomes from Santa Claus Land in that outfit, but Sandra says that she probably looks more like Mary Christmas. I can tell by looking at her that that's meant to be a joke of some sort, but I don't really get it, which Sandra says doesn't give her any great surprise.

Anyway, this year, we intend to go on a boating holiday, cruising along the canals, and maybe getting as far as Stratford. Sandra says if I behave myself she won't make me go to see one of Shakespeare's plays in the theatre. I don't know though. From what I hear, some of them can be pretty good, with lots of swordplay and plenty of action and blood. It's not real blood, even I know that, but probably looks like the real stuff anyway. She likes Shakespeare, does Sandra, which I suppose she should when she teaches English Literature in our local college, but luckily I'm not the jealous type, and anyway, I've seen pictures of him, and he's way too old for her, so

that's all right.

Well, we arrived at the boat hire place, and found we had got quite a nice one, that looked pretty much like it did in the brochure, which is a turn up for the books. There was a little kitchen, only I'm supposed to call it a galley, but that can't be right, because there was an engine instead of oars, and although the boat was quite big enough for me and Sandra, I just couldn't see where the drummer would sit, assuming he had any slaves to give the time to. As for the bloke with the whip...!

It was at that point that Sandra told me to pack it in and leave the humour to someone better equipped in the intellectual department, so I did. She gave me a little squeeze for trying, so it was well worth it, know what I mean? As it happens, it was quite a big squeeze, because she likes to show how much she cares.

Of course, there was more to the boat than just a kitchen - sorry, can't bring myself to call it a galley - there was a sofa sort of thing that opened up into a double bed, after which I really lost interest, but Sandra said if I'm going to describe it, I'd better do the job properly. So, a double bed, another single bed, which I doubted we would have much use for, unless things got cosy, which they normally do when me and Sandra are away on holiday, and a table on hinges, that pushed up and locked in position when not wanted. I thought at the time we'd likely have trouble with that, and I wasn't far out. Then there was a bench, a bit of a cheat really, since it was the single bed in disguise. I suppose if three people are on a boat like this they have to eat their meals standing up, unless they fancy putting all the bedding away every morning.

Not much point in that, I would have thought, but that's probably because I like to see my bed occupied and in full use. A couple of small cupboards, and that was about it downstairs, or what would have been downstairs if there had been any stairs to have a down from.

Upstairs, if there had been any upstairs, well you know what I mean, there was a tiny area at the back of the boat where you could sit and steer. I thought Sandra might do that, as I'm a big bloke, and I could see if I sat there, I probably wouldn't get out until the end of the holiday, and there didn't seem to be much fun in that, although Sandra did offer to come and feed me every few hours, but I could see she was joking again. Then, right at the front end, there was a flat platform, perfect for sunbathing, and when Sandra turned her eyes on that, it was obvious what she was thinking. She likes the sun, does Sandra, and it looked as though she might get a bit browner than usual, maybe even in places not normally on display, as we intended to find some quiet spots



without anybody else around.

Well, that's what we intended, but the reality turned out to be a bit different. Talk about Piccadilly Circus! Honestly, the canal system is so overcrowded with holiday makers, none of which know how to handle a boat, and I include myself in that, Sandra said we might take our holiday next year on the Exeter bypass, where you tend to meet a better class of person. It was rather nice there last year, I know, as the jams were so bad we had time to take out our picnic table and set it up on the grass verge, where we were joined by a very friendly couple from Manchester. It seemed almost a pity to spoil the grass, as you could see it was in good condition before we had our picnic on it. Totally untouched by the hand of man, said Sandra, to which she added that it was probably virgin on the ridiculous, but it's a long time since she was one of those, so I'm not sure she could remember what she was talking about.

All right, Sandra, I know. Leave the jokes to those capable of such intellectual feats. Even so, we did enjoy the holiday. Oh yes, this is back on the boat now. We're not on the Exeter bypass any more, which would be a bit difficult to do in a boat, even during the height of last summer's floods in that area. It was great fun going through the locks, especially when one right idiot fastened the rope too tightly to the bollard on the tow path, and when the water started to rise, the pointy bit at the front of the boat went sharply downwards, causing a bit of flooding all of its own. Now at the risk of sounding as though I'm being less than modest, I was pretty fast on the uptake, which is not like me at all. What I did was to take the hacksaw that we found in the boat, goodness knows why that was there, and cut through the rope so that the pointy bit came back to a horizontal position toot sweet all in a great rush. This led to Sandra falling backwards with her legs in the air and her skirt around her neck, so it was worth the reproachful look I got from her. Well, when I say reproachful look, I really mean something rather stronger, but Sandra says she is a lady and doesn't use language like what I put down first, even if it was a bit more accurate.

The best bit of the incident was that when we - yes, I was the right idiot mentioned earlier - discovered that all our clothes had got wet, including the ones we were wearing at the time, it meant that Sandra had to settle for wearing her new bikini until everything else dried out. Now when I tell you that she goes in for bikinis in the same way as some women go in for shoes, that is, a couple of sizes too small, you can understand why I enjoyed the holiday. As for Sandra, well, the days were warm, with plenty of sunshine, and she got the tan she wanted.

Oh yes, we went to the theatre a few nights later, and there was plenty of blood on the stage, so much I felt a bit sick like, and had to shut my eyes during the fights, but Sandra held my hand at those times, and was very understanding when we turned in for the night, so if that was a punishment for not behaving myself, I think I could really get to like the theatre.